



AUTISM SCRIPT

Module 6006

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Speaker Notes

Hello everyone, my name is Janna Saif, and I'm excited to talk about a topic that is very close to my heart – autism. Autism affects millions of people worldwide and understanding it better can help us create a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone. Today, we'll explore what autism is, how it is diagnosed, what are the challenges, and an effective strategy to support them, such as a structured visual timetable. Now, let's dive into the agenda for today's webinar

Let's begin with a quick overview.

Introduction

First of all, what is Autism

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2024), Autism, or Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), is a lifelong developmental difference affecting communication, social interaction, and behavior. People with autism often have difficulties with social communication, repetitive behaviors, and intense interests or sensory issues from an early age (Lord et al., 2020). Hirota and King (2023) emphasized that this impacts how people communicate, function socially, and display behavioral patterns throughout their lives. Globally, about 1% of people have autism (WHO, 2022).

Early identification is essential—it helps us provide tailored support and create inclusive environments.

Identification and Diagnosis of Autism

In early years settings, autism can be difficult to diagnose because many behaviors overlap with typical development (Hus and Segal, 2021).

According to the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015), early identification should be part of everyday observation. The lead role here usually falls to the SENCO.

In the Curran (2020) study, over 80% of SENCOs felt confident in identifying additional needs using tools like the EYFS Development Matters tracker, Well COMM screening, and the two-year progress check.

Please take a look at the image on the left, where I've included a visual summary of common signs of autism by Cannon Disability Law (2025), such as:

- Delayed speech and language
- Repetitive behavior
- Limited eye contact
- Difficulty with transitions or social play

These are commonly noticed by early year staff during daily activities.

However, Curran (2020) also highlighted several challenges. Many referrals are delayed due to overstretched external services like CAMHS and Speech and Language Therapy. She also reported variation in how well staff are trained to identify autism, which affects the consistency of diagnosis.

We use several tools for this. There's the EYFS Development Matters Tracker, the Well COMM screening tool, and the two-year progress check—which is often the first real opportunity to pick up any concerns.

Another essential resource is the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ-3 and ASQ:SE), which are parent-completed checklists used during the "integrated review" at around two to two-and-a-half years, as recommended by the Department of Health (2016).

Now, once concerns arise, they should be escalated quickly. If parents or nursery staff spot red flags like no response to their name or very limited pretend play, both of which are early signs according to NICE guidelines and the UK Autism Strategy, they're encouraged to refer the child to their GP or health visitor.

Unfortunately, NHS data from 2024 shows how stretched the system is. Almost 193,000 children were waiting for autism-related referrals, but only 5% were seen within the recommended 13 weeks. The Children's Commissioner (2024) also found that only 28% of those children got their first appointment on time.

This delay is a huge concern because, as the UK Parliament Post (2020) pointed out, most autistic children are diagnosed at around four and a half years—even though signs often appear as early as two.

The benefit of early identification is that it allows intervention strategies to begin early, making the transition to primary school easier for the child.

Barriers Faced by Children with Autism

Now let's look at the barriers children with autism face in early year's settings.

A major issue is sensory sensitivity. Children may overreact or underreact to sounds, lights, or textures. Nurseries can be noisy and overwhelming. MacLennan et al. (2022) discussed this in their study on sensory experiences—many autistic individuals describe environments as chaotic and difficult to manage.

On my poster, you'll see this referenced under "Barriers," with examples like loud noise or busy settings causing distress.

Another key barrier is communication. Many autistic children struggle to express their needs. This can lead to frustration and challenging behavior. According to Curran (2020), SENCOs reported that 88% of cases involved speech, language, and social communication challenges.

There are also systemic barriers, including limited staff training and delayed access to health professionals. Some parents may hesitate to discuss concerns early due to fears of labelling or exclusion, as Curran also pointed out. This often delays diagnosis and intervention.

Some children start school without ever receiving formal support, which sets them at a disadvantage, both academically and emotionally.

We also need to acknowledge that many children with autism have other co-occurring difficulties. According to the UK Parliament Post (2020), around 70% of autistic children experience anxiety or other mental health conditions. Up to 30% have a learning disability, and many are non-verbal. These co-morbidities create an even greater need for early and effective support.

And it's important to highlight that autistic girls often get overlooked. The NHS (2022) explains that many girls are very good at what's called "masking"—this means they copy their peers or hide their distress to fit in. On the surface, they may seem fine, but inside, they're struggling. Without proper training, staff may miss these hidden signs, and those girls can go without the help they really need.

So where does that leave us?

Staff training and awareness are vital. Surveys have shown that many families with autistic children want teachers who are better informed and more understanding of autism. And most autistic children themselves say school would be better if teachers had a deeper understanding of their needs.

This is also backed up by policy. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) emphasizes the need for ongoing staff training and inclusive education. Similarly, EYFS and Ofsted both expect practitioners to create inclusive environments—but unfortunately, Ofsted inspections often point out a lack of specialist support in early years settings.

The Department for Education's 2021 guidance called "Meeting the Needs of All Children" puts it clearly: staff should focus on adapting the environment and removing barriers to help children with SEND reach their full potential.

So overall, while there are many challenges, understanding these barriers is the first step toward creating a more supportive and inclusive space for autistic children.

Support Strategy: Structured Visual Timetables

To address these challenges, one effective and inclusive strategy is using structured visual timetables.

These are pictorial schedules that help children understand their daily routine, easing transitions and reducing anxiety. I've included an example of a visual timetable on the bottom-right corner of the poster—courtesy of the Leicestershire NHS Partnership.

As Hayes et al. (2010) explain, visual schedules provide predictability. They reinforce verbal instructions using images, which is helpful for children who struggle with listening or understanding spoken language.

Murry (2015) agrees and emphasized that using visual aids like schedules, charts, and picture cards helps children understand routines and expectations. This reduces anxiety and improves communication. Visual support provides clear and consistent information, helping children know what to expect next.

Curran (2020) also stressed the importance of having a structured yet flexible classroom environment, something visual timetables support well.

Here's how to implement them:

- Use the same pictures for common activities like snack time, story time, or outdoor play.
- Introduce the schedule in a calm tone and guide the child step-by-step.
- Encourage them to move a marker to show progress through the day.
- Make sure it's placed at the child's eye level for easy access.

The challenges are the initial setup time and ensuring all staff are trained to use it consistently, but the long-term outcomes are very positive and cost-effective. Not all

autistic individuals respond the same way to visual aids. Personalization is key, as what works for one person may not work for another (Kesherim, 2024).

Now, let's take a closer look at why visual timetables are so effective for children with autism.

One of the key reasons is that they play to the strengths of autistic learners. Many children on the spectrum have strong visual processing skills, but they may struggle more with auditory processing, so they might miss or misunderstand verbal instructions. This has been highlighted by Hume and the Indiana Resource Center for Autism (2025), who explain that visual strategies not only support communication but also help reduce anxiety and improve understanding during transitions. According to Hobbs (2023), Visual aids can help autistic individuals understand social cues and appropriate behaviors, facilitating better social interactions.

Think about it—when a child sees pictures showing “what’s happening now” and “what’s next,” it gives them a sense of predictability. That feeling of knowing what’s coming can calm nerves and help children feel more in control.

According to the Council for Disabled Children (no date), through their collaboration with I CAN, visual timetables are especially useful for children who struggle to process spoken language, who might not remember instructions well, or who feel anxious when things change suddenly. The guide says that these timetables clarify the current activity and what’s coming next, which is key for helping children move smoothly through their day.

Research even backs this up with numbers: a study in the UK found that 73% of pupils used visual timetables either “very often” or “a lot” each week—and interestingly, both

autistic and non-autistic children found them helpful. This shows that visual support isn't just a special needs tool—it's a universal strategy that benefits all learners. That study was shared by Rutherford and colleagues, and it reinforces the value of making visual timetables a standard part of classroom practice.

So, in short, visual timetables are much more than a set of pictures on a wall—they're a structured way to reduce anxiety, boost understanding, and support independence, especially for children with autism.

Conclusion

Finally, being autistic doesn't mean you have an illness or disease; it means your brain functions differently from others. Autism is something you're born with, and signs may be noticed in early childhood or later in life (NHS, 2022b)

Supporting children with autism starts with early identification, understanding the barriers they face, and applying strategies like structured visual timetables.

Curran's (2020) findings show that when experienced teams work with empathy and clear planning, outcomes improve significantly.

As the final message on the poster says, supporting autistic children is not about fixing them, but about creating environments where they can flourish.

Thank you for listening.

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