

Supporting children with Autism



Introduction

This poster will critically evaluate how autism is identified and diagnosed. Barriers that may impact autism in children and an in-depth discussion on a support strategy used to best support a child with autism.

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental condition caused by differences in the brain that can affect how children understand the world around them. It is called a spectrum disorder as there is a wide range of traits that an individual may display. However, most children with autism share common difficulties that affect them in different ways (NHS Wales, no date and Ferrer, *et al*, 2022). Although, all children are affected by autism in different ways there are two main categories of difficulties that they may experience. These are social and communication difficulties and repetitive or restricted behaviours, interests or attitudes. (Centers for disease control and prevention, 2023).

However, Bogdashina (2016) describes autism as not just a disorder but as a way of being, as it is so widespread it changes every experience, sensation, thought and emotion for an individual.

Identifying and Diagnosis

NHS Wales (no date), suggest that there is a wide range of difficulties that may be under these two categories. And often children will experience difficulties from both of these areas. Under the social interaction and social communication category children may experience difficulties:

- Making and maintaining relationships
- Understanding their emotions
- Understanding other people's feelings
- Understanding social rules
- Unusual or repetitive speech
- Not being able to maintain eye contact
- Reduced facial expressions

Under the restricted and repetitive behaviours category children may experience the following:

- Highly focused on certain interests
- Excessively following routines or rules
- Difficulties coping with change
- Repetitive behaviours
- Noticing small details, patterns or sounds that someone else may not notice

National Autistic Society (2020) state that alongside these difficulties most children with autism will also suffer from sensory issues. There are different types of sensory issues a child could become over sensitive or under sensitive to certain senses or situations.

According to GriffinOT (2021), the association between autism and sensory processing differences has been well known for many years, however it was only formally recognised as a difficulty in autism in 2013. They also state that sensory difficulties can affect every aspect of a child's life for the rest of their lives as the human body is always receiving sensory messages.

Smeets and Roeleveld (2016) suggest that to identify whether a child has an additional learning need then three models should be used, a pedagogical model that is related to the child's knowledge goals. A social model that focuses on the child's social situations and a medical model that relates to the child's health. They suggest that these three models should overlap to ensure an appropriate diagnosis is made and the child is best supported. However, Kapp (no date) believes that the medical model is not an adequate way of diagnosing autism as it views the difficulties an autistic person has as dysfunctional and doesn't consider the impacts that personal and social contributions have on an autistic person's difficulties.

Bogdashina, (2016) suggests that in recent years research surrounding Autism has greatly improved, however professional experts in the field of autism are not considering the thoughts and views of those with autism as they do not correspond with the thoughts and views of people without the disorder.

Barriers when identifying and diagnosing Autism.

Curran (2020) believes that in early years staff knowledge and understanding is crucial when identifying if a child has additional learning needs. 80% of special educational needs coordinators reported that they felt confident when identifying additional learning needs in their settings. However, they felt that training surrounding additional learning needs is lacking. Leonard and Smyth (no date) carried out a survey on teachers in Ireland and discovered that those who received training in additional learning needs whether in university or elsewhere, had a more positive attitude towards the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder and were more capable of dealing with their needs than those teachers who had not received any training throughout their career.

Dillenburg, *et al*. (2016) agrees and also adds that poorly trained staff has a damaging affect on their abilities to best support children with autism and also on staff morale. And believe that the lack of adequate training is a matter of great concern. Leonard and Smyth (2020) state that they are aware that training comes at a great cost. However, from their study they believe that the benefits gained from training outweighs the cost. Research carried out by McLeod and Perepa (2020) again shows the need for more training in dealing with autism as their study suggested that Early Years practitioners knew how to identify autism. However, they were unaware of the early signs of the condition.

However, according to National Autistic Society (no date) and Child Autism UK (no date), due to the Additional Learning needs and Education (Wales) Act 2018 a new Additional learning needs (ALN) code for Wales 2021 has been introduced in schools across Wales to provide training to ensure staff are aware of how to identify, assess and make provisions for children with additional learning needs.

Lego Therapy

Lego therapy is a way of using children's natural desire to play to motivate behavioural changes and has also been seen as an effective teaching implement to increase social sills and communication (Lindsay, Hounsell, Cassiani. 2017 and Therapy Focus 2023). Brodie and Mather (2017) add that it can develop these skills by allowing the children to learn how to share, take turns and follow rules. It also encourages children to use the names of others doing the activity and enhances problem solving skills. Although, Lindsay, Hounsell and Cassiani (2017) believe Lego therapy has the potential to improve social and communication skills they also express their concern that a more rigorous study needs to be carried out to ensure it is being used to its full potential.

According to Nadia (2023) this activity will be carried out in groups of Three. One child will be the engineer, one will be the supplier and one the builder. The engineer is the only one that will see the instructions and will have to tell the supplier what bricks are needed. And then tell the builder how to build the model. This allows the children to discuss with each other what pieces are needed and where they belong.

Brodie and Mather (2017) who are specialised teachers that piloted the Lego therapy in their school stated when they first rolled out the therapy sessions, they observed a lot of frustration and upset from the children. Which they believe was due to the children having to interact with one another in order to give instructions. However, they soon began to observe the children gaining confidence in speaking to each other. These skills were then incorporated into the children's learning and positive outcomes were seen more and more. The first outcome they observed was the children began greeting each other on a daily basis.

Alongside these outcomes they also noted that the children began to develop in other areas too such as, self-esteem, confidence and attitudes towards the feelings of others.

Conclusion

From this poster it is evident that autism is a disorder that has a wide range of aspects to it. There are also many things to take into account when identifying and diagnosing a child with autism. Alongside this it shows that with more training across schools the inclusion of children with autism may be seen more across mainstream schools rather than specialised schools. It is also evident that if Lego therapy is used appropriately it could be an excellent strategy used in supporting children with autism.

Reference list

Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018, c.2. Available at:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2018/2/contents/enacted> (Accessed: 15th January 2023).

Bogdashina, O. (2016) *Sensory perceptual issues in Autism and Asperger syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Brodie, C and Mather, V. (2017) *Using Lego therapy with autistic pupils*. Available at: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/lego-pilot> (Accessed: 16th January 2023).

Centers for disease control and prevention. (2022) *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*. Available at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html> (Accessed: 8th January 2023).

ChildAutismUK. (no date) *For Schools*. Available at: <https://www.childautism.org.uk/for-schools/> (Accessed: 11th January 2023).

Curran, H. (2020) *Identifying special educational needs in the Early Years: perspectives from special educational needs coordinators*. Available at: <file:///C:/Users/HP%20Envy/Downloads/Identifying-special-educational-needs-in-the-early-years.pdf> (Accessed: 14th January 2023).

Dillenburg, K. et al. (2016) Staff training in autism: The one-eyed Wo/Man. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 13(7), p. 716-733. Available at: <file:///C:/Users/HP%20Envy/Downloads/ijerph-13-00716.pdf> (Accessed: 12th January 2023).

Ferrer, E. et al. (2022) Identifying autism symptom severity trajectories across childhood. International society for autism research. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/aur.2674> (Accessed: 14th January 2023).

GriffinOT. (2021) *Autism (ASD) and Sensory processing issues – signs and how to help*. Available at: <https://www.griffinot.com/asd-and-sensory-processing-disorder/> (Accessed: 11th January 2023).

Kapp, S. (no date) *How social deficit models exacerbate the medical model: Autism as case in point*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Steven-Kapp/publication/338986384_How_social_deficit_models_exacerbate_the_medical_model_Autism_as_case_in_point/links/5e36da93a6fdccd965819ecf/How-social-deficit-models-exacerbate-the-medical-model-Autism-as-case-in-point.pdf (Accessed: 10th January 2023).

Leonard, N and Smyth, S. (no date) *Does training matter? Exploring Teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children in mainstream education in Ireland*. Available at: <file:///C:/Users/HP%20Envy/Downloads/ATTITUDES%20TOWARDS%20THE%20INCLUSION%20OF%20CHILDREN%20WITH%20ASD.pdf> (Accessed: 12th January 2023).

Lindsay, S., Hounsell, K, Cassiani, C. (2017) A scoping review of the role of Lego therapy for improving inclusion and social skills among children and youth with autism. *Disability and Health Journal*. 10(2), p. 173-182. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1936657416301728?casa_token=Qm-eENUq0s0AAAAA:rfv0GMUUhWGg8Ra-sdj-jA32wc67V6ZZOdIGGeqSc4UP1oAGV_p1sKH-pqKQJSwf8cxeolFR7hw (Accessed: 12th January 2023).

McLeod, J and Perepa, P. (2020) Early years practitioners' knowledge of early signs of autism in England. *The British Journal of Special Education*. 35(2), p.192-204. Available at: <https://nasenjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9604.12299> (Accessed: 12th January 2023).

Nadia. (2023) *Lego Therapy*. [Blog]. Available at: <https://sltforkids.co.uk/blog/lego-therapy/> (Accessed: 15th January 2023).

National Autistic Society. (2020) *Sensory Differences*. Available at: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/sensory-differences/sensory-differences/all-audiences> (Accessed: 8th January 2023).

National Autistic Society. (no date) *Extra help at schools in Wales*. Available at: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/education/extra-help-at-school/wales> (Accessed: 14th January 2023).

NHS Wales. (no date) *Diagnostic assessments for Autism*. Available at: <https://cavuhb.nhs.wales/our-services/integrated-autism-services/diagnostic-assessments-for-autism/> (Accessed: 8th January 2023).

Smeets, E, and Roeleveld, J. (2016) The identification by teachers of special educational needs in primary school pupils and factors associated with referral to special education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 31(4), p.423-439. Available at: <file:///C:/Users/HP%20Envy/Downloads/The%20identification%20by%20teachers%20of%20special%20educational%20needs%20in%20primary%20school%20pupils%20and%20factors%20associated%20with%20referral%20to%20special%20ed.pdf> (Accessed: 10th January 2023).

Therapy Focus. (2023) *What is Lego-based Therapy?* Available at: <https://therapyfocus.org.au/on-the-blog/what-is-lego-therapy/> (Accessed: 13th January 2023).