

Supporting Children with Non-Verbal Autism

Introduction

This poster aims to explore non-verbal Autism (or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)), as an Additional Learning Need (ALN). A learning disability or difficulty which causes a child’s learning to be more difficult than other children of the same age is referred to as having an ALN as the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 states. If an individual requires additional learning resources due to a learning difficulty or disability, regardless of whether it is caused by a medical condition or not, they are considered to have Additional Learning Needs (ALN) (Newport City Council, 2024). Autism is described as a developmental disorder that has an impact on an individual’s social interactions and perception of their environment (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Typical signs of autism in children include not responding to their name, avoiding eye contact, and repetitive movements (NHS, 2022). Approximately a fifth of learners in Wales are estimated to have an ALN (Snap Cymru, no date). Brignell, et al. (2018) further explain that language issues are considered common in children with ASD, and between 25% and 30% of children with ASD either never acquire functional language or are minimally verbal.

Barriers

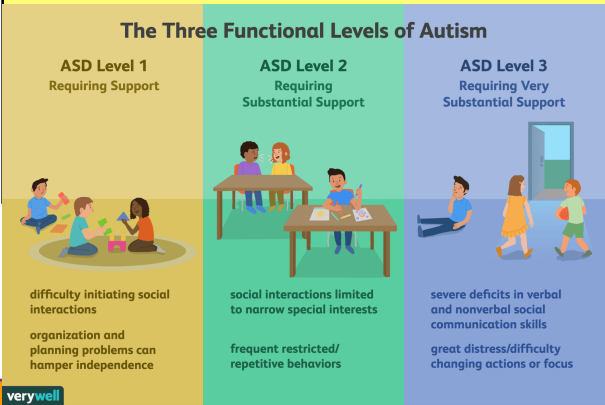
The National Autistic Society (2024a) suggests that Non-Verbal Autistic children are frequently thought to have a disability or medical issue that prevents them from speaking. The medical model of disability is a framework that conceptualises disability as an internal issue and focusses on medical interventions and rehabilitation to treat the condition (Chawner and Owen, 2022). Carmarthenshire County Council (2022) state that these difficulties can affect children in different ways. For example, Nottinghamshire Children’s Trust (2013) and Black, *et al.* (2022) explain that due to their difficulties interpreting social signs, many children with NV autism find it challenging to form friendships and to participate in reciprocal social activities. Furthermore, other barriers that a NV child with autism could face can be explained using the social model of disability. Aube, et al. (2021) state that some children with NV ASD experience stigma over their disability. Public and professional perceptions of autism, along with how apparent autistic symptoms are interpreted, are the main factors contributing to the stigma surrounding autism (Turnock, Langley, and Jones; 2022). Liao, Lei and Li (2019) suggest if staff had appropriate training on NV ASD, it could reduce the stigma children face in their environment.

Identification and Diagnosis of Non-Verbal Autism

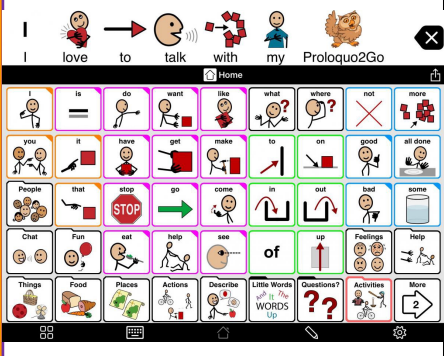
According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2022), Autism is difficult to diagnose before the age of about 12 months, although by the time a child is two years old, a diagnosis can usually be made. The Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (2016) explain that in children under three years old, regression of language or social abilities without loss of motor skills should prompt a referral for an autism assessment due to the high probability of autism.

NAS (2024a) state that understanding the early signs and symptoms is the first step in diagnosing children with ASD. The goal of early intervention and prevention is to offer targeted, tailored support to lessen the need for services or prevent the need for later, more extensive interventions (Welsh Government, 2021).

However, according to Koegel, *et al.* (2021), it considered important to acknowledge that almost all children under the age of 18 months are either Non Verbal or Minimally Verbal. Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (no date) further state that children must be assessed by health care professionals who have specialist training in diagnosing autism, in order to receive a diagnosis.



(Source: VeryWell Health, 2024).



(Source: The Guardian, 2013).

Strategies

According to NAS (2024) Autism is a spectrum condition that affects individuals differently, where some autistic with autism display delayed language development, while others with autism do not use speech at all. Simmons (2017) explains that in this situation, alternative methods of communication must be developed. A popular support strategy that can support NV autistic children communicate is Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) (NAS, 2020c).

These tools, which come in a variety of devices and systems are designed to support children with NV ASD that struggle with language (Aftab, *et al.* 2023). NAS (2023) further explain that AAC describes the use of communication tools that contribute to a message and can replace speech. Additionally, AAC improves children who have NV Autism’s mental health, as their frustrations and anxieties related to communication issues are lowered (Iacono, Trembath, and Erickson, 2016; Sievers, Trembath, and Westerveld, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, children that have Non-Verbal ASD are faced with many challenges, from the identification and diagnosis of the condition, to barriers that can create mental health issues from frustration on not being able to communicate verbally, and self-harm, to facing stigma for their condition.