

Introduction.

Autism is also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the medical world (National Health Service, 2022) and refers to a developmental disability that is said to affect the way in which people communicate and how they interact with the world and is a condition that will remain with the person for life (Autism, 2023). Interestingly whilst Lord *et al.* (2018, p. 508) agrees that the person's communication is affected, they extend and focus on the effect of other behaviours such as sensory issues experienced by those with ASD.

Identifying and diagnosing.

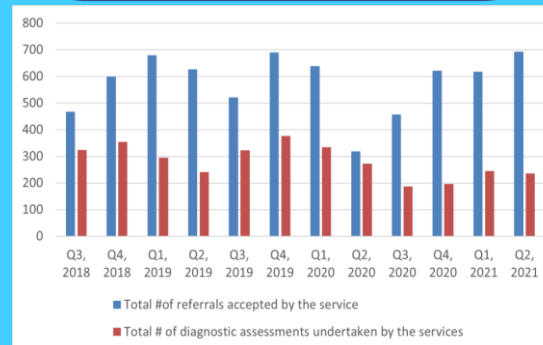
ASD signs and symptoms vary from person to person. People with ASD generally struggle with social situations, communication, and experience the world differently to others, including having different sensory needs, this is why it is referred to as a Spectrum Disorder (National Health Service 111 Wales, 2023; National Health Service Fife, 2023; Autism, 2023). Waiting times to be assessed for ASD are around 20 months (NHS Wales, no date). However, it is noted that waiting times have likely increased. Mencap (no date) and Mind (2023) agree that the long process of assessing for an ASD can be a very emotional time for a family, and that it is important to ask for help. There are currently **over 9,000** children in Wales awaiting an assessment (Welsh Conservatives, 2023). Nation Cymru, (2022) state that almost 1,000 of these children have been waiting over 2 years for an assessment. In the graph pictured, the number in which children are waiting for an assessment fluctuates throughout the year and the gap between children waiting for an assessment compared to children who have received a diagnosis is increasing, worsening due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Holtom and Lloyd-Jones, 2022). Some parents may not want a diagnosis because of the stigma that can, unfortunately be associated with it, which can include some people believing it's the parent's fault that their child has ASD and even see a change in people's attitudes towards their child (Daniels, Coughlan and Duschinsky, 2021, p. 8).

Giambattista *et al.* (2019) suggests using subtypes of ASD to enable a more specific research area. For example children with "high functioning" or "Aspergers" perform intellectually at a higher rate than other children with ASD. Unfortunately, children with Asperger's, predominantly females, are going undiagnosed as having ASD as they are better at masking other autistic traits, and therefore current forms of diagnosis resulting these females are being missed (Ratto *et al.*, 2018, p. 1699; Gould, 2017, p. 703). Staff working with children need extra training to enable them to better support them with their needs and to enable them to identify certain traits that are less well known (Dillenburger, 2016, p. 1). Welsh Government (2023) agree that better staff training and specialist services are needed to help identify these needs as soon as possible as early intervention will benefit the child's development as this is the time when their brain plasticity is high and are therefore able to develop new skills (Manzini *et al.*, 2021)

Strategy.

There are a number of different strategies that can be put in place to help children with ASD. Visual aids are a proven, effective method of communication as many children with ASD have language delay or communication difficulties that can affect their learning (Lofland, 2016, p. 27).

It has been shown that using visual aides also enables a child with ASD to maintain their attention during a task as children with ASD are visual learners (Padmadewi, 2017, p. 170; Brodzeller *et al.* 2018, p. 278; Kidder and McDonnell, 2017, p. 103). Around 63% of children with ASD also have language delays, visual aids have been proven to help develop a child's language skills (Georgiou and Spanoudis, 2021, p. 2; Gladfelter, Barron and Johnson, 2019, p. 9). Children seek comfort in knowing what to expect next (Colizzi *et al.* 2020, p. 11).



Picture: Welsh Government, 2022.

Barriers.

Children with ALN have high rates of exclusion from schools, however attainment in the early years is noticeably improving in Wales (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018). To ensure a fully inclusive education system in Wales the *Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018* was created, with the idea of removing all barriers to learning and doing so as an intrinsic part of the education system, rather than an optional extra (Mackenzie, Cologon and Fenech, 2016).

There is a high comorbidity rate between ASD and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), Galiana-Simal *et al.* (2020) stating it is as high as between 80-90% of SPD cases also have ASD. Children who have ASD also experience sensory hyper or hyposensitivity to the world around them, from bright lights to loud noises, to the different smells in a classroom (National Autistic Society, 2023b). These are some of the earliest autistic traits observed in infancy (Robertson and Baron-Cohen, 2017). Jacobs and Betts (2012) suggests designating a calm quiet area with minimal items in the class where the child is able to retreat to if they become over stimulated. Hattenstone (2021) state that people with ASD have been portrayed in a way that gives the impression that all people with ASD are geniuses, instead of showing a wider range of other traits such as hand flapping or tics. By removing this preconception it will make society a more accepting place for everyone (Mitchell, Sheppard and Cassidy, 2021, p. 14; Monk, Whitehouse and Waddington, 2022, p. 792).

Conclusion.

To conclude, autism appears to affect people very differently and that is why it is now referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder, but is typically viewed as viewing the world differently and having social and communication difficulties. The diagnosis journey can be a very long one and parents can be less inclined to push for a formal ASD diagnosis because of the stigma that surrounds a diagnosis. More training is needed to help practitioners identify a wider range of traits. In 2018 the Welsh Government introduced the *Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018* in an attempt to enhance an ALN child's education experience by encouraging inclusivity in schools and helping identify ALN as early as possible. People with ASD benefit from using visual aids as they are visual learners. Visual aids help develop communication skills and allow children to better understand daily routines.

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