

Learning to see the invisible

Around one in 100 children are on the autism spectrum. Its 'invisible' nature means many do not have a formal diagnosis but most require individualised support to help them learn and socialise at school. Some children are supported through School Action and School Action Plus and some have Statements of Special Educational Needs, but all require understanding and support to be given a chance to reach their full potential.

This is the driving force of the Autism Education Trust (AET), established in 2007 by a partnership of key autism organisations with financial help from the government. It is still funded by the Department for Education and is the only national coordinating body in England focused on providing the children's workforce with help and resources to further improve the way education placements are delivered to children and young people with autism.

How do we know what is needed?

When planning and implementing educational support for children with autism, the individual nature of the condition should be paramount in considerations. One size does not fit all. But this does not mean that support strategies need be complex, time consuming or expensive. Minor adjustments to the existing environment, routine or reward systems in schools can reap huge benefit for both teaching staff and pupils.

Initial research¹ to map current autism education service delivery and identify gaps in knowledge has informed the work of the AET and continues to drive its plans. The

research findings highlighted the lack of specialist support for autism education practitioners, including speech and language therapists and occupational therapists, as well as lack of knowledge and understanding among school staff. This skills shortage is widespread – a new report by think tank Policy Exchange² found that even in special schools only 39% of teachers and support staff had any sort of SEN qualification. Added to that, the increasing number of children on the autism spectrum getting a diagnosis is placing greater demands on existing provision. The forthcoming green paper is set to review current practices and highlight areas where both central and local governments can do more to provide appropriate choices and support for families of children and young people with SEN.

How does the AET help the education workforce?

It is widely recognised that autism education practices require continued investment and review to ensure that all children on the autism spectrum are given the opportunity to reach their full potential. This need to share and coordinate good practice is the driving principal of the AET.

Sarah-Jane Critchley, Project Head at the AET, says: "We work with teachers, SEN specialists and wider education professionals to develop resources aimed directly at practitioners and offer easy-to-use tools and support for classrooms and other school settings.

"Only a fraction of children with autism have a diagnosis and each child is affected by their autism in very different ways. We know many

Providing effective educational provision for children and young people with autism...

local authorities struggle to identify all children on the spectrum, but we aim to help SEN teams across the country by sharing good practice online and regularly organising 'learning and sharing days' for professionals to meet, discuss and agree on the main issues. We aim to help teachers and the wider educational professional network develop strategies that work for individual children and benefit the whole school."

The AET website provides good practice written for local authorities covering areas such as advocacy, multi-agency support and regional coordination. (See Good Practice area of www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk.) The forthcoming national conference, planned for early 2011, will look at the findings of ongoing AET research into the financial benefits of early interventions in autism. The AET has also established effective ways of involving children and young people with autism in its development and work through its Youth Council.

¹ Jones, G et al (2008). 'Educational provision for children and young people on the autism spectrum living in England: a review of current practice, issues and challenges.' The Autism Education Trust. www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources/research.aspx

² Hartley, R (2010). 'Teacher Expertise for Special Educational Needs. The Policy Exchange.' www.policyexchange.org.uk/publications/publication.cgi?id=199



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