



Difference, not deficit

The Autism Education Trust (AET) explains how to welcome a child with autism, or suspected autism, to your early years setting

Approximately one in every 100 people is estimated to be on the autism spectrum. Autism can be hard to detect in some people, so there may be children attending your setting who are not yet diagnosed.

Autism affects the way a person communicates and relates to other people and the world around them. What makes recognising autism particularly difficult is that there is no 'typical' autistic child. Autism is a spectrum condition, which means it affects people in different ways. Still, there are some more common characteristics, or what the AET calls 'areas of difference', that all children on the spectrum will experience.

Children with autism are just as unique as any other child with individual skills and challenges. The key word here is 'difference' not 'deficit'. Getting to know them as individuals, mapping their strengths and difficulties in these four key areas will not only help them to access the curriculum

better, but will also have a positive impact on the whole setting, including your staff.

Interacting

Children on the autism spectrum can find social interactions, with both adults and their peers, confusing and tiring. Some children show little motivation for social relationships, while others are keen to develop friendships but are not sure how. Everyday social interactions can be challenging because they may not know the rules and find it hard to work out what others expect of them. They may need support in group activities and help to understand how other people are feeling.

Processing information

Children on the autism spectrum may find it hard to predict what will happen in the future or imagine something they have not experienced before. They can find change and transitions challenging and may prefer a consistent routine and well-defined rules so

that they know what is going to happen next. For example, they may want to travel the same way to and from pre-school or eat the same food every day. Many children develop special interests in a topic or activity and these can be used to engage them in learning and social interactions.

Sensory processing

Many children on the autism spectrum have differences in the way they process sensory information. They might be over-sensitive to some stimuli, such as background noise, uncomfortable clothing or certain smells. This over-sensitivity makes it extremely difficult for them to filter out irrelevant sensory information and it may be hard for them to concentrate on a specific task or what you say to them. Other children on the spectrum might be under-sensitive and find it difficult to process sensory information. They may not feel discomfort or pain and will often seek out sensory feedback from objects or activities.



Communication

The expressive and receptive language of children on the autism spectrum often develops differently to their peers. This can result in differences in initiating conversations, understanding instructions and taking turns in conversation. Children on the spectrum may also take language very literally or use language non-productively, such as by repeating a few lines from their favourite cartoon again and again. Many children with autism will have delayed language skills and some will develop little or no verbal communication skills.

Supporting children

Understanding is the first step towards effective support. Autism is a very complex condition and every child with autism is different. There is no universal way to support every child in your setting. However, a wide range of adjustments can be made to help. Bob Lowndes, director of the AET, suggests:

- Communication is key – use simple, clear language and keep your sentences short. Allow time to process information and wait for responses. Supplement verbal information with visual supports such as timetables and ‘now and next’ boards.
- Children with autism may need to be taught how to play. Find out what motivates them and create opportunities to engage with them at their own level. You can try joining in with what the child is doing, rather than trying to guide their play. Try copying what they are doing before adding to the activity or introducing toys. For example, if a child likes opening and closing doors on toys join

in with this before adding toy figures to walk through the doors. By following their lead, you could help them discover that playing with someone else can be more fun than playing alone.

- Build on their strengths and use special interests creatively to engage children in learning. For example, if a child has a particular interest in trains, use toy trains to demonstrate the next task.
- Children with autism need to be carefully prepared for transitions between activities, groups and areas. You could try using a visual timetable, with lots of pictures. Keep it placed somewhere close to the child so that they can always see it. You can refer to this at multiple points throughout the day. Make sure you give plenty of verbal warnings before a transition happens, and not just at the time of the transition.
- Children on the autism spectrum may experience heightened stress and anxiety levels in comparison to their peers. This often results in behaviours which the child, staff and family can find challenging to manage at times. It is important to identify triggers for these behaviours and find ways to reduce or remove the triggers by using visual imagery, new activities or a designated safe space.
- Consider taking a sensory audit of your setting to assess how you could make an autism-friendly environment. This could include removing any unnecessary or distracting smells or sounds.

How to support Bina

Bina is three years and ten months old and attends a nursery. She knows lots of words and can recite parts of her favourite “Little Princess” stories. She likes to wear a crown and can get very upset if she has to take it off. She doesn’t always know how to ask for the things that she wants.

1. Use Bina’s special interest in Little Princess to introduce new concepts and extend her play. For example, Little Princess and Bina might like to read a book about Goldilocks, make a cup of tea in the kitchen corner or put their coats on together before going outside.
2. Provide structured opportunities for Bina to have positive interactions with her peers. Organise a Little Princess tea party and invite other children to join in.
3. Introduce visual supports, such as word and picture cards, to help Bina make her needs understood. Research has shown that the ability to use people’s names and verbs is a necessary step when developing creative language and conversation.

Practitioners should work collaboratively with parents, carers and colleagues to ensure that effective strategies are shared and used consistently with Bina.

More information

For more information, visit www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk

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