

# Autism

## Difference, not Deficit

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Vol 9.2

School Leadership Today  
www.teachingtimes.com

Providing support for students with autism can make a world of difference. **Bob Lowndes** from the Autism Education Trust shares his advice and practical tips on supporting children with autism in your setting.

**W**ith the latest prevalence studies indicating that more than 1 in 100 children and young people are on the autism spectrum in the UK, it is very likely that you have one or more children with autism in your setting. Boys are five times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls, but it's important to mention that girls are under-diagnosed and their numbers might be much higher than reported. Autism is hard to detect in some young people and there may be children in your setting who are not yet diagnosed. This article will give you some

practical advice on recognising signs of possible autism, what to do if you suspect a child has autism and also ways to support children on the autism spectrum in your setting.

### What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong condition which affects the way a person communicates and relates to other people and the world around them. What makes recognising and diagnosing autism particularly difficult is that there is no 'typical' autistic person. Autism is a spectrum condition, which means it affects people in different ways. Still, there are some common characteristics, or as the Autism Education Trust defines it, four areas of difference, that all children on the spectrum will experience. It's important to highlight that the key word here is difference, not deficit. Children with autism are just as unique as any other child with their unique skills and challenges, only requiring a different educational approach. Getting to know them as individuals, mapping their strengths and challenges in these four key areas will not only help them to access the curriculum better but will have a positive impact on the whole setting, including the staff and yourself. We will explore these four key areas below.

#### Some of the main signs that a child may be on the autism spectrum include:

- not drawing their parents' or others' attention to objects or events, for example pointing at a toy or a book, or at something that is happening nearby (or a child may eventually do this, but later than expected)
- unusual use of language (stilted and formal) and literal interpretation
- issues in understanding other people's feelings and emotions and recognising and expressing their own
- carrying out activities in a repetitive way, for example always playing the same game in the same way, or lining toys up in a particular order
- difficulties in interacting appropriately with other children (e.g. turn taking) – the child may avoid others to play alone or appear to dominate others
- resistance to change to familiar routines and in transitions from one activity to another

### Social interaction

Some children on the autism spectrum may have no desire for social relationships. Others are desperate to develop friendships, but are not sure how. Everyday interactions, like chatting, are challenging because they don't know the rules and find it hard to work out what others expect. They might appear insensitive or seek out time





alone when overloaded by other children, or you might notice that they don't seek comfort when they are hurt. They often have special interests that may appear as obsessions to other people. The ability to concentrate on these interests can lead to high levels of skill and knowledge. It can, however, make it hard for the child to switch attention and focus on an adult-led activity.

### Processing information and adapting to change

Children on the autism spectrum may find change difficult. It may be hard for them to imagine something they have not experienced and so planning for the future can be challenging and frightening. They may want to always travel the same way to and from school, or sit in the same seat or eat exactly the same food for lunch. As life can be confusing, they often prefer to follow a predictable daily routine with clear and well-defined rules so that they know what is going to happen every day.

### Sensory processing

The majority of children on the autism spectrum will have sensory perception difficulties. They might be over-sensitive to some stimuli, such as background noise and lighting, they may find some clothes uncomfortable and they may react adversely to being touched. This over-sensitivity makes it extremely difficult for them to filter out irrelevant sensory information and to concentrate on what you say. Other children on the autism spectrum might be under-sensitive to some stimuli and might have difficulties noticing certain colours and transparent objects. They might seek pressure by hugging objects or people, or they may not feel discomfort and pain.

## Communication and language

It is likely that a child with autism will experience difficulties with both verbal and non-verbal communication. This will include difficulties with initiating conversations, understanding and using verbal cues and body language, understanding instructions and taking turns in conversation. Children on the autism spectrum may take language very literally or use learned scripts from cartoons when talking. A lot of children with autism only communicate to request what they need and do not use language to make comments or share interests. Some are delayed in learning to speak and may not speak at all.

## Ways to support children with autism

One thing all adults with autism agree on is that they wish their teachers had understood their autism. Understanding is the first step towards effective support. Since autism is complex and every child with autism is different, there is no universal way to support every child in your setting. However, there is a wide range of – sometimes very simple – adjustments that can be learned through autism training. Good autism practice is good practice for all children. The Autism Education Trust (AET), the leading national training programme promoting best autism practice, offers some practical advice on supporting children with autism in your setting:

- Communication is key.** Adjust your communication by using simple, clear language and keep sentences short. Allow time to process information and wait longer than you think for a response. Supplement verbal information with timetables and other visual supports.





- **Children with autism need to be taught how to play with other children.** It is important to create opportunities to engage with the child at their level, and find out what motivates them. You can try joining in with what the child is doing, rather than trying to guide their play. You can start by copying what they are doing, then add to the activity or introduce new toys. e.g. if the child likes opening and closing doors on toys, start with this and then add toy figures walking in the doors. By following their lead, you could make them discover that playing with someone else can be more fun than playing on their own. Find a child who is mature and socially confident to act as a model and a partner for the child.
- **Build on strengths and use special interests creatively to engage children in learning.** (e.g. if the child in your care has an interest in trains, hoovers or dinosaurs, use these within the activities you offer, not just as a reward at the end.
- **Children with autism need to be carefully prepared for transitions between activities, groups and areas.** Think about transition from home to setting, between activities and from one area of the setting to another. You can try to use a picture based visual timetable placed close to the child so they can see it at all times. You can refer to this multiple times throughout the day and give verbal warnings before the transition happens and at the time of the transition.
- **Children with autism find unstructured times like break times and lunch times and free choice very hard without direction as to what they might do.** So build in structure by setting up organised activities the child can do alone or with another child and cue the child into this.

- **Children on the autism spectrum often experience heightened stress and anxiety levels in comparison to their peers, causing panic attacks which might challenge others.** There are ways to reduce the anxiety triggers, such as the use of visual objects, symbols or words, an enjoyable physical activity or a designated safe place.
- **Think about undertaking a sensory audit of your setting.** By reducing unnecessary visual overload, keeping noise levels to a minimum or simply by replacing a smelly rug, you will not only help the child with autism concentrate better but all the other children in your setting.

**For more information, autism education training and for practical resources please visit [www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk](http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk).**

**A special thanks to our contributing editor, Dr Glenys Jones, Autism Centre for Education and Research, University of Birmingham.**

## Case study

### Topcliffe School, Washwood Heath Multi-Academy Trust

**Ian Lowe, Deputy CEO of Washwood Heath Multi-Academy Trust and former head teacher of Topcliffe School shares his experiences.**

#### **What sort of challenges did you and your staff face initially while trying to support children with autism?**

The difficulties staff faced were a lack of awareness of the needs of the children and the challenges they would face within a mainstream school/ class setting. They had limited awareness of how autism affected a child's learning due to communication difficulties (understanding language, following instructions/ routines), following classroom rules and their social understanding of how they should deal with different situations and other children. Support was needed to give them strategies they could use to deter behaviours experienced by supporting the children in the areas they struggled with.

Teachers also reported several challenges, including: understanding and managing behaviour; socio-structural barriers (i.e., school policy, lack of training and resources); and creating an inclusive environment (i.e., lack of understanding from other teachers, students and parents).

#### **Why did you choose the Autism Education Trust training programme?**

To help us to be able to support children and the challenges they face. To make us a more inclusive school for all children, particularly when setting up/ establishing our ASD Resource bases this was crucial training to have.

#### **What practical advice did you and your staff find particularly helpful?**

The training provided us with some great practical resources to use within the class to support individual children/ groups, e.g:

- Pupil profile and prompts for observations to complete profile
- Conversation starters
- Situations–option–consequences–choices–strategies–simulation (SOCCSS) helping children to make a balanced decision
- Communication cards
- Appropriate voice level boards
- Stress bucket
- Emotion thermometer/ volcano
- Motivator puzzles
- Task boards and play time choice board/ lunch time schedule
- Strategies to support sensory sensitivity
- Environment checklist

## Case study

### Garrets Green Nursery School

**Lesley Martin, the retiring Head Teacher of the nursery school talks about her experiences and the journey to create a fully inclusive provision where all children thrive.**

#### **What sort of challenges did you and your staff face initially while trying to support children with autism?**

One of the greatest challenges for the team was managing the diverse needs of the pupils. Within a mainstream Nursery School, at that time, approximately 10% of the pupils had quite complex needs. One child, for example, would pace around the perimeter of the room, never settling to any activity or toy, pre-verbal and prone to collapsing to the floor and screaming. Another child who was more verbal but had limited comprehension and speech relating only to the here and now, would bite, kick and hit, had sensory needs and would empty every drawer and cupboard.

For our staff, finding strategies to support each of the children and to manage the behaviour was initially problematic as they attempted to do the best for every child in the group. The day-to-day management, ensuring that the children all reached their potential was not easy, particularly with a number of children who also had additional needs, including some complex medical needs.

Additionally, staff were aware that there was a conflict between what was expected at that time for a classroom to be bright and stimulating for the majority of the children, while those children with autism were disadvantaged by the 'clutter' of a busy environment. Communication was also problematic and staff felt that they were struggling at times to understand what the children needed and how they could make their expectations and instructions clear to the children.

#### **Why did you choose the Autism Education Trust training programme?**

Our school has always had an ethos which valued every child and family and aimed to offer high-quality experiences to ensure that pupils made good progress. We were aware that we had high expectations but that we generally sometimes needed guidance to effect change in practice. As the number of pupils with autism joining the school grew, there was an even greater need to seek out appropriate training.

Our staff have always been very reflective and evaluate their practice and pupil engagement regularly and we all recognised that training was needed to develop further.

#### **What changed since the training?**

There has definitely been an increase in pupil progress with attainment often remaining lower than expected levels for the age group but with accelerated progress from a very low starting point, particularly in PSED, PD and often in Communication and Language.

Overall, the pupils show an increased enjoyment in school life and want to attend. Over time, there is also an improvement in behaviour and compliance as anxiety decreases and understanding of expectations improves. There is generally also an improvement in play skills and in the development of relationships with adults.

#### **What is the one thing that you took away with you from the training and use in your practice?**

As a head teacher, the training reinforced for me the need to make support for pupils with autism a whole school issue, developing a shared awareness and understanding and developing a provision which is led by senior staff and embedded in the school's inclusive ethos. This influenced the content of the SDP, appraisal, standards of teaching, learning and development, engagement of children, trust and satisfaction of parents and a general increase in the effectiveness of what we offer.

#### **What message do you have for other school leaders wishing to support children with autism?**

I feel that any significant change to provision and practice has to be a whole school commitment, led by senior members of the school leadership team and delivered passionately in order to engage all staff.

Providing the right support is sometimes thought to be difficult and time-consuming and staff are often anxious about the impact on other pupils that children with autism may have. With the correct support in place, staff should see that their lives become a little easier as pupils are happier, less anxious, show greater engagement and have fewer behaviour concerns. It seems sensible to ensure, therefore, that the correct provision is in place.