

## Autism - a governors perspective

Many people think Autism is a mental health issue but the true definition is that Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others.

Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people. Autistic children and young people have difficulty with communication, social interaction, friendships and imaginative play. If you are autistic, you are autistic for life; autism is not an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity.

Autism is a spectrum condition. Thus whilst all autistic children share certain difficulties, being autistic will affect them in different ways. The range of difficulty that autistic children in particular experience can also be affected when other issues such as learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions, are present which means that different levels of support will be needed. Each Autistic child is an individual and there is no one way that can be used to provide this support, as what works with one child may be ineffective with another. However all children on the autism spectrum learn and develop. With the right sort of support, all can be helped to live a more fulfilling life of their own choosing.

To understand how widespread the incidence of Autism is, some facts and figures demonstrate that children and young people can be found in every educational setting.

### **How common is autism?**

Its common: the UK estimate is that approximately one in 100 children has it.

### **How many children with autism are there?**

In the UK, around 100,000.

### **What is the difference in diagnosis rates between boys and girls?**

Presently, four times as many boys as girls are diagnosed with autism.

### **How do children with autism fare at school?**

- First, the basic statistics: 70% of children with autism are educated in mainstream schools; the rest are in specialist provisions (which isn't necessarily a bad thing: different environments suit different children).
- Over 11% of children with special educational needs in state funded schools have a diagnosis of autism.
- The number of Statements/EHCPs that list autism as the primary need has increased by 3% since 2010.

## What about quality of teaching?

- 60% of teachers in England do not feel they have had adequate training to teach children with autism
- 35% of teachers think it has become harder to access specialist support for children

From this information it becomes apparent that governors in all types of schools, whether they are maintained or academies will have some children on the Autistic Spectrum amongst their pupils.

Schools have a legal duty to take positive steps to make sure that pupils with disabilities, which includes Autism, can participate in all aspects of school life. Failure to make reasonable adjustments, to ensure that disabled and non-disabled pupils have equal access, in admission arrangements and to education services is unlawful. The reasonable adjustments duty requires schools:-

- to think ahead
- to anticipate the barriers that disabled pupils may face
- to remove or minimise them before a disabled pupil is placed at a substantial disadvantage

Reasonable adjustments may need to be made in admissions, exclusions and in fact every aspect of the life of the school in order to assist the learning opportunities available for autistic pupils.

Dealing with Autism within schools tends to be the province of the SEND teacher (or teachers) but in a mainstream school particularly key stage 3 and Key Stage 4 where pupils are taught by a variety of teachers CPD should be used to develop teachers' knowledge and understanding of the needs of the autistic young person. Areas where heightened awareness is needed, for instance, are the playground or school dining room, which can be intimidating for autistic children. They may have difficulty developing social skills and understanding jokes or idioms. They like structure and routine because it helps them to cope in an unpredictable world. Good supervision during unstructured time is essential. Staff can monitor and observe autistic children and young people and then identify and share the support needs of those who can't express their own feelings. It's useful for all support staff to have some autism awareness training, particularly those offering playground support. Governors need to ensure that the school's Special Needs Policy reflects the need for training for all staff that come into contact with these children.

Governors should also ensure that the schools premises are fit for purpose in providing autistic children and young people with an agreed safe and quiet place for them to go when they feel anxiety building or are overloaded by sensory stimuli. This could be within the school inclusion unit,

library or a calmer area of the school and may not be the same for all autistic pupils. To avoid stigma being attached to this place, it's helpful to choose an area that has many established uses.

Governors also need to be aware that children with autism are at risk of exclusion:-

- A survey conducted in 2013 found that 40% of parents reported that their son or daughter had been informally and illegally excluded in the last 12 months and 20% had been excluded formally.
- Government statistics show that children with a statement of special educational needs are six times more likely to be excluded from school than children with no special educational needs.

Schools are under additional legal duties when considering the exclusion of children with SEN and disabilities. Children with SEN are entitled to extra support, which may range from more help within school, to the involvement of outside specialists and ultimately an education health and care (EHC) plan. Early intervention to address underlying causes of disruptive behaviour should include an assessment of whether appropriate provision is in place to support any additional SEN that a pupil with Autism may have.

Schools should have a zero tolerance no bullying policy that is consistently enforced. Any incident of bullying must be investigated and pupils should be encouraged to report any kind of intimidating behaviour. Every child should feel comfortable talking about bullying they are experiencing and be confident that action will be taken. Some autistic children and young people may not recognise bullying, so it's important that teaching and support staff observe behaviour in and out of the classroom. Classroom and learning support assistants are often able to notice an incident or hear remarks made by other pupils and should document these to share with relevant staff and parents.

One form of bullying is social exclusion. It can help autistic children and young people to have a 'buddy' during unstructured times. This could be a peer who spends lunchtime with the child or young person, either regularly or when there is a particular need. An autistic child or young person may find social interaction too demanding. If attempts have been made to support them to develop friendships and it's clear their choice is to spend time alone, they should be allowed to do so.

As a governor you may need to ascertain whether your school as part of its PSHE curriculum or assembly programme is creating opportunities for all pupils to develop an understanding of medical conditions, special educational needs and disabilities. Information on many additional

needs can be presented, without highlighting a particular condition or pupil. It should help to make pupils more understanding and accepting of an autistic child.

Governors will also need to develop a policy in line with the Department for Education's statutory guidance released in April 2014 updated 11th December 2015 – "Supporting Pupils at School with Medical Conditions" under a statutory duty from section 100 of the Children and Families Act 2014. The statutory duty came into force on 1st Sept. 2014

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions--3> .

"Medical condition" for these purposes is either a physical or mental health medical condition as diagnosed by a healthcare professional which results in the child or young person requiring special adjustments for the school day, either ongoing or intermittently. This includes a chronic or short-term condition, a long-term health need or disability, an illness, injury or recovery from treatment or surgery.

Governors should have regard to the statutory guidance issued, take account of it, carefully consider it and make all efforts to comply. For pupils who have medical conditions that require EHC plans, compliance with the SEND code of practice (part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014) will ensure compliance with this guidance with respect to those children.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>

Ofsted places a clear emphasis on meeting the needs of pupils with SEN and disabilities.

Governors may feel that implementing these proposals have cost implications which their school can ill afford for one or perhaps two pupils. However to use a now defunct strap line, every child matters, and as a governor it is your responsibility to challenge the status quo and allow autistic children access to the education they deserve.

Pam Stevenson (Chair of Governors at Halesbury School)

*{Our thanks to Pam for her welcome introduction to this important issue}*