

An Approach to Inclusion

by Kathleen Morris-Coole

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is the fastest growing special needs group. While debates continue as to why this should be, it is the parents and practitioners who have to deal with the day to day consequences of this complex disorder and find positive ways to impact on and improve the quality of affected individuals' lives and those of their families.

Some medication and dietary interventions are proving helpful in reducing anxiety and hyperactive behaviours but none, as yet, reverse or remove the underlying triad of difficulties. Educational intervention remains the primary source of help. Understanding how the triad impacts on these children's perception of the world continues to be the most effective tool we have to inform us of how best we can reach out and help.

Children with ASD are different from any other group of special needs children. Many of the approaches and strategies we employ with them will not vary greatly from those we use with other children, but the reasons we select them will. The majority of other special needs children, excluding those with physical difficulties, have delayed development or specific learning difficulties. Children with ASD have a developmental disorder, which results in them perceiving and understanding the world in a significantly different way. Unless we understand and respect these differences we cannot hope to intervene successfully.

The term ASD applies to a diverse group of individuals with a wide range of behaviours and needs. It embraces those with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) and also those with normal to high intelligence.

All share the same triad of differences, which results in them having problems in the three areas of communication, social understanding and imagination. According to Uta Frith, a neuroscientist based at University College, London, in *Explaining the Enigma* (1989) this results in "an inability to draw together information so as to derive coherent and meaningful ideas – a fault in the pre-disposition of the mind to make sense of the world". It is a condition sometimes referred to as mind blindness.

"With greater numbers, changing social attitudes and new legislation it is increasingly likely that teachers in all settings are likely to encounter children on the autistic spectrum."

Theirs can be a frightening world where anything can happen and it is this fear which can result in selected repetitive behaviours and routines, within which they feel safe, and extreme resistance to change which, from their perspective threatens that safety.

With greater numbers, changing social attitudes and new legislation it is increasingly likely that teachers in all settings are likely to encounter children

on the autistic spectrum. For this group the pre-school and early years experiences are even more crucial in developing appropriate behaviours and learning skills.

So, what can pre-school and early years teachers do to maximise the chance of successful inclusion?

Parents

Preparation is crucial and will involve close and continuous liaison with parents. They are the people who can

identify strengths and weaknesses, tell us about their child's fears and any possible flash points and how they have evolved ways of dealing with these. They can identify motivators that make it worthwhile for the child to co-operate.

The motivators, identified by the parents, will be an essential feature in any successful programme. These children are, certainly in the initial

stages, unlikely to do something just because they are asked or because other children are doing it. Their lack of social understanding of rules and expectations prevents them from needing to fit in or please us, so we need to use their self-interest to make it worthwhile for them. As they become more familiar and secure this resistance often diminishes but the need for rewards remains.

Staff

The entire staff will require training so that a consistent and informed approach can be agreed. The training should provide information about the disorder as well as a range of practical strategies. At this point pre-planning to identify initial targets can begin and the possible implications on staffing levels discussed. The targets set will take account of the social as well as the educational skills required as both will need to be taught explicitly. Turn-taking and joint attention will almost certainly feature in the early programmes.

The setting

These children thrive within structured settings where expectations are clear and where adults look beyond particular behaviours to the underlying problems. Such children tend to be visual learners and respond well to symbolised or picture timetables which show the sequence of their day, to schedules which illustrate the stages within an activity, and to visually clear tasks which have a clear beginning and end. Speech therapists or advisory teachers with experience of TEACCH and Total Communication can help the receiving school to identify and prepare the appropriate resources.

Remember that they have a communication disorder – language is a barrier rather than a key. Use clear, concise language and give the child plenty of time to process it.

If there is a problem tell the child what he or she should do, not what they shouldn't do. For example, 'Hands down!' rather than 'Don't touch!'

The carefully graded materials available in Montessori nurseries are helpful for these children but it cannot be taken for granted that they will have automatically absorbed the correct names and uses of these materials and a more direct teaching style will probably be required. 📄

Kathleen Morris-Coole is a special needs Outreach worker in East Devon.

“Their lack of social understanding of rules and expectations prevents them from needing to fit in or please us, so we need to use their self-interest to make it worthwhile for them.”