



FACILITATING INCLUSION OF LEARNERS WITH AUTISM IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

A Guide for Teachers and Caregivers/Parents
of Persons with Autism

Supported by:



Landsforeningen LEV was founded in 1952 by parents from all over Denmark. The mission for LEV was and still is to advocate for all people with intellectual disabilities and their families and inclusion for all in the society

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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

- Margaret Mead

FOREWORD

Persons with Autism in Ghana are amongst the forgotten and voiceless people of our country. They are often faced with discrimination and denied their right to education. Like all other children, Inclusion Ghana believes that children with autism have a right to education and therefore government of Ghana must support them with the needed educational environment in mainstream schools to exercise this right. As Ghana begins the implementation of the Inclusive education policy, IG believes that no child or learner should be left behind.

Inclusion Ghana recognizes that the cultural stigma and challenges faced by parents of persons with autism in Ghana is so strong that many parents hide their children or are reluctant to take their children to school. Being part of the technical working group that supported the development of the inclusive education policy and its implementation plan, Inclusion Ghana saw a need to develop this guideline based on evidence of an inclusive education project focused on learners with autism in mainstream schools.

This guideline is first and foremost designed for teachers and parents/caregivers of persons with autism. We hope it will inspire teachers on how best to include learners with autism in the mainstream schools. It is also expected that parents/caregivers will also utilise the information in this book to support their children in school. The guideline would also serve as an advocacy tool for anyone who wants to get a child with autism to be included in mainstream schools. The guideline takes its inspiration from the Inclusive Education policy and outlines practical steps or guide that would help include persons with autism in mainstream schools.

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ACRONYMS

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| AACT | Autism Awareness Care and Training Centre |
| ASD | Autism Spectrum Disorder |
| CWD | Children with Disabilities |
| FAS | Fetal Alcohol Syndrome |
| GES | Ghana Education Service |
| ID | Intellectual Disability |
| IE | Inclusive Education |
| IEP | Individualised Educational Plan |
| IG | Inclusion Ghana |
| LEV | Landsforeningen LEV |
| M&E | Monitoring and Evaluation |
| MoE | Ministry of Education |
| PSHG | Parents Self Help Group |
| PECS | Picture Exchange Communication System |
| PTA | Parents and Teachers Association |
| PWA | Persons with Autism |
| PWID | Persons with Intellectual Disabilities |
| SEN | Special Educational Needs |
| SPEdCo | Special Education Co-ordinator |
| TEACCH | Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children |

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Introduction

In 1943, Leo Kanner formally documented Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through his observations of eleven children with developmental disorders. Since that time, many changes have been made in both the perception of the disorder and its prevalence of diagnosis. In 1960, ASD was reported in 4 to 5 cases per 10,000 individuals. The prevalence of cases rose to 5 to 31 cases per 10,000 individuals in 1990 (Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, & Kincaid, 2003).

The education and treatment of individuals with ASD has undergone extreme changes too since 1943. In Ghana, the education of a child with ASD would only be considered within a specialized school or a psychiatric facility. With increased knowledge of the disorders associated with autism, the public school system is now much more expected to provide an appropriate learning environment for these learners. Educators are called to educate all children, regardless of race, gender, or ability. Learners with ASD were once educated in alternative settings in extreme situations, in the special education classroom in moderate cases, or in the regular educational classroom if undiagnosed. As public policy is shifting and more knowledge is being gained about appropriate education of individuals with ASD, educators and parents are striving to find the most effective way to educate these learners.

Although the traditional model of lecture in the classroom is no longer the norm, classrooms instruction is not as individualized as these special Learners need in order for them to achieve success. Many of these learners with ASD are lost in the shuffle of special education, or lost in a regular education setting that focuses heavily on learning methods that are difficult for them. Classroom teachers are rarely educated to differentiate instruction and recognize the needs of a student with ASD.

As stated by Simpson (2003) there is overwhelming evidence of a shortage of teachers and other professionals who have the knowledge and skills to serve the needs of learners with ASD. Indeed, preparing qualified teachers and other professionals to educate and otherwise support learners with ASD is the most significant challenge facing the autism field (p. 195).

In Ghana, the number of learners receiving education in the public school system with a diagnosis of ASD is only a handful. Public school systems or classroom teachers in Ghana are not equipped with a knowledge base that will provide the environment needed for the learner with ASD to become successful.

All individuals with ASD learn at differing rates, and with different degrees of success depending on their personal strengths and weaknesses. There is not one universal way to instruct learners with ASD that will benefit them.

The purpose of this guideline is to give evidence based recommendation gathered in observing several children with ASD in the classroom on how they were included in the classroom.

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a condition that has for long been misdiagnosed and misunderstood. As a result, intervention for ASD has muddled along from psychoanalytical approaches to the pharmaceutical and currently to more appropriate educational practices. ASD manifests as behaviours that are often odd, unusual, 'inappropriate', and different from what are seen as acceptable norms of the society. Hence someone who does not understand the condition finds the child with ASD perplexing and therefore difficult to teach.

ASD is defined as a disability that affects the way that a person communicates and relates to people around them (National Autistic Society). It is a complex developmental disorder that affects more boys than girls, in the ratio of 4:1. ASD is described as a spectrum of disorder because of the wide variation in the intensity of the condition and the associated learning difficulties that may accompany the disorder. The generic term autistic spectrum disorder includes a wide range of people from those who have severe learning difficulties and limited communication skills to people who are cognitively able and have good verbal skills, such as those described as having Asperger's Syndrome.

The three core impairments that can be seen in a person with ASD are:

- Social interaction and relationships
- Social communication and language
- Social understanding - imagination

Children with Asperger's Syndrome share the same core problems with others on the autistic spectrum, both the triad of impairments and the proposed additional descriptors. However, they present as more verbally competent and academically able. They do want to interact with peers and make friends but because they are unskilled in their approach, they experience significant social difficulties. This call for an inclusive setting where they can learn to socialise in order to build this skill.

What is Inclusive Education

The purpose of education is to ensure that all children have access to knowledge, skills, and information that will help prepare them towards later contribution in their career, workplaces, and communities. Inclusion education (IE) is an educational approach as well as a philosophy, which provides all children with community membership and better opportunities for academic and social achievement. Inclusion is about making sure that every child feels welcomed and that their unique needs and learning styles are attended to and valued. Inclusion is about making all children valuable participant in social and academic activities. These are central points in the learning process that all children go through when learning about themselves and developing their own "self".

All children have a need to be included in communities and activities with caregivers, teachers and other children. Inclusion is focusing on the joint classroom instead of the individual child. Where once the focus was narrowly on issues of class, gender and race the discussion is now also including the participation of learners with disabilities. We are now talking about seeing the whole person rather than the labels they have been given.

IE happens when children with and without special needs, HIV status, age and children of diverse backgrounds and abilities are participating and learning in the same classroom, interact socially with each other within the regular school setting. It requires teachers to provide appropriate and individualized support and services to all learners during the learning process without stigmatization. Teachers involved in inclusive classrooms must vary their approaches and teaching methods to enhance learning for all learners. IE has proven to be very beneficial for both children with and without disabilities. Having both in the same class would allow them to:

- Develop individual strengths and gifts, with high and appropriate expectations for each child.
- Work on individual goals while participating in the life of the classroom with other learners of their own age.
- It would socialise parents of children with ASD with parents without children with ASD.

- Foster a school culture of respect and belongingness and provide opportunities to learn about and accept individual differences.
- Develop friendships with a wide variety of other children, each with their own individual needs and abilities.
- Positively affect both their school and community to learn and appreciate diversity and inclusion on a broader level.

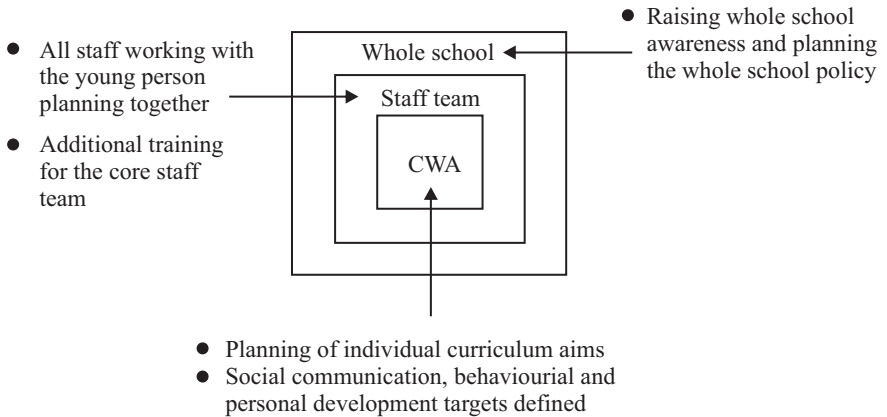
Ghana's Inclusive Education Policy

The essence of the policy was to make schools aware of the fact that all children can learn and as well have a right to learn and that all children learn differently. Children have different ways of learning, therefore the schools and the education system must make sure that the physical as well as the social, emotional and psychological environment to learn has been created. The Children with disabilities should be welcomed into the school, have friends, be treated with respect, be believed in and valued by their fellow learners, teachers, head teachers as well as the community.

Approximately 100,000 Ghanaian children aged 6-14 have a disability. More than 16,000 of these children are out of school (2010 Population and Housing Census). For a very long time, the education system has served those who have no special educational needs and fit readily into it, and has excluded those with special educational needs and either set them apart in special schools or ignored them altogether.

The overarching goal of the Inclusive Education Policy is to redefine and recast the delivery and management of educational services to respond to the diverse needs of all learners within the framework of Universal Design for Learning and Child Friendly School Concept. The IE policy sets out to change the education system, not the children. In order to ensure the Inclusive Education Policy benefits all persons without exemptions, Inclusion Ghana embarked on a pilot project in collaboration with LEV on how persons with autism could best be included in mainstream schools. This is in readiness for the upcoming policy yet to be implemented by government. The current situation with the policy is the question raised on whether or not children with ASD could be included in mainstream settings, if so how can this best be done without creating tokenism in the classroom.

WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH FOR FACILITATING INCLUSION OF LEARNERS WITH AUTISM IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS



The Whole School: Commitment to Inclusion

This is needed by the whole staff team and should be set out in the school's special educational needs policy. The provision of a calm, predictable environment requires awareness raising, commitment and planning by the whole school. It is important that all members of the school staff and the entire student population are given some awareness training on autism spectrum disorder as well as on the child with autism at the school. This would create acceptance and a more welcoming environment for the child with autism in the mainstream school.

The child with ASD will meet all members of the school community and not only his or her teachers. This calls for a holistic school awareness approach on autism and inclusive education. The Inclusion Education Policy and its Implementation plan for PWDs including persons with ASD must be readily available to all mainstream schools in the regions in order to assist the entire staff of these schools to provide effective and a more proactive support for the child with ASD. It is important that where whole school strategies for management are agreed and implemented, staff should understand the reasons for the strategies and the importance of a consistent response.

Staff Team

After the entire school have been trained, educated and awareness has been created on ASD and the IE Policy, the staff would be expected to use the knowledge acquired from the training to support the child by ensuring that the special needs of that child is met at the school. The core staff working directly with the child would require additional training i.e. more precise information about the child with ASD. This could be done with parents, caregivers and/or previous support persons. This would aid them to talk and discuss potential difficulties and ways parents and caregivers dealt with them. Plan the mode of communication that will be between the home, school and caregiver or support persons in order to get the best mutual support and understanding of the child.

Planning by the staff team should include:

- Clarification of roles and responsibilities among members of the team who are working with the child with ASD. There will be a need for non-contact time for team planning.
- Agreed contingency plans for problems and moments of crisis.
- In-service training about methods and strategies which might be useful to manage learning and behaviour.
- Planning of management strategies to ensure consistency within the team and the efficient dissemination of information to the whole school staff.
- The personal, social and pragmatic communication needs of the learner with ASD being defined, specifically taught and given high priority.

Information and Communication

Gathering information from parents and caregivers and any professionals involved is a crucial part of the teachers' preparation stage. Parents and caregivers must speak to teachers and others core persons involved in the learner's schooling. During these meetings an action plan should be made to include:

- Successful strategies to manage learning and behaviour.
- Organisation of the learning environment.
- Possible anxiety triggers in the new school environment.
- Strategies to promote personal, social and educational development.

Clear lines of communication and consistency are important in giving feedback. A two-way communication is important in order to obtain feedback on a range of issues, such as the response to management programmes and curriculum issues, stress triggers etc. Good communication helps when gathering information such as modifications to behavioural targets, changes to the timetable, arrangements for cover teachers, details of special events etc., which may cause anxiety. Efficient communication should also include clear lines of communication between home, mainstream schools and the special schools.

Learner with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Individual curriculum aims, behavioural and personal development targets planning must be taken into consideration during these processes. The school must ensure that the learner diversity needs are met and that the learner benefits at the end of each academic year. The approach in the class must be structured in a manner to ensure that the learner actively participates and achieves the main objective for being in the school with his or her colleagues.

The mode of communication utilised by the learner with ASD must be identified to ensure that it is included. For e.g. if the learner's mode of communication involves the use of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) or not must be identified. The personal targets of the learner refer to their moral, physical, emotional, cultural and intellectual development mostly based on their needs. Behaviour development targets focuses behaviour that has been chosen or 'targeted' for change. The target should be positive with emphasis laid on what you would like the learner to do as opposed to what you do not want him/her to do.

Transition Planning

The importance of carefully planning the transition to a new school for a learner with ASD cannot be over-emphasised. Learners with ASD will be particularly vulnerable during transition because of the inevitable change of environment and routine.

Even a learner who appears very settled in his or her current environment can have difficulties with changing schools. The new school will need to be provided with full information about the educational and social responses of the learner.

Most learners with ASD will make great efforts to conform and behave appropriately at school and high levels of anxiety and stress may only be apparent when they get home. Careful planning for transition is very important as a prelude to successful inclusion. It may be useful to hold a transition planning meeting, involving key people (e.g. the SPEDCo from both the present and the new school, the educational psychologist, parents/carers, representatives from other relevant agencies).

At this point, the new school may not be identified. Nevertheless the meeting can be helpful in assisting parents/carers to consider the options available and the support that the learner with ASD may require. If the child is coming from a special school and the new school has not been identified yet, a meeting should be held to include parents and current caregivers and must be arranged by the special school.

Potential sources of support for parents/carers in identifying and visiting schools must be critically taken into consideration, for example support from the Parent Self Help Group (PSHG) will assist a parent to select the mainstream school that would best accept and include their children. PSHG involves parents who have children with ASD coming together to share their experiences on how they can support each other and to share ideas on how best their children with ASD can be included and accepted within the society. Parents, carers and the learners with ASD should be encouraged to visit identified schools frequently in order to get themselves acquainted before transition.

Moving from Special school to Mainstream school

The learners with ASD have been socialised in an environment where they shared similar characteristics. The change from a familiar environment to a completely new one where the characteristics are different would pose challenges but if these challenges are dealt with correctly then the child would be transitioned without difficulty. The special school has either special educational needs teachers, caregivers or support persons that assist learners with ASD to ensure that they adapt to certain basic skills in life in order to fit into society.

The staff at these special schools must completely prepare the learner with ASD according to the mainstream system in order to help the learner fit into the new system. The preparation should embody every activity carried out in the mainstream school including academic preparation, which focuses mostly on the subjects and topics, lesson changes, the number of hours to sit for a lesson etc. Preparation should also cover activities outside the classroom such as break times, socialising, turn taking, lunch periods and closing periods.

Role of the Special School

The management of the special schools must keep a data on the capabilities of the learner. This would provide adequate information on the strengths and challenges of the learner with autism and how best he/she could be included in the mainstream school

- The learner must be prepared on the schedule utilised in the mainstream school. This would help him/her to follow the pattern of activities within the mainstream school thereby reducing tantrums and meltdowns.
- Identify support persons or caregivers that can efficiently assist the learner within the mainstream school. This will help ensure that they enjoy full inclusion and participation without any form of discrimination.
- The special school must organise regular visits to the school with support from the caregiver or support persons assigned. This would create acceptability by the school and as well create acquaintance with the school environment.
- The special school must at the initial stage of sending the learner to the mainstream school, get pictures of the school, teacher, classroom and the pupils/students of the school ready to aid in the transition. This will help ensure easy entry and acceptance of the new environment as well as persons to be engaged within this environment.

Role of Caregiver at the Mainstream School

- The caregiver or support person assigned can help prepare the learner for the transition with the use of pictures of the teacher, caregiver, school, pupils etc. This could help resolve challenges such as refusal to go to the school or even stay in class for lessons. The learner would identify with the persons involved and this would ensure an efficient transition.
- The caregiver or support person must share the capabilities and challenges of the learner with autism with the staff but specifically the teacher that would be hosting the learner. This would aid the teacher to identify with the needs of the child and also find out how best to assist to ensure that they are met without creating room for tokenism in the classroom.
- The caregiver or support person must meet with the teacher assigned in order to have access to the timetable for the class. This would help in preparation of the child to identify assembly periods, the changes in lessons, break times, lunch times and closing times. The training would help the child to adapt to the new system of timings and this would help reduce tantrums and meltdowns in the classroom.

- The caregiver or support persons must have a first-hand information on the topics to be treated for the term. This would aid in efficient preparation and participation of the child in the mainstream school. This would also help the caregiver or support person to find out new approaches that could be utilised to help the child with autism to fully participate in class. This would facilitate the caregivers' preparation to the child on how to study a particular topic and understand them as well as solve questions related to them.

The caregiver must also prepare the child on how to copy from the board during lesson hours. This would reduce the challenge of inability to copy rightly what has been written by the teacher on the board. It would also restrict the movement of caregiver or support person to the board to point out what to copy from the board.

The caregiver can create a day's calender to train the child on the number of days per term. The days should be cancelled out when a visit had occurred to ensure that child identified the number of days left for the end of the term. This would help reduce refusal to the school over a period of time.

Role of the Special Educational Needs Teacher

A special educational needs (SEN) teacher is specifically employed to work with learners who need extra support, or require an advanced programme of learning in order to reach their full educational potential. SEN teachers may work with individuals who have physical disabilities, sensory impairments (i.e. hearing or visual), speech and language difficulties, learning difficulties such as dyslexia, conditions such as ASD, social, emotional and mental health needs, or have a combination of these difficulties. A SEN teacher may also work with gifted and talented individuals

A special need teacher would typically be responsible for:

- Developing programmes of learning activities for the learner with ASD
- Planning, preparing and researching the lessons
- Preparing and adapting teaching materials to match learner's needs
- Teaching students on an individual, class or small group basis and help them understand instructions

- Checking and assessing learners' work and giving feedback on this
- Carrying out a learner's care plan (education, social, behaviour and personal)
- Attending meetings and reviews
- Liaising with other professionals, such as social workers, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and educational psychologists.
- Coordinating the work of support staff
- Giving information and help to teachers

From Home to Mainstream School

Role of parents:

Some children with disabilities in Ghana might have been hidden at home and have not been given the opportunity to go to school, or even go outside. Change is hard for all children, especially those on the autism spectrum. The first day of school is going to be a big challenge, which can be terrifying for a child with ASD. To help make the transition easy for the child from home, you can start by introducing as many things as possible before the first day so that the child has an opportunity to become familiar and comfortable with them.

- A slow and steady start is recommended when bringing a child from home to a mainstream school. You might have to start off by introducing all the new school items such as uniform, bag, lunch containers etc. that the child will be using. This should be done as early as possible so that the child has enough time to get used to the items.
- Let the child visit the school in order for the child to see the school, meet the teacher and the class before starting school. This also helps the child in learning the way to school and how to get there.
- Practice all the "school-stuff" you can with your child before starting school to help increase familiarity. This can be practicing eating lunch from a lunch box, walking to school, wearing the uniform and school bag.

- Highlight all areas that might cause issues/anxiety to give you the best chance to work on them and start working on this from the familiar home environment. A simple thing such as wearing a schoolbag or a uniform might be a challenge for a learner with ASD, especially if they have sensory issues.
- Learners with ASD might not know time by looking at a clock but often have an "inner-clock". To help the child's school transition you can start at home by using the same timetable as the school such as letting the learner get used to waking up and eating lunch at specific times.
- Bag tags can be incredibly helpful to promoting independence. A simple laminated bag tag that has a list (either written or with pictures) of what the learner needs to pack in their bag each day. While an adult is available at home to help pack the bag for school, your child may often be left to their own devices in the classroom to pack their belongings away. Practice doing this at home can also be beneficial; spatial awareness and understanding of how to fit things in the bag can be challenging to some children.
- Written notes in a notebook/diary between teacher and parents can be helpful in everyday communication but also to refer back to at a later date. Notebooks/diaries can be helpful for teachers to inform parents about homework.

Timetables

Ensuring that the learner with ASD has a detailed timetable and organisational information appropriate to his or her needs is very important. Knowing what to expect helps to keep anxieties levels low for all children and not just those with ASD. Children with ASD will all benefit from a clearly defined, predictable routine to the school day. This may need to be visual.

- It is a good idea for both parents and caregivers to know in good time, the timetables of the learner's class and school in order to prepare the learner. Ensure that the learner knows his schedule for each day and knows what subjects will be taught and who the teacher is.

- Make sure to inform the child about what will happen during the lesson. Some learners with autism will find it difficult to concentrate in class if they have not been prepared for what will happen during the lesson. Not knowing this can cause distractions and anxiety with the learner. Talk with teachers and heads of school that can help parents and caregivers to know about the specific topic taught in each class.
- If the learner does not know time it can be helpful for them to have something that will indicate when the lesson starts and ends, as well as break time. This could be visual.
- Make sure that the learner has time to do what he/she needs to do before starting class. Learners with ASD often have certain routines that need to be done before a lesson can begin. This could be them taking out their school stuff in a specific order or lining up their pencils. If this routine is not done it can have crucial consequences for the learner and the rest of the day.

Visual effects and Support

Visual support for the daily routines could include:

- A visual timetable for the morning/afternoon or the whole day.
- A visual schedules for particular times of the school day such as the morning routine.
- Work schedules which define what work is to be done and how much work.
- Pictures of the different teachers that the child will meet during the day.
- The closing time should be clearly defined, as in when the learner completes a task or the lesson is over.
- Visual support to indicate time such as break time or lunchtime etc.

Not all learners with ASD will require all of these forms of visual support, but some may. Consideration should be given to the way it is presented, as some people require specific pictures, others only require it in writing while some don't not need any visual support.

PICTURE EXCHANGE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) are an essential tool for many nonverbal learners, and their instructors. PECS come in many forms, but all include pictures. The images allow the child to communicate their needs, make choices about what they want, or get to know what will come next in their daily schedule. This system of communication allows for an alternative expression of needs and ideas. PECS does not require complex or expensive materials. It was created with families, educators, and resident care providers in mind, so it can be readily used in a range of settings.

PECS begins by teaching an individual to give a picture of a desired item to a "communicative partner", who immediately honours the exchange as a request. The system goes on to teach discrimination of pictures and how to put them together in sentences. In the more advanced phases, individuals are taught to answer questions and to comment through PECS.

PECS can be used to help a learner with ASD communicate with you, and for you to provide visual schedules to them in a way that is easy to understand. PECS will typically start with pictures of desired objects like food, places, and familiar people. Over time, sentence strips are added. For example, a picture of a chocolate chip cookie that reads below: "I want cookies". For some learners, these boards eventually transition from pictures to words.

Parents and educators who also use PECS are to create schedule boards, a visual schedule of the child's days. For learners who have a difficult time transitioning between activities, using PECS is a great way to motivate them to shift settings or actions.

PECS has been successful with individuals of all ages demonstrating a variety of communicative, cognitive and physical difficulties. Some learners using PECS also develop speech.

Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children

Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) was developed at the University of North Carolina, originating in a child research project begun in 1964 to use when working with persons with ASD and communication handicaps. Core tenets of the TEACCH philosophy include an understanding of the effects of autism on individuals; use of assessment to assist program design around individual strengths, skills, interests and needs; enabling the individual to be as independent as possible; working in collaboration with parents and families.

Strategies used are designed to address the difficulties faced by all people with ASD, and be adaptable to whatever style and degree of support is required. It works by using visual support to promote meaning and independence for each individual. The basics of TEACCH are to respect the learner with ASD and his/her behaviour and also to preserve his/her interests and value what makes this person special. Using TEACCH is not a way of striving for the normal but focuses on the person as an individual and their opportunities in being independent.

The approach is based on the idea of improving communication and understanding through visual effects so that most instructions are done visually, either in writing or with pictures. TEACCH is not a way of changing a person's behaviour but a way of supporting the "things" that best helps the person in their way of learning.

Communication Passport

Communication passport is a simple and practical way to help people communicate with a non-verbal child. It contains personal information about the child's needs, such as their medical condition, likes and dislikes etc. The passport is their personal identity and is owned by them, not the parents, caregivers or teachers. It is to give other:

- Information about the learner
- Information on what is important to the learner
- Information on the learner's likes and dislikes

It values the learner and gives them a voice that helps others to understand them and their needs. It also gives the learner some control.

Communication passports should give positive problem-solving solutions to help the learner and not be a catalogue listing the learner's additional needs. It can be very useful in helping new staff/strangers to quickly understand the learner's personal needs. Communication passports can be used for any non-verbal child or adult of any age.

They should be reviewed quite often in order to make necessary adjustments. The passport should go everywhere with the learner especially when they visit anywhere for the first time (start a new place) e.g. a new school.

How to create PECS, TEEACH and Communication Passports

You can find ideas and inspiration to create your own PECS, TEACCH and communication passport online. Searching for it will give you many websites to choose from and all you have to do is find the pictures you need, print and laminate them.

The pictures used for this can be any colour, size or shape. It can be as simple or complex as needed. Use your imagination e.g. if the learner loves cars the passport could be in the shape of a car or if the child loves dolls, a dolls house will do.

Whatever the design is it should be attractive, colourful, accessible and positive, not jargon-ridden or confidential. PECS are not as individual and personal as TEACCH and communication passports and can be made by almost anyone when creating the most necessary pictures. TEACCH and communication passports should be made by someone who knows the learner very well. The most important part of this is to involve the child, where possible, from the beginning on what they want to be included. Perhaps the child could help to make the passport or colour a picture for it.

Sign Language

Some learners with ASD do not have speech they often use sign language when communicating. Signing is not only used by deaf but also used by people who can hear, but cannot verbally express themselves. Sign language is a language, which involves the use of manual communication and body language to convey meaning, as opposed to actual speech. This can involve combining hand shapes, orientation and movement of the hands, arms or body, and facial expressions to express a speaker's thoughts.

They share many similarities with spoken languages, which is why linguists consider both to be natural languages. Learners with ASD often employ the use of signing to communicate their needs, emotions, feelings and what they actually want a particular point in time. This calls for support persons, caregivers, parents, teachers and other core staff members in mainstream schools to assist such learners in the class. It is therefore imperative for core staff to learn these signs in order to be able to support and assist these children in the mainstream schools.

A common misconception is that all sign languages are the same worldwide or that sign language is international, it is not. Persons with autism have different meanings attached to their signing and this calls for training and support in order to create full inclusion and participation in the mainstream schools. Simple signs used in sign language can be found online, either shown in pictures or videos.

Classroom Settings

Mainstream classes do not always have the best setting for a learner with ASD. The classroom setting can be designed in a manner that will ensure full inclusion and participation of the learner in the classroom. The setting in the class has a great impact on the intellectual management as well as social and behaviour management of the learner. The use of proper strategies would help in efficient adoption and participation in the entire school work.

In order to achieve this, emphasis must be laid on strategies that would help the learner participate. The setting must also be able to manage any unforeseen or unanticipated behaviours as well as academic participation. This involves a class free from distractions, properly organised and sensory friendly depending on the special needs and anxiety triggers of the child with autism. The classroom setting for a learner with ASD must contain a lot of pictures on the various subjects taught in class. For e.g. the chart for numbers and alphabets must be colourful and picture based.

This would aid them to identify the alphabets as well as the numbers when taught. The class must be free from any ensemble that might distract concentration or cause anxiety triggers. The lighting system in the class must be visible in order to aid the child study. The child must be positioned close to the board in order to be able to copy lessons without difficulties. The arrangement of the tables and chairs in the classroom must be spacious in order to allow easy passage and to control harm or tantrums and failure to sit in class.

Buddy System Approach

A helpful aspect in the inclusive education settings is to have a buddy-system. A buddy can be a classmate or fellow learners at the school who could best assist and support the learner with ASD throughout his or her stay in school and as well ensure class participation. Assigning a learner with ASD to a peer buddy is a great idea for a number of reasons. It teaches the peer, patience and tolerance, and it gives the peer, responsibility for some of the things that you would take care of otherwise, like making sure the learner with ASD has the necessary materials at hand or is following along with the rest of the class in an activity.

The benefit of the buddy-system is that more people will learn about ASD. Buddies will bring greater awareness and understanding wherever they go after they leave school. Buddies learn about as well as understand the nature of the autism spectrum in order to provide the best support. Buddies must relate to the difficulties that a child with ASD might be facing and should be able to see the situation from an autistic perspective. The buddy must be well aware of the child's needs and sensitivity. These are all elements in the process of creating a relationship based on trust.

Buddies are role models to the learner with ASD and can model age appropriate behaviour more effectively than adults. They can offer advice on social issues, which affect the learner with ASD. Learners on the spectrum are easy targets for bullies, as they often prefer to be alone, a buddy can help prevent them from being bullied.

Setting up a buddy system can also lead to genuine friendships. If the learner is with the peer buddy, he/she would not be alone, and would be less likely to be a victim of bullying and therefore less likely to begin refusing to attend school at all.

The Caregiver Approach

This approach would support the learner with ASD to participate fully in the classroom. This would ensure that tasks are broken down into simpler form for comprehension by the learner. This would also help manage unforeseen triggers as upcoming activities and routine changes would be communicated to the child by the caregiver.

Situational Approach

This involves the use of either the caregiver approach or the buddy depending on the situational requirements. The approach selected would help ensure efficient class participation and inclusion in the mainstream setting.

Teaching /Learning Style

The style of teaching is as important as the profile of the learner with ASD when it comes to ensure successful inclusion. Even for a learner with good verbal skills and rapid processing of the language of instruction an explanation may be difficult because of subtle language problems. Visual support and opportunities for experiential learning are important.

A 'lively' motivating teaching style with analogy and tonal variation, may be confusing for a learner with ASD. A calm, consistent style together with a social learning, for example on-line programmes, may be more helpful alongside with visual effects. Try to avoid non-literal and figurative language when teaching, or just talking to a learner with ASD. This may confuse them as they are visual learners and often take word very literally.

It can be hard for a learner with ASD to make choices and he/she might go for the "safe" choice or his/her preferred choice. A good strategy is not to have too many options to choose from such as A and B. When the child is able to choose from the two choices, a third can be added and so on.

Academic Management

This approach would help the learner with ASD to participate in academic work to achieve his or her personal target in the school. The child can only achieve this if the approach utilised by the teacher is more practical and participatory in nature. There must be an established consultative group for special educational needs co-ordinators, class teachers, and special needs assistants, working with learners with ASD which would serve as a means for sharing information and strategies for dealing with particular issues in handling or managing learners on the spectrum. With support from educational psychologists and speech therapist:

- Focus the learner's attention before any communication - such as by using his/her name, or using some arranged signal.
- Use clear, simple requests or instructions, one at a time. Task analysis - to ensure tasks are manageable and within the child's attention span.
- Always check understanding and repeat/rephrase instructions as necessary.
- Practise newly acquired skills in different settings, in order to foster generalisation.
- Use various means of presentation, such as visual, physical guidance, peer modelling.
- Teach the learner what 'finished' means, and ensure that he/she knows what to do on the completion of a given task.
- Use simple and shared charts to record progress, and regular use of praise or more tangible rewards to mark good performance.
- Emphasize visual cues and signals as an aid to the memory, especially on topics treated.
- Endeavour to link work to the learner's particular interests.
- Explore word-processing, and computer-based schemes for literacy development.
- Gradually increase the complexity of reading material (and using books designed for slower readers but with a more 'grown-up' content).

- Allow the learner to avoid certain activities (such as sports and games) which he/she may not understand or like, and support him/her in open-ended and group tasks.
- Allow some access to obsessive behaviour as a reward for positive efforts on tasks set.
- Removal or minimising of distractors, or providing access to an individual work area, when a task requiring concentration is set

Attention Issues

Focusing attention in class may be difficult because of the distractions that the classroom environment presents. Learners with ASD often find it hard to 'filter out' distracting stimuli especially those to which they are particularly sensitive. Often engaging the young person with the class learning agenda may be a major challenge because he or she may have strong interests and preferences about what he or she wants to do. There are different strategies that can be used when you want to engage the learner with ASD in a task.

- Try and build the task around their interests. The task can be something that learner finds rewarding, as in something where they can see a purpose of their doing. A visual cue or reminder of this "reward/meaning" can be useful in such situations. The task is more likely to be done if it is set in a familiar and preferred context.
- Give the learner a clear idea of how much work is required from them. If the class is working from a book and is asked to do only certain questions (e.g. 1, 4, 5, 6) and there are other questions on the page, a learner with ASD may become anxious about not doing the others and have difficulties with concentration and/or ask repetitive questions. To avoid this happening, a sheet containing only the questions to be tackled will eliminate any distractions.
- Have a clear concept of "finished" to make it easier for the learner to leave the task and understand that a new activity is about to happen.

Refusal to Work

If a learner with ASD refuses to work or do a certain activity, there are different strategies you can use.

- Make sure that the learner knows what has to be done and what the beginning/end of the task is. The instructions must be literal and concise. If the instructions are too much, the task can be broken down in smaller stages; first this, then this. Visual and concrete cues can be very useful reinforcement when giving a learner with ASD a specific task.
- Make sure that the learner has all the necessary equipment in order to do the task.
- Make sure that there are as little distractions as possible for the child to concentrate best. Learners with ASD often needs space and must not be overwhelmed by other people. Make sure the child is given space and time to do the task asked of him.
- Reward systems can be very helpful as well. Find out what the learner likes, for example a specific toy, an activity or so. When the learner finished the task given or is able to what is being asked of him/her, he/she will get the reward.
- Be prepared to negotiate with the different tasks. The learner might need more time or more/less choices to choose from.

Motivation

It can be difficult to motivate a learner with ASD by using the usual social reinforcers and concrete rewards such as time to do a preferred activity when they have 'finished' may be more effective. Learners with ASD may not see the point of an activity that does not interest them and, therefore, refuse to engage.

Learners with ASD may be reluctant to attempt new tasks and prefer the safe and familiar. This is often because they do not get the main idea, or see the relevance or the possibilities of a new experience. It is important to relate the unfamiliar to the familiar and to make these links explicit

Making choices may be difficult if the learner is unable to 'see' the potential offered by the options. They may select the safe, predictable, familiar option each time.

General Behaviour

Learners with ASD often live a life with routines and have a certain pattern of behaviour. These behaviours can however be managed in the mainstream school with support from the core support staff and the support persons assigned for this learner. In order to achieve conformity and inclusion of the learner with ASD in the mainstream school, consider the following:

Anxiety Triggers

Anxiety triggers can be identified through discussion with parents/carers, last year's teacher or, in the case of transfer to a new school, through liaison with staff at the current school. It is essential to keep the learner's anxiety levels low to enable him or her to learn effectively.

Common anxiety triggers for learners with ASD may include:

- Crowded places such as an assembly hall or corridors. Some young people may find close physical proximity, for example sitting in a group on the carpet or lining up, anxiety provoking. At school, moving around the site at lesson changeover times may be difficult
- Crowded places also present opportunities for misunderstandings about the intention behind actions. Many children with ASD are not aware whether something was accidental or done on purpose. They may assume intent and react with aggression or anxiety, including making accusations of bullying. Explaining about accidental as opposed to intentional actions can be helpful.
- Unstructured time that has no specific rules or activity, which creates boundaries or limits, can be very challenging. Waiting time can be a big challenge for the learner with ASD. For example after finishing a task/assignment and waiting for the rest of the class to finish. It can be waiting for lunch or waiting for class to end or start.

- Academic situations such as understanding what to do and how to do it (writing, reading, math or taking tests) or answer questions or doing presentations in class.
- Sensory issues can be triggered almost any time or anywhere on a daily basis. Whether the individual is experiencing an anxious moment or not, sensory integration challenges can overpower a person's ability to control him or herself. Sensory situations that may provoke anxiety can include sounds or loud noises, specific smells, bright or flickering light and even clothing.
- Social situations are already challenging for individuals with ASD and can increase anxiety in the moment or even in anticipation of an upcoming event. Some examples could include changes in plans or daily routine interrupted, engaging in conversations with other people or large school gatherings.
- It is a good thing to identify the learner with ASD's personal space in order to prevent tantrums or meltdowns. Some persons prefer to have their personal space protected. This can be in the corner of the room, in the back or anywhere they won't feel overlooked by others. They will feel safer and, will therefore, be calmer. Most learners with ASD do best in a rather formal classroom setting where there is limited free movement around the room. It is often a good idea for the child to have his/her own working space where they can work independently and with few interferences and distractions.
- Recognise that some change in a certain manner or behaviour may reflect anxiety or stress which may be triggered by a (minor) change of routine.
- Not taking apparently rude or aggressive behaviour personally; and recognising that the target for the learner's anger may be unrelated to the source of that anger.

- Train the learner to adapt to the new environment. The challenges are that the learner would find it difficult at the initial stages but patient and persistent support would help the learner fit into this new environment for inclusion and participation.

Language

- Use clear and unambiguous language. Avoiding humour/irony, or phrases like "my feet are killing me" or "it's raining cats and dogs", which will cause bewilderment.
- Make clear to the child what behaviours are unacceptable. Make it simple and use firm 'No' when indicating this.
- Avoid sentences like "Would you like to do this?" or "Why?".
- Regular opportunity for simple conversation, with increasing use of 'how' and 'why' questions.

Classroom Learning Structure

- Provide a very clear structure and a set of daily routine (simplified tasks).
- Provide warning on any impending change of routine, or switch of activity.
- Ensure consistency of expectation among all staff, and avoiding any 'backing-down' once a reasonable and manageable target has been set.
- Specific teaching, via photographs or video recordings, of how feelings are expressed and communicated, and therefore how, they can be recognised.
- Create a buddy-system where the learner with ASD is paired with a peer.
- Protecting the child from teasing at free times, and providing peers with some insight into the needs of children on the autistic spectrum.

- An inclusive classroom should be colourful and well decorated. It should have a display of charts of number, letters of the alphabet as well as drawings and pictures hanged on the wall. Learners with ASD, when aided with pictorial images help them to understand concepts better and reduce behavioural challenges.

Social Skills

Specific teaching of social rules/skills, such as turn-taking and social distance; and of gambits for initiating and maintaining conversation. Enhancing verbal expression (intonation) via drama, role-play, and audio- or videotaped feedback.

Monitoring the Behavioural Progress

- The use of charts as a record of behavioural progress and a basis for reinforcement
- Enhanced supervision from the teacher and support persons during practical or physical activities

Tantrums vs. Meltdowns

Terms that are often used when talking about ASD are tantrums and meltdowns. First of all, these two terms are not the same. They can look very similar when you see a child in the middle of having one. But for children who have sensory processing issues or who lack self-control, a meltdown is very different from a tantrum.

- A tantrum is an outburst that happens when a child is trying to get something he/she wants or needs. Some learners with learning and attention issues are more prone to tantrums. The essence of a tantrum is that is voluntarily - the learner is doing it for a reason and has some control over his behaviour.
- A learner can often stop a tantrum if he gets what he wants or if he's rewarded for using a more appropriate behaviour. A meltdown isn't likely to stop when a child gets what he wants. In fact, the learner may not even know what he wants. To tame tantrums, acknowledge what your learner needs without giving in.

Make it clear that you understand what he's after. "I see that you want my attention. When your sister is done talking, it will be your turn." Then help him/her see a more appropriate behaviour that will work. When you are done yelling, tell me calmly that you are ready for my time."

- A meltdown is a reaction to feeling overwhelmed. For some learners, it happens when there is too much sensory information to process whilst for other children; it can be a reaction to having too many things to think about. Meltdowns are a reaction to something and are usually beyond a learner's control.
- Meltdowns tend to end in one of two ways. One is fatigue - the learner wears themselves out. Another way is to change or minimize the amount of sensory input. This can help learner feel less overwhelmed. To manage a meltdown, help the learner find a safe, quiet place to de-escalate.
- Let's leave the mall and sit in the car for a few minutes." Then provide a calm, reassuring presence without talking too much to your child. The goal is to reduce the input coming at him/her.

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