



Inclusion Development Programme

Supporting children on the autism spectrum:
Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years
Foundation Stage



Minimum specification		
	PC	Mac
CPU	Pentium III or greater	PowerPC G4 (867MHz or faster)
RAM	128 MB	512 MB
Hard drive	100 MB space	100 MB space
CD/DVD-ROM drive	24 x speed	24 x speed
SVGA graphics card	16 bit colour	16 bit colour
Minimum screen resolution	800 x 600	800 x 600
Sound card, speakers, or headphones	16 bit	Standard
Keyboard and mouse	Yes (Microsoft compatible)	Yes
Operating system	Windows 2000 or later	Mac OS X or later

Instructions for running the disk

Insert the DVD-ROM into your disk tray. Your computer may automatically run the program if you have a feature called **Auto run** enabled. If it does not automatically run, use the following steps.

For PC users, double click on My Computer, and then double click on the disk icon to open.

For Mac users, double click on the disk icon on your desktop to open.

Double click on the file '**index.htm**'.

The Inclusion Development Programme is an inclusive resource which focuses upon meeting children's needs in mainstream settings. The photographs used in the DVD-ROM and booklet depict both children on the autism spectrum and their peers, playing and learning together. The appearance of any particular child in these photographs should not be taken to suggest that they are necessarily on the autism spectrum.

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The websites referred to in these materials existed at the time of going to print.

Please check all website references carefully to see if they have changed and substitute other references where appropriate.

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Introduction

Meeting the individual needs of all children lies at the heart of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Every child deserves the best possible start in life, and support to fulfil their potential. A child's experience in the early years has a major impact on their future life chances. All early years providers must have and implement an effective policy for ensuring equality of opportunities and for supporting children with learning difficulties and disabilities. Practitioners should focus on each child's individual learning, development and care needs to ensure that the children and families with whom they work are fully included. Providing an inclusive setting that promotes equality of opportunity does not mean that all children should be treated the same, but that the unique skills and abilities of each child should be recognised and developed, and that *'inclusion is not optional: children have defined entitlements in this area and settings have legal responsibilities'* (EYFS).

What is the Inclusion Development Programme?

The Inclusion Development Programme (IDP) is part of the Government's strategy for children with special educational needs (SEN), outlined in *Removing barriers to achievement: the Government's strategy for SEN* (DfES 0117/2004). This four-year programme (2008–2011) will provide support for leadership teams in schools and settings, and professional development materials for teachers and practitioners working with children with a range of special educational needs of all ages from early years through to secondary school.

It aims to:

- build the independent capacity of schools and settings by helping teachers and practitioners to develop the skills needed for the early identification and support of children with high incidence needs;
- strengthen leadership and strategic approaches to inclusion and achievement of children with high incidence needs by providing guidance and support for special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), headteachers, leaders and managers.

What is the focus of this Early Years IDP?

This year, the Early Years IDP is focusing on children on the autism spectrum. It is relevant to all practitioners, teachers, managers and leaders working within the EYFS, with children from birth to the age of five. Whatever your role, you are encouraged to reflect on how you can apply the strategies described in these materials to the work you do in your setting.

Year 1 of the IDP focused on supporting children with speech, language and communication needs. If you would like a copy of this resource, it can be downloaded from www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies/inclusion/sen/idp or a hard copy is available from DCSF Publications (address on back cover), reference 00215-2008BKT-EN. You are also likely to find parts of that material useful in informing your work with children with autism.

Many schools and settings already benefit from the support of an early years advisory teacher (EYAT) and an area SENCO. In some local authorities (LAs) these roles are carried out by the same person. The Government has signalled the need to align the role of the area SENCO with the work of EYATs in supporting quality improvement in early years settings (Sure Start, Early Years and Childcare Grant Letter 01/08/07). This reflects the importance of developing and maintaining fully inclusive practice where the unique skills and abilities of each child are recognised and developed as part of improving the quality of experience for all children. The IDP complements the work of EYATs and area SENCOs in helping settings improve quality and maintain inclusive practice.

Many practitioners in all types of settings are working with young children who have either been diagnosed as having autism or who have similar needs but are as yet undiagnosed. These materials will help practitioners to support both groups of children – a formal diagnosis of autism is not needed in order to implement the ideas and interventions in this booklet. In fact, strategies that are successful for children with autism will also support the learning and development of all children in early years settings.

All EYFS practitioners have a responsibility to identify children's needs and intervene with appropriate support as early as possible, to help children achieve the goals of *Every Child Matters* and progress towards the early learning goals. This does not mean, however, that practitioners are expected to diagnose autism as this is the job of other professionals and specialists. A diagnosis is only made following extensive observation of the child, detailed assessments and discussion with parents and other professionals. You can find further guidance on how to act on your concerns in the A Unique Child module of the DVD-ROM/online learning materials.

Effective practice in the EYFS focuses on meeting children's individual needs and providing an inclusive setting for all children. Practitioners may not currently have any children in their setting with diagnosed autism or difficulties in the areas associated with autism. This does not mean that the IDP is not for them. Autism is recognised as a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA). There is an 'anticipatory duty' under the DDA which means that all settings are required by law to be prepared for disabled children who might come to their setting in the future. This means that all early years practitioners are expected to have at least a basic understanding of conditions such as autism and how to meet the needs of young children with them through high-quality, inclusive early years practice. This material will provide practitioners with this basic knowledge and will signpost practitioners who want to find out more to further information.

Practitioners should focus on each child's individual learning, development and care needs by:

- removing or helping to overcome barriers for children where these already exist;
- being alert to the early signs of needs that could lead to later difficulties, and responding quickly and appropriately, involving other agencies as necessary;
- stretching and challenging all children.

Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, p.9

It is inevitable in a resource of this nature that general statements are made about children on the autism spectrum. So, when working through this resource, it is important to appreciate that not every child on the spectrum will experience the same difficulties or have the same strengths. Strategies mentioned in the resource will therefore not be necessary or effective for every child. A comprehensive assessment of each child on the spectrum will be necessary to determine their exact needs.

Settings must implement the welfare requirements of the EYFS, which include legal requirements set out in the 1996 Education Act, the SEN Code of Practice and the DDA 1995. Further guidance on promoting disability equality is available in *Implementing the Disability Discrimination Act in schools and early years settings* (DfES 0160-2006DOC-EN), and in 'Promoting Disability Equality in Schools' at www.teachernet.gov.uk; you will find details of other legislation and guidance on the accompanying DVD-ROM.



Terminology

As in many other areas, different terms may be used when referring to children with autism. The term 'autistic spectrum disorder' (ASD) is often used to refer to children who have autism, as in the expression 'children with ASD'. However, the term 'disorder' has medical connotations, to which some people object. Given that the focus of the IDP is on meeting children's educational needs, the Early Years IDP will refer to 'the autism spectrum' or 'children with autism' throughout as the accepted terminology for practitioners rather than using the term 'disorder'. This does not imply in any way that children with autism have less severe or complex needs than those described as having a 'disorder'. Use of the word 'spectrum' acknowledges the fact that there are a number of related conditions in this area that are present from early life, including high-functioning autism and Asperger syndrome. In this resource, use of the word 'autism' covers all conditions within the autism spectrum.

The term 'autistic' may also be used to refer to children with autism, but increasingly, people prefer to use the word 'child' or 'children' before mentioning autism (i.e. 'a child with autism' rather than 'an autistic child'). This is to acknowledge that a child is, first and foremost, a unique individual, and should not be defined solely by their autism.

Parents of children with autism will have differing views on the terminology around autism and practitioners should sensitively ask them which terms they prefer to be used when discussing their child and should respect these preferences.

Throughout these materials, the term 'parent' is used to mean a parent or carer. The term 'setting' is used to describe any of the wide variety of providers delivering the EYFS, including schools, private, voluntary and independent providers and childminders.

If you are unsure of the meaning of any terms used in this publication, a glossary is included on the accompanying DVD-ROM.

Special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs)

All early education settings and childcare settings registered with Ofsted are required to have regard to the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2001). One requirement is that a setting should designate a person responsible for overseeing inclusive practice who is usually called a SENCO, but in some settings is known as an 'inclusion coordinator'. All members of the team, not just the SENCO, are responsible for ensuring that children's needs are met, but the SENCO is responsible for ensuring that the setting's SEN policy is fully implemented. The SENCO will work closely with key people, parents, leaders and managers to ensure that all children's needs are met. LAs provide additional support to settings with a team of area SENCOs (these professionals are sometimes known by other names, such as 'inclusion officers' or 'specialist teachers').



How to use these materials

This booklet and the interactive DVD-ROM (the content of which is also available online at www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies/inclusion/sen/idp) should be used in a group with colleagues to form the basis of continuing professional development (CPD) sessions. They can also be used by individual practitioners. The content of the DVD-ROM reflects the content of the booklet, giving video examples of real practice and activities that will promote further reflection and development. These materials will help you improve your provision for all children, and will particularly support you in developing more inclusive practice, especially for children with autism or difficulties in some or all of the areas commonly associated with autism.

It is the responsibility of leaders and managers to demonstrate their commitment to inclusive practice by ensuring that practitioners are given the necessary time to work through the materials as a group and the opportunity to carry out follow-up work in the setting. It is important that leaders and managers should also be involved in the CPD sessions. As practitioners working together through the materials, you will identify areas of your practice that are particularly successful and some that need further development. Practitioners will need the support of their leader or manager to plan and implement changes within the setting.

Childminders who work alone may consider joining, or starting, a local childminding network, or making links with other childminders or early years settings in their area. It will be very helpful to work through the materials as a group and to share your experiences with other practitioners. Children's centres and LA support teams may also help to facilitate CPD sessions with you.

LA consultants, EYATs and area SENCOs will find the materials useful as part of the LA training and support for inclusion. The materials will also be a valuable resource for trainers providing initial early years and childcare qualifications.

There are already many other sources of information about working with children with autism in the early years. In this booklet and on the DVD-ROM, links are made to existing materials and organisations that provide relevant support. You are encouraged to use these to find out more and to deepen your understanding.

The EYFS package (booklets, posters, cards and CD-ROM, DCSF-00261-2008) should be used alongside these materials. The Principles and Effective practice guidance set out in it are the basis for this document, and you should refer to them as you work through the materials: they provide a wealth of additional guidance on effective practice.

The EYFS establishes four overarching Principles to inform our thinking and practice in order to meet all young children's entitlement to rich and engaging learning experiences. These materials are organised according to the four themes and Principles of the EYFS:

- A Unique Child
- Positive Relationships
- Enabling Environments
- Learning and Development.

At the end of each section you are asked to reflect on your practice as:

- a practitioner;
- a SENCO;
- a leader or manager (this includes all senior management teams and management committees).

In some cases you may be fulfilling all these roles.

So what is autism, how common is it, and what causes it?

Autism is a term used since the 1940s to describe a different developmental pattern that emerges in early childhood. It can have a major impact on how children learn, interact and behave. At its core, autism is a social disability: its most noticeable effects are on how children interact with others, which in turn affects how they learn and use language to communicate, how they play, and so on. About 60 per 10,000 children under eight have some form of autism (Medical Research Council, 2001).

Children with autism will have difficulties or differences in three areas of development. These are described as the triad of impairments (triad simply means three) and include communication, social understanding and flexibility of thought and behaviour. Many children with autism also experience the world differently through their senses: they may, for example, be under-sensitive or over-sensitive to certain sounds, smells or visual sensations.

The causes of autism are complex. We know that it is more common in boys than girls (some current estimates say there are four boys with autism for every girl), and that children with autism are more likely to also have relatives with autism than other children are. These clues tell us that genes contribute to the development of autism – but research has shown that there is no single 'autism gene'. Instead, it seems likely that several genetic differences combine to cause autism in a child. These genetic factors may interact with environmental factors, but little is currently known about how this might occur. Whatever

the cause, the brains of children with autism develop slightly differently from those of typical children. These differences can give them greater ability in certain areas, such as pattern recognition, but make other things harder to master.

Autism is a lifelong condition. However, people with autism continue to grow and develop throughout life, and education is the key to helping children with autism reach their full potential. Some other interventions may also be helpful, but there is no known 'cure' for autism.

You will find a useful quiz focusing on truths and myths about autism on the accompanying DVD-ROM.

The EYFS and autism

Requirements

The Statutory Framework for the EYFS makes clear that:

...providers should deliver individualised learning, development and care that enhances the development of the children in their care and gives those children the best possible start in life. Every child should be supported individually to make progress at their own pace and children who need extra support to fulfil their potential should receive special consideration.

Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, p.9 paragraph 1.13

All early years providers must by law deliver the Learning and Development requirements of the EYFS. Autism is likely to impact upon all six areas of Learning and Development in the EYFS.

Personal, social and emotional development: Children with autism will need additional support to develop understanding of the needs, views and feelings of others and to form good relationships with adults and make friends with peers. Children with autism may find it difficult to concentrate and maintain attention, and to take turns and share.

Communication, language and literacy: Children with autism will need help to interact effectively with others, to take turns in conversation, to understand jokes and idioms (expressions such as 'pull your socks up'), to make up their own stories and to predict what might happen next in a story. Some children may need to use augmentative methods of communication, such as visual support materials, for example, gesture, photographs or symbols.

Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy: Basic numeracy can be a relative area of strength for some children with autism as numbers are ordered, predictable and the way in which they are used in calculations follows consistent logical rules. Problem solving and reasoning can be more of a challenge for the child, given difficulties in flexible thinking, social understanding and verbal reasoning.

Knowledge and understanding of the world: Children with autism will need support to help them to make sense of the world, particularly the social world. They may need encouragement to investigate new objects and materials and to use all their senses effectively. They are likely to have difficulty generalising knowledge and concepts from one context for another. For example, a child may know that the washbasin in his own family bathroom is for washing hands, but may not realise that other washbasins he encounters serve the same purpose. Remember that children with autism are likely to have difficulty in seeing things from other points of view so they are likely to need support to appreciate the cultures and beliefs of others.

Physical development: Children with autism may need encouragement to try out new things, as they may have developed strongly preferred physical activities which they feel secure with and choose to repeat. Although some children with autism can be very agile, others may have reduced awareness of their own bodies, leading to difficulties with navigating obstacles and with fine motor tasks such as fastening buttons or zips.

Creative development: For some children with autism, art or music may be relative strengths. However, it is a myth that lots of children with autism are highly gifted in these areas. All are likely to need support

to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings and to take part in imaginative play and role-play with other children. Some individuals with autism have very elaborate ideas and may develop stories about fantasy worlds, but they do not have the creative and flexible social imagination which would allow them to take part in activities such as pretending to be another person.

Strategies for supporting children in each of the areas of Learning and Development can be found in the Learning and Development monitoring of this handbook.

Some children will have their needs recognised for the first time by practitioners in an early years setting. Other children will start in the setting with a diagnosis of autism, and may already be receiving support from other professionals. It is important that all the people involved work closely together to ensure a consistent approach for the child and family. The Early Support Programme (www.earlysupport.org.uk) facilitates the development of integrated support services for families and professionals. You will find Early Support materials referenced in many parts of the EYFS and more details about it in the Enabling Environments section of this handbook.

In line with the Principles and ethos of the EYFS, the goal should be for learning to be achieved largely through play-based activities, but this may not be easy for many children with autism. Adults will sometimes need to intervene in freely chosen activities to encourage the child to learn through playing with other children. Wherever possible, support should be integrated within a small-group or whole-group setting to promote inclusion and the development of social skills. The IDP is focused very much on 'quality first teaching' (high-quality provision for all children) rather than specialist provision. However, it is recognised that at times children with autism will need more intensive input, and some may benefit from some learning on an individual basis, as the social aspect of learning in a group can add to the complexity of the task for a child with autism.

Most children with autism should make good progress with the support that can be offered within an effective setting. However, as autism is complex and lifelong, nearly all children will have additional support from specialist services such as speech and language therapy and specialist teachers or area SENCOs. These professionals will support you to provide suitable experiences and activities for the children within the context of a high-quality inclusive EYFS environment. You can find out more about their roles in the Enabling Environments section of this handbook.

With support from outside professionals, schools and settings should develop their own strategy for supporting children with autism, in line with the EYFS guidance, and this strategy should be shared with parents. It should describe how the setting will support children who have been diagnosed with autism or who are experiencing some difficulties in the areas commonly associated with it. Leaders and managers should ensure that the strategy is implemented, and should lead their teams to constantly reflect on and review their practice.

A practitioner asks:

A child has just started in my setting and he doesn't make any eye contact with me. He also likes to play with the train set all the time and doesn't take any notice of the other children. Does this mean he's autistic?

Autism is increasingly featured in TV programmes and in print and as a result, it is much more in people's minds than previously. It is natural that people should reflect on what they have heard in relation to autism and, where they are working with a child who appears to have some of these difficulties, to think 'I wonder if this child is autistic?' It is not uncommon for children to have some of the difficulties associated with autism, but this does not necessarily mean that they are on the autism spectrum. Practitioners must resist any temptation to 'diagnose' autism. Instead, the practitioner should observe the child carefully and note down the concerns that they have, sharing these with parents and seeking their views on their child's strengths and areas of need. Over a period of time, and in consultation with parents and other members of staff in the setting, the practitioner should build up a good understanding of the child's strengths and areas of need. If the child does not make reasonable progress over time and following discussion with parents, further advice should be sought from outside professionals. In time, some children will go on to receive a diagnosis of autism, while others will make good progress and the behaviours about which the practitioner was concerned will reduce or disappear. As long as the practitioner is offering appropriate support to meet the needs they have identified, discussing concerns with parents and seeking support from other professionals where appropriate, they should not worry that a child is 'going undiagnosed'. Diagnosis of autism is a complicated and often lengthy process. Your views as a practitioner are important, and will be sought if formal assessment is deemed necessary, but you are not the person who makes a diagnosis.

What is the impact of autism on children's development?

The impact of autism on children will vary according to the severity of the problems, and may affect some or all of the following areas.

Social understanding – children with autism tend to be unaware of the thoughts, feelings and intentions of others. This makes it very difficult for them to 'put themselves in other people's shoes' or predict what is likely to happen next. For example, if a child with autism takes a toy from another child, they will not understand that they could be causing that child to become angry or distressed. Being unable to predict what will happen next means that new and unfamiliar events and situations can be very distressing for a child with autism and may cause anxiety.

Social development and interaction – most children with autism find it very difficult to mix socially with other adults and children. They may appear alone, unaware of others and are often described as 'being in a world of their own'. For other children with autism, their efforts to interact with peers may be naïve or clumsy. Many will have very limited ideas for play, which means that their play tends to be very repetitive and solitary.

Non-verbal communication – children with autism have difficulties with non-verbal communication. This is often characterised by much reduced, unusual or absent eye contact, lack of conventional facial expression and reduced or absent use of pointing. The strategies we commonly use to indicate that we are engaging with others, such as turning towards them, nodding and taking turns to talk are likely to be significantly reduced or absent in children with autism.

Verbal communication

– **speaking:** Some children with more severe autism might never develop conventional speech. Where verbal communication does develop, it is often markedly different from that of typically developing children. For example, the child might repeat back what others have said, but without any meaning (known as 'echolalia'); or might use language inappropriate to the context, such as talking about trains

when asked what they would like for lunch; or might speak with unusual rhythm and intonation, making their speech sound 'odd'. Children with autism may communicate for a limited number of reasons, such as to get what they want, but not to show, engage, play or share with another person.

– **understanding:** Many children with autism have difficulty in fully understanding what is said to them. For some children with severe autism this could relate to the vocabulary and grammar, while in others it might relate more to understanding people's intentions, for example, that when someone asks 'Do you know what time it is?' they don't expect to be simply told 'Yes'.

Sensory processing difficulties – many children with autism have either over- or under-developed senses and any of the five senses may be affected – vision, hearing, touch, smell or taste. This may mean, for example, that a child finds the sound of a ticking clock in the setting unbearable, or is distracted by it to such an extent that they ignore everything else that is going on around them and focus exclusively on the sound of the clock. A child with an under-developed sense of touch may not feel pain, meaning that they engage in potentially dangerous behaviours. Many children with autism can also have difficulties with balance and body awareness.

Engagement with the EYFS – the difficulties described above could limit children's access to the EYFS, as most areas of Learning and Development are underpinned by social understanding and communication. The quality of the support that practitioners are able to offer children with autism will determine the extent to which these children are able to make good progress in all areas of Learning and Development.

Remember that autism is complex and lifelong, and that effective early intervention is crucial if children are to make good progress, and ultimately lead adult lives which are as independent as possible. Without effective support throughout their education, children with autism are at significant risk of underachievement in all five *Every Child Matters* outcomes. The inability to cope with a world which can appear hostile and confusing may lead to frustration and misunderstandings. By providing early intervention and high-quality provision that meets the needs of children with autism in the early years, we are giving them the best possible start to their education.

Much more information about how autism affects children's development, and, crucially, how practitioners can intervene to minimise the negative impact of these difficulties and to make use of the strengths of the learner with autism can be found in the following chapters of this handbook and on the accompanying DVD-ROM.

A Unique Child

EYFS Principle

Every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.

Commitments

1.1 Child Development: Babies and children develop in individual ways and at varying rates. Every area of development – physical, cognitive, linguistic, spiritual, social and emotional – is equally important.

1.2 Inclusive Practice: The diversity of individuals and communities is valued and respected. No child or family is discriminated against.

1.3 Keeping Safe: Young children are vulnerable. They develop resilience when their physical and psychological well-being is protected by adults.

1.4 Health and Well-being: Children's health is an integral part of their emotional, mental, social, environmental and spiritual well-being and is supported by attention to these aspects.

The 'Development matters' columns of the *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage* identifies the developing knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes that children will need if they are to achieve the early learning goals by the end of the EYFS. You should refer to this column in all areas of Learning and Development to help you identify and monitor the progress that children on the autism spectrum are making across all the areas of learning:

It is important to note that children will not necessarily progress sequentially through the stages... Some elements may appear to have been achieved very quickly, others will take much longer. As children move from one element to another, they take with them what they have already achieved, and continue to practise, refine and build on their previous development and learning.

Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage, p.11

Practitioners must take care not to make assumptions about what children's needs will be. Children with autism are likely to have particular difficulties with aspects of personal, social and emotional development, communication, language and literacy, knowledge and understanding of the world and creative development. However, even in these areas of Learning and Development, they may have relative strengths.

How do children with autism differ from their peers?

According to the EYFS Principle: *Every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured*. However, most children with autism will need plenty of help from adults in order to bring out these characteristics. At times, they may appear not to be confident or self-assured, instead seeming to be frustrated, confused or distressed. When this is the case, they will need the support of sensitive adults to ensure that they are helped to overcome their difficulties.

As the EYFS makes clear, children develop in individual ways and at varying rates. The ways in which children with autism will develop their communication, social interaction and social understanding may well differ from that of most children, as they follow different developmental pathways. As all children are unique, it is not really possible to define a 'typical child'. However, the concept of 'typical development' is a useful one insofar as it helps us to identify areas where children might need additional support in order to make good progress, and to provide early intervention.

Children with autism are likely to differ from their peers in one or more of the following ways.

- They are much less likely to understand the needs, views and feelings of others.
- They are likely to find it more difficult to make friends, to form good relationships with adults and peers, and may need additional support to help them to learn to take turns and share.
- They will have greater difficulty in using language, particularly joining in with conversations, and understanding jokes and non-literal language. Some children with autism may not speak, instead communicating in other ways, including through their behaviour.
- They are less likely to explore new ideas and objects, and more likely to stick to what they know.
- They are much more likely to be upset or confused by changes to their routine or environment, or by new and unfamiliar experiences.
- They are less likely to play imaginatively, such as acting out characters in stories, and much more likely to play in quite a rigid way, in which actions are repeated over and over again with their favourite toys.

The list above is not exhaustive, but includes some of the main ways in which children with autism are likely to differ from their peers. Of course, you must take time to get to know 'the unique child' in order to understand exactly how autism affects an individual's development.

A practitioner asks:

At what age can a child be diagnosed as having autism?

Autism cannot be diagnosed at birth because babies develop social behaviours gradually. Some studies claim that autism can be diagnosed in children as young as six to 12 months, however, this finding is not widely accepted. What is agreed by experts is that most children with autism show signs of it by the time they are two to three years old, and autism can increasingly be diagnosed at this age. Some parents report noticing that their child seemed 'different' from a very early age, while others say that their child was initially developing language and social skills in the usual way, and then lost these, in some cases almost overnight. In many cases, healthcare professionals may notice signs of autism during routine childhood health screening, and this may eventually lead to a formal diagnosis. However, because many of the behaviours associated with autism are also present in other conditions, healthcare professionals may carry out various medical tests in order to rule out other possible causes before diagnosing autism. In order to receive a formal diagnosis of autism, all three of the triad of impairments will be present at 36 months of age, even if they were not originally noticed at this age. For some children, particularly those where early signs of autism were not so clear, diagnosis may occur at a much later age.



Each child's unique profile of strengths and needs in relation to the triad of impairments

It is important that children's strengths are recognised and built upon when planning to meet their needs. As with all children, for those with autism it is important that each child's unique strengths are recognised alongside their areas of need. It is all too easy to focus in on the child's difficulties, particularly when they seem to colour every aspect of their development. Even within an area of difficulty, it should always be possible to identify relative strengths. For example, a child who finds social communication with adults and peers very challenging might well have a close relationship with their pet dog at home; a child who finds any change to their routine very difficult may respond with delight to a new toy or sensory activity. Over time, practitioners will develop an increasing understanding of each child's unique profile of strengths and needs and should be able to hook into their interests, build upon the child's strengths in order to plan to meet their needs and develop skills in the areas of difficulty. For example, for a child who returns time and time again to playing with dinosaurs, the practitioner might plan a turn-taking activity that is based upon dinosaurs. In this way, the child's favourite toy is used creatively to develop social interaction, rather than being seen as a problem, or something from which the child needs to be distracted.

It is helpful to remember that there is always a reason for a child's behaviour, and that each behaviour serves a purpose. This may not be immediately obvious to you but remember that behaviours that appear to be random and to serve no useful purpose will always happen for a reason. It may be very difficult initially for the practitioner to work out why the child is behaving in a particular way but by watching carefully and patiently, you will come to understand what the child is trying to convey. For example, a behaviour such as hand flapping often appears to be bizarre or even distressing to the practitioner who is seeing it for the first time. However, this behaviour may serve a number of functions: it may be comforting to the child; it may help the child to stimulate an under-sensitive sense of touch and feeling; or it may be used to create visual patterns in front of the child's eyes that the child finds fascinating. Over time, with careful observation and discussion with colleagues, practitioners should

begin to understand why the child behaves as they do, and what the triggers are. In the case of less positive behaviours, it is then possible to minimise triggers and to address the behaviour in a more positive way.

A diagnosis of autism won't explain everything about the child, of course, as each has their own personality, family and cultural background. Also, children with autism may have additional needs such as medical difficulties; learning difficulties; or additional neurological (brain-based) conditions, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD or Tourette syndrome. All these conditions are more common in children with autism than typically developing children, and their presence may require different sorts of adaptations.

Inclusive practice: planning to meet individual needs

A well-planned early years environment which is based upon the Principles and practice of the EYFS will go a long way towards meeting the needs of children with autism. Planning should start from the child's interests, and activities should be personalised to meet individual needs. Your setting's SENCO should be able to provide you with ideas for planning appropriate activities if you would like some help with this. You will find an example of an individual plan for a child with autism in the Learning and Development section of this handbook and more individual plans in the same section of the DVD-ROM.

Ideally, parents – including fathers – should be a part of any planning meeting. However, where this is not possible, it is very important that all planning is shared with parents as they have a wealth of knowledge about their child on which practitioners can draw. Practitioners should make sure that parents are in agreement with what has been planned, that they understand why a particular strategy is being used and the intended effect. Parents should be encouraged to use the same strategies at home in order to ensure consistency and to consolidate the child's learning. Practitioners can also adopt strategies that parents have found to be successful with their unique child. However, sometimes strategies work better in some contexts than in others, and it is important that practitioners and parents regularly discuss children's progress so that planning can be adjusted as necessary. Where a particular strategy requires a high degree of concentration and compliance on the part of the child, it may not always be appropriate to repeat it at home after a tiring day in the setting.

A practitioner asks:

Is it true that children with autism are gifted in certain areas such as music or maths?

As unique individuals, it is not possible to make generalisations about the abilities of children with autism, other than to say they will all have varying degrees of need in the areas covered by the triad of impairments. In other areas, children with autism vary as much as typically developing children. A small number may be particularly able in certain areas, such as music or numeracy, and such instances have been well documented in the media, perhaps giving the impression that they are more common than is the case. What is clear is that all children with autism can make good progress in their development, and the earlier their areas of need are addressed, the more likely they are to make good progress and to develop any particular strengths they may have. Practitioners should have high expectations of all the children in their care, including those with autism, but should not automatically expect them to excel in particular areas.

Monitoring progress

Children's progress should be reviewed regularly, and further planning can be based upon the progress that children have made. Not all strategies will work with all children, and it is therefore important to have flexibility within planning so that things that are not working can be changed as necessary. Of course, it is important to recognise that it may take time for children with autism – or any child for that matter – to respond to a particular strategy, and practitioners should not assume that the strategies they implement will have an immediate effect. It will take time for the child to adjust to a new way of working, a new resource or new expectations, and practitioners should be prepared to persist, being consistent

in the way they use a particular strategy or resource. The area SENCO or another involved professional will be able to give advice on how long practitioners should persist with a particular strategy, and where progress is very limited, when it may be time to try something else or advise how to present the activity in a different way.

Practitioners should use the same monitoring procedures for children with autism as they use with their typically developing peers, including use of the EYFS Profile. For some children, additional monitoring and record keeping procedures may be suggested by the area SENCO or speech and language therapist. Where this is the case, these can be used alongside the setting's usual monitoring procedures, rather than instead of them. However, where there is overlap, it is not necessary to write things twice or to repeat observations. Monitoring and record keeping should be manageable and not take up a disproportionate amount of the practitioner's time.

A practitioner asks:

I've heard that there are now many more children with autism than a few years ago. Is this true?

It is certainly true that there are more children being diagnosed with autism now than previously. This does not necessarily mean that autism is becoming more common, although this may be the case. There is no central register of everyone who has autism, which means that it is not possible to know the exact number. Since Leo Kanner first described 'classic' autism more than 50 years ago, the results of research and clinical work have led to a broadening of the concept of autism, which means that more children are receiving a diagnosis. The fact that the number of reported cases of autism has increased dramatically since the 1990s may be largely a result of increased referrals, changes in diagnostic criteria, age at diagnosis, availability of services and increasing public awareness of autism.

Children who speak English as an additional language

Children who speak English as an additional language are neither more nor less likely to have autism than children who speak only English. It is usual for children who are at the early stages of learning English as an additional language to go through a period where they say very little in their setting; this should not automatically be a cause for concern for practitioners, as most children go through a period of observing, listening, absorbing and beginning to make sense of their new language before having the confidence to begin speaking in English. As always, it is helpful for practitioners to talk to the child's parents to find out about their development in their home language or languages.



Cultural considerations

A practitioner asks:

Is it true that autism is not recognised in some countries?

It is sometimes said that in some countries, or certain cultures, autism is not recognised or understood. However, it is more accurate to say that there is a wide variety of acceptance and understanding among people in relation to autism within any country or culture, rather than making sweeping generalisations about an entire country or culture. Broadly speaking, there are geographical and cultural differences in relation to acceptance of difference in general, and in some cultures there is still a great deal of stigma attached to any disability, particularly those which involve learning rather than being purely physical. For this reason, a child's autism might be kept a secret, or denied. It is true that not all languages yet have a word for autism, but this does not necessarily mean that the condition is not recognised. However, translation issues can sometimes present a problem when parents need information: it is known, for example, that some written material on autism in languages other than English that is used in the UK is poorly translated, and may frighten parents unnecessarily.

Practitioners should be aware of and sensitive to all parents' feelings, viewpoints and differing levels of understanding, regardless of their culture. Where parents are not fluent in English, their child's autism may not have been explained to them in an accessible or accurate way, meaning that they do not fully understand their child's needs. When a child has a diagnosis of autism, practitioners should aim to work in partnership with other agencies, helping to ensure that parents understand the implications of the diagnosis for their child's development, and how they can work with practitioners in a mutually supportive way to ensure that their child makes the best possible progress.

Practitioners should never assume that parents will have a particular view or level of understanding about autism simply because they are from a particular cultural background.

Ensuring children's safety and well-being

For children with autism, difficulties with social understanding, combined with an inward focus in which they often do not see 'the wider picture', means that they are more likely to be at risk from everyday hazards. It is often said that children with autism 'have no sense of danger' and for many this does indeed appear to be the case. While all young children need to be taught that moving cars and sharp scissors are dangerous, children with autism will tend to take much longer to appreciate such dangers, and they are potentially at much greater risk of hurting themselves or – usually inadvertently – others around them. Of course, risks can never be completely eliminated, but practitioners must determine what is an acceptable level of risk within their setting, taking into account the fact that children with autism may not learn from taking risks in the same way that most other children do. Dangers should be explicitly explained to children, using language they are able to understand. Tell children exactly how they should behave when faced with a potential danger, why they should behave in this way, what will happen and the potential consequences of not behaving in this way.

It is clearly vital that all children are supported in their personal, social and emotional development (PSED) throughout their early education, and beyond. Children with autism may be at increased risk of poor outcomes for PSED, particularly as they become older and more aware of their areas of need and how these affect their sense of participation and belonging. In the early years, practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that their provision is organised in such a way as to minimise confusion, frustration, distress and conflict. As for any child, this is best achieved by a thorough understanding of the unique profile of strengths and needs of the child with autism, gained through careful observation and discussion with others. In this way, practitioners can personalise learning for the child, ensuring that appropriate adaptations are made wherever necessary, such as using a visual timetable to increase predictability and thus decrease confusion or distress arising from not knowing what is to happen next.



Reflecting on practice

Refer to the Reflecting on practice section on the Principles into Practice cards for A Unique Child (1.1–1.4) as well as the Effective practice guidance on the EYFS CD-ROM, and consider these in relation to children with autism.

How well do you as a practitioner...

- have a thorough knowledge of child development and how autism might impact upon an individual's development?
- understand how children progress at different rates, and that children with autism are as diverse as their peers?
- get a good picture of children's strengths and areas of need both inside and outside the setting?
- make time in your staff team to discuss children's levels of development?
- make time to talk to parents – including fathers – and value what they tell you?
- think about how you can use children's particular interests to develop skills in their areas of need?
- use children's strengths as the starting point for planning?
- appreciate that children's behaviour always happens for a reason and has a purpose?
- take positive steps to ensure children's safety and well-being?

How well do you as a SENCO...

- understand the particular needs of children with autism and how they can best be helped?
- know who to contact in your locality for extra help and advice about autism?
- keep an up-to-date list of key contacts within the local area, such as speech and language therapists, specialist teachers and so on?
- know where to access culturally and linguistically appropriate materials and practical help for children and families from minority ethnic backgrounds?
- listen to the advice of visiting professionals and include it in your day-to-day practice?
- support other members of the team in understanding how autism impacts upon children's development?
- support staff in planning and implementing strategies for working with children with autism?

How well do you as a leader or manager...

- have a thorough knowledge of this area yourself?
- ensure that the training and development plans for the setting include a requirement that all practitioners access training and development on autism at a level appropriate to their professional needs and the needs of the setting?
- encourage and welcome other professionals and agencies into the setting?
- ensure that staff working with children with autism are appropriately supported both within the setting and by external professionals?
- plan regular opportunities for practitioners to discuss children's levels of development and to plan support for children?
- review children's progress, including an analysis of the EYFS Profile results, reflect on that progress, and support practitioners in implementing necessary changes in the setting and in their own practice?

Positive Relationships

EYFS Principle

Children learn to be strong and independent from a base of loving and secure relationships with parents and/or a key person.

Commitments

2.1 Respecting Each Other: Every interaction is based on caring professional relationships and respectful acknowledgement of the feelings of children and their families.

2.2 Parents as Partners: Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning.

2.3 Supporting Learning: Warm, trusting relationships with knowledgeable adults support children's learning more effectively than any amount of resources.

2.4 Key Person: A key person has special responsibilities for working with a small number of children, giving them the reassurance to feel safe and cared for and building relationships with their parents.

Parents as Partners

As soon as you know that a child with autism is going to join your setting you should start to build a positive relationship with their parents. The child's entry into the setting needs to be carefully planned in partnership with parents, whether the transition is from home or from another setting the child has been attending. Ideally, you should arrange to meet with parents on a number of occasions before the child starts in the setting, either through home visits, meetings in the setting, or both.

Although it is likely that parents will have noticed some time ago that their child was experiencing some difficulties, they may have only recently found out for certain that their child has autism. Parents' reaction to a diagnosis will vary, but common feelings include shock, anxiety and confusion. As practitioners, we can never know how a parent is feeling, so it is important not to make comments such as 'I know how you feel'. Your main focus should be on the child's strengths and positive aspects of their development, while at the same time acknowledging parents' feelings and not brushing aside any fears, anxieties or feelings of loss. You should reassure parents that you will put plans in place to address the identified areas of



Parents will need to feel assured that setting staff recognise their child's needs and are committed to meeting them, and to ensuring that their child's time in the setting is safe and happy. Practitioners should be positive about the child coming to the setting, but need not feel that they have to appear to be 'experts' in autism. Parents will have made a positive choice for their child to attend your setting, and by far the best way to reassure them that they have made the right choice is to communicate to them that their child is welcome, and that you are looking forward to working with them. You should be honest about your experience in working with children with autism and about the training you have had or are planning to attend. Tell parents, for example, that you have worked through this IDP resource on autism. If you have not worked with a child with autism before, it is fine to say so if asked, but it is important that you are confident in your own abilities and make it clear to parents that you will continue to develop your knowledge and skills in this area.

Practitioners should tell parents about other sources of support that will be available to them and their child in the setting, including that from visiting professionals such as an area SENCO, specialist teacher or a speech and language therapist. However, it is important not to raise parents' expectations about levels of one-to-one support their child will receive. In all likelihood, you will not have the resources to offer high levels of individual support, nor is it necessarily desirable for the child to receive this.

A practitioner asks:

The Dad of a child with autism in my setting says that his son behaves much more like a typical child at home than in nursery. Do you think it is just wishful thinking, and what should I say to him?

The EYFS makes clear that relationships with parents should be respectful, and as a practitioner, you should always assume that what parents are telling you is correct unless there is firm evidence to the contrary. A relationship involving mistrust can never be a positive one.

You may feel defensive upon hearing the above comment, or perhaps doubt your practice, and such feelings are understandable. However, it is often the case that children behave differently at home from the way they behave in their setting, and this does not mean that you are doing something wrong.

A positive way forward would be to ask the child's father to give you examples of how the child behaves differently at home. Together, you can explore these differences and think about what might be leading to them. Many children with autism can find a busy early years setting confusing and overwhelming, as it is very different from a quiet family home and over-stimulation might well lead to children showing more of the behaviours associated with autism. This conversation with the child's parent provides a useful opportunity to share strategies and it may be that Dad is able to give you some ideas of how the family successfully minimises and avoids potentially difficult times. You may be able to use these strategies in your setting to support the child's learning and development. It would also be a good idea to talk to Dad (without being defensive) about how most children behave differently at home and in their setting, reassuring him that this is not a problem, but at the same time seeking to deepen your understanding of the child, their autism and their home environment, while reflecting on your own practice.

It is particularly important to stress to parents that they are the 'experts' on their child, and that you want to learn from them about their child's likes and dislikes, strengths and areas of need, and what strategies they use to address any difficulties. In turn, parents will be keen to hear about how your setting operates, what activities their child will be doing, and how they can support you in your work with their child. This two-way dialogue and sharing of information, ideas and skills will form a strong basis for a lasting positive relationship between home and setting.

Supporting positive relationships between children with autism and other children

You as a practitioner have a vital role to play in supporting the development of positive relationships between a child with autism and their peers. If possible, it is usually a good idea to prepare the other children in the group for the arrival of the child with autism. Of course, you may not have much time to do this if all the children are new to your setting, but hopefully children's entry is staggered over a period of time and, in this case, you might wish to arrange starting dates so that the child with autism comes in after you have had the chance to prepare the other children. Alternatively, in certain circumstances it may be better for the child with autism to start towards the beginning of the admission period, so they have a chance to get to know the practitioners and get used to the setting environment before it is filled with other children. Either way, if entry is staggered, this should be over quite a short period of time – it is not good practice for children to be waiting for months to start in their setting. Any adjustment to admission arrangements needs to be agreed with parents bearing in mind that, for some parents, a deferred start might cause unnecessary stress and practical difficulties, such as arranging additional childcare if parents work. Obviously, it is very important that you have permission from the parents of the child with autism before you talk to other children about them.

Preparing other children for the arrival of the child with autism should be done informally, without making 'a big deal' out of the child's difficulties. It is a good idea to start with a discussion about the

uniqueness of each of the children in the setting. Next, it would be good to read the children a story about a child with autism, and then go on to say something like 'Next week, a new boy will be starting in our group. He's a bit like the boy in the story we've just listened to and he finds the same things difficult.' You might then outline some of the child's particular needs, using simple language that the group can understand. Then, suggest how the other children might react when faced with a particular situation. For example, you might say, 'Jamal gets a bit upset when other children get too close to him. If you're playing next to him and he moves away, it's best not to keep following him, because this might make him cross or a bit frightened.' To end the preparation session, sensitively answer some of the questions that the children will inevitably have. It is important to finish such a session on a positive note, talking about some of the child's strengths and interests, saying, for example, 'Jamal knows ever such a lot about dinosaurs!' and hopefully inspiring the group to look forward to his arrival.

Once a child is attending the setting, it is important for the adults to monitor sensitively how they are getting on with the other children, taking action as necessary to try to prevent difficulties before they arise. If, for example, the practitioner notices that other children are getting too close to the child with autism and making them anxious, the practitioner should remind the other children how this makes the child feel, and ask them to give the child some space. As the child becomes more able to deal with other children nearby, the practitioner can encourage other children to play alongside them, or to interact with the child if they are happy for this to happen. The practitioner has an important role to play in supporting any interaction as necessary, and modelling good communicative behaviours such as turn-taking and responding appropriately to what the other child is saying. However, if the child is coping well with the exchange and initiating some communication (and remember to watch out for any communication, such as eye contact, and not just speech), then the practitioner may want to step back at times, and allow the children to interact without being inhibited by an adult joining in.



A practitioner asks:

I've heard that children with autism can't make friends. Is this true?

In this, as in any other area, children with autism vary greatly, and we need to be wary of speaking about them as if they are all the same. We know that children with autism have difficulties with social interaction and social communication, but this does not mean that they are unable to make friends. When a child with autism first starts in a setting, they may find it very difficult to interact with other children to begin with, but this will depend upon the individual child, and how much experience they have had of being around other children.

Developing friendships is a complex process which involves many stages. To begin with, for a child with autism, these might include accepting another child being close to them; playing alongside them and gradually becoming involved in shared activities; turn-taking; joint attention and enjoyment of their company. The child with autism may need additional support with any or all of these things.

'Being a friend' is a complex idea, but friendships can take many forms. In encouraging positive relationships between children, ultimately, we should aim for mutual respect and for both parties to benefit from the friendship. This is certainly achievable for children with autism. A particular child might rarely make eye contact with their peers, or might continue to have great difficulty in understanding the perspective of other children, but this does not mean that they cannot be a good friend! Your support as a practitioner will be vital in helping them to develop and maintain positive relationships. And remember, all children 'fall out' sometimes, and children with autism are no different. They may need your support to manage disagreements in a positive way, particularly to begin with.

Skilful practitioners will help the peers of a child with autism to understand the difficulties that this child may have. As we know, even very young children are remarkably accepting of difference, and some children may actively seek out the friendship of a child with autism.

For a child who is very uncomfortable about being close to others, we should respect this, and not force them to play alongside their peers. Over time, most children will gradually become more comfortable around others. It's fine to be 'a friend from a distance' to begin with!

Inevitably, at times there will be disagreements between children. Adults need to deal with these calmly and sensitively, remembering that the child with autism may find it very difficult to empathise with others or understand their point of view, and that the child's actions may result from this rather than 'naughtiness'. In such a situation, where for example the child with autism has hurt another child, once the other child has been comforted, the practitioner needs to make clear to the child with autism that such behaviour is not appropriate, and either explain why this is the case, or for less able children, simply state the rule. The child may not understand to begin with, but over time will begin to appreciate that certain behaviours are not acceptable, even if they continue to find it difficult to empathise with the child who has been hurt.

The relationship between a child with autism and other children should be thought of as a mutually beneficial one. The child with autism has positive role models in whom they can observe social interactions, effective communication and imaginative play skills, and hopefully over time they will imitate these behaviours and ultimately begin to use them in a more meaningful way, supported by both peers and adults. For the other children, having a child with autism in their group helps them to understand and appreciate that we are all different, and encourages acceptance of diversity, mutual respect and an understanding that every child has a unique and positive contribution to make to the setting.



Supporting learning through positive relationships

The quality of the relationship a practitioner develops with a child with autism will influence every aspect of that child's development. This next section will tell you about some of the strategies you can use to engage with the child and develop their learning through the positive relationship you have established with them.

Eye contact

Generally speaking, as adults we consider it to be important to make eye contact with people when communicating with them. We also tend to think that a child needs to be looking at us in order to pay attention. Many children with autism are reluctant to make eye contact with others, while some may use eye contact inappropriately. Understandably, many practitioners think that encouraging the child to make eye contact should be a key target. However, for many children with autism, making and keeping eye contact can make them feel uncomfortable and anxious. Some children may be able to make eye contact when they are feeling relaxed, but completely unable to do so when they are in confusing, complex or over-stimulating situations.

If, as practitioners, we have as a goal for children to make eye contact, we need to be very clear about the purpose of this goal. It is not appropriate to expect children to make eye contact simply because 'that's what most people do' or because 'it's rude not to look at someone when they're talking to you'. Practitioners need to remember that a social concept such as 'rudeness' is very difficult for a child with autism to grasp, and that they cannot assume that a child is being rude, defiant or inattentive simply because they do not respond to a request to 'look at me'. It is also very important to remember that just

because a child is looking at your face it does not mean that they are paying good attention. Children with autism have very real difficulties with reading more subtle body language, especially messages that are conveyed with the eyes.

In expecting a child to 'look at me', the practitioner may be making it less likely that the child will pay attention and take part in meaningful communication. Some children with autism have enormous difficulty in attending to and coordinating information from two of their senses at the same time. For example, a child may be able to listen to and remember everything an adult is saying if they are able to look at the floor while the adult is speaking. However, if the adult insists that the child looks at them, the child might not be able to take in what the adult is saying. In this situation, the practitioner needs to decide which is the more important, for the child to make eye contact, or for the child to have a conversation with them. In expecting children with autism to conform to our social expectations, we may in fact be hindering their learning.

For the child who does make some eye contact and appears not to find this too difficult, it may be possible to use strategies such as putting on a clown nose, or holding a small preferred toy in front of your face, to encourage the child to increase the length of time they make eye contact. However, practitioners should be aware that what they are probably doing here is simply getting the child to look at their nose or the toy, rather than making true eye contact in order to communicate. If such strategies are used, the practitioner should be absolutely sure that in encouraging eye contact, they are not preventing the child from concentrating on what they are saying.

Entering the child's world

Children with autism are often said to be 'in a world of their own'. This expression refers to the lack of awareness of their surroundings, and in particular of other people, that many autistic children appear to have. As a practitioner, you will naturally want the child to share the world of the setting, to be able to interact with adults and peers and make the most of the opportunities and experiences available in your provision. However, in order to truly engage with the child to make this more likely, it helps if you are able to see the world from the autistic child's perspective so try to put yourself 'in the child's shoes'. This will give you a valuable insight into the way they think and behave, and makes it far more likely that the child in turn will engage with you and the world of the setting.

In order to 'enter the child's world', you should follow the child's lead, joining in with and imitating their vocalisations and actions. It may be possible to do this right next to the child, or, if the child finds this too uncomfortable, from a short distance. You should decide in advance which behaviours you will not copy, such as screaming or throwing things. Some practitioners have found that copying exactly what the child is doing (also known as 'mirroring'), making exactly the same noises and actions as the child, has led to the child 'making a connection' with them for the first time, with the child really paying attention to what the adult is doing, and in some cases even making sustained eye contact.

To begin with, you may feel a bit silly copying the child's noises and actions, particularly if these do not appear to have any meaning. However, you should try to overcome these feelings and not worry about how what you are doing might appear to others. Good mirroring requires time and patience. In copying the child, you may even gain new insights into why they are doing a particular thing. For example, one practitioner copied a child who often crouched in a particular spot in the outdoor play area and slowly rocked backwards and forwards. This took a leap of faith on the part of the practitioner, as previously she had considered this to be a random and meaningless act, a type of behaviour to be discouraged. However, to her astonishment, she discovered that the child had positioned himself in the exact spot where rays of light fell between two trees in the garden. As she rocked backwards and forwards, she shared with the child the experience of seeing beautiful patterns of light appear and disappear. Suddenly, she had 'entered the child's world' and his behaviour was no longer random, meaningless or something to be discouraged. The practitioner was then able to extend the child's interest in light patterns by providing mirrors and kaleidoscopes for him to play with, and this developed into a mini topic on light which was shared and enjoyed by all the children in the group.



Once the practitioner has 'entered the child's world', they can then move on from simply copying the child to supporting what the child is doing, such as clapping in time to their actions, stopping when they stop. Practitioners can also support the child by providing a running commentary on what they are doing, either through speech or singing. This attaches meaning to the child's actions and also provides a useful model of appropriate language and vocabulary. You will see a video clip example of this in the DVD-ROM.

Working with the child's particular interests

Many children with autism have a particular interest that may occupy a great deal of their time; common interests include trains, cars and dinosaurs, or simply an item such as a pen or box lid, that would not traditionally be thought of as interesting. These particular interests are sometimes described as 'obsessions'. However, the use of this rather negative word is not helpful, and it is better to think of the child's particular interest as a way into extending their learning.

For example, you may have a child who is particularly interested in dinosaurs, but who is reluctant to engage in any 'messy activities' such as cooking or using clay or dough. To encourage the child to be involved in such activities, you might decide to make dinosaur biscuits as a cooking activity, or to make dinosaurs from play dough. In this way, the child's particular interest can be used to encourage them to extend their range of activities and to try things in which they had previously not wished to be involved.

The child's particular interest can also be used as an incentive or reward to encourage them to participate in an activity of your choice. For example, the practitioner could say, 'If you sit down and do this puzzle with me, we can go and find the big box of dinosaurs afterwards.' For the child with less well-developed language, it might be more appropriate simply to say, 'First puzzle, then dinosaurs.' If this strategy is used, it is important that it is used positively as an incentive, rather than as a punishment. For example, it would not be appropriate to say to the child, 'If you don't do this puzzle with me, you can't play with the dinosaurs today.' Remember that the communication you use as a practitioner is key to helping the child develop positive relationships.

Practitioners often worry that children are spending too much time focusing on their particular interest, and not enough time on other things. However, the EYFS makes it clear that practitioners should take children's interests as a starting point for developing their learning. Where a child is engaged in a repetitive activity such as lining up cars over and over again, which is often thought to be a less positive activity, you should aim to extend the activity, perhaps by encouraging the child to sort the cars by colour, shape or size, or to make a garage for the cars. It is important that any adult-led activity has a meaningful context, for example, sorting the cars by size so that they can fit into different-sized garages, or by colour so that a 'customer' who wants to buy a blue car from the car showroom can see which ones they have to choose from.

Where a child has a favoured activity that involves an adult, such as the practitioner blowing bubbles and the child bursting them, the adult should make the most of any opportunity for two-way communication. For example, the adult might blow some bubbles, and then stop, looking at the child expectantly, perhaps saying, 'More?' It is important to give the child plenty of time to respond, and any form of response – verbal or non-verbal – that indicates that the child wants the activity to be repeated should be acknowledged and acted upon. For children who are verbal, the adult might say, 'Ready, steady...!' and encourage the child to say, 'Go!' in order for the bubbles to be blown. Where the child shows an interest in blowing the bubbles for themselves, this would be a useful opportunity to work on turn-taking.

You will find out more about working with the child's particular interests in the Learning and Development section of this handbook and in the accompanying DVD-ROM.

Accepting the child for who they are

Hopefully, this section of the handbook will have made you think about how you as a practitioner can develop a positive relationship with a child with autism, and how positive relationships can be established with parents and between peers. Part of this process involves a growing realisation that autism is a lifelong condition which will continue to affect the child throughout their life. Practitioners will clearly want to encourage the child to conform to the rules of the setting, and to 'fit in' as much as possible. However, alongside this there also needs to be recognition of the fact that the child with autism may do some things differently, will have a different perspective on certain things, and will continue to find some things difficult, unpleasant or challenging. Rather than trying to change the child, the skilful practitioner will aim to fit their practice around the needs of the child, accepting the child for who they are, addressing areas of need, but at the same time celebrating the child and their achievements. The child's autism needs to be accepted as something that is a part of them, rather than something to be denied or 'got rid of'.

A practitioner asks:

I know that children with autism find change difficult. Does this mean that the child's key person should be the only person who works with them?

It is true that children with autism tend to find change difficult, but this does not mean that the child's key person should be the only person who works with them. The key person is likely to be the adult who provides the most support to the child, particularly in the early stages of building relationships where the key person will aim to make the child feel safe and cared for, and will establish a positive relationship with parents. However, it is neither realistic nor desirable for the key person to be the sole source of support to the child or to spend all their time with them. As children with autism become more confident in their setting and able to interact with others, different adults should spend an increasing amount of time with them, taking the lead from the child and giving them space as necessary.

Staff should be flexible when allocating key people to children, as the child will not necessarily develop the closest relationship with their allocated key person. Where a child forms a close relationship with a particular practitioner, it will generally make sense for that practitioner to become the child's key person, even if they were not originally the allocated key person. Remember, the practice should fit around the needs of the child, rather than the child being expected to fit into the routines and practice of the setting.

It may be that in some cases a child has an allocated teaching assistant (TA). In such cases, the above principle also applies – the assistant should not be the only person working with the child, and the aim of the support provided is ultimately to increase independence, not to be constantly by the child's side. However, where an allocated TA is ill or on leave, an existing member of staff who is familiar to the child should take their place. It would not be good practice to use an unfamiliar adult (for example, from an agency) as a replacement TA for a child with autism, as the child is likely to find this degree of unexpected change difficult to deal with.



Reflecting on practice

Refer to the Reflecting on practice section on the Principles into Practice cards for Positive Relationships (2.1–2.4) and the Effective practice guidance on the EYFS CD-ROM, and consider these in relation to children with autism.

How well do you as a practitioner...

- work in partnership with parents to build a positive and mutually supportive relationship?
- prepare for the child's entry into your setting?
- acknowledge parents' feelings around their child's diagnosis?
- inform parents of all sources of support available to them and their child?
- use information from parents about their child to improve your knowledge of the child and your practice?
- support positive relationships between children with autism and their peers?
- prepare other children for the child's arrival in your setting?
- make an informed choice about whether to encourage the child to make eye contact?
- try to think about the world from the child's perspective?
- follow the child's lead in order to encourage interaction with them?
- work with the child's particular interests to extend their learning?
- ensure that adult-led activities have a meaningful context?
- make the most of any opportunities for two-way communication with the child?
- accept the child for who they are?

How well do you as a SENCO...

- work with practitioners and parents to coordinate a consistent approach to a child's learning at home and in the setting, and where necessary between settings?
- establish positive relationships with other agencies and visiting professionals?

How well do you as a leader or manager...

- reflect on and review the setting's relationship with parents, taking into account parents' feedback?
- ensure that there is an effective two-way communication system between practitioners and parents?
- ensure that staffing arrangements are flexible to allow the child's preferred adult to be their key person?
- know where parents can go in their local area to attend support groups or courses on autism, and share this information with parents?
- make links with other settings, and share information about children who attend more than one setting?
- ensure that systems are in place to enable practitioners to reflect on and develop their skills and practice in relation to working with children with autism – for example, training plans, peer observation, feedback from senior staff?
- provide time and support for the SENCO to carry out their role?

Enabling Environments

EYFS Principle

The environment plays a key role in supporting and extending children's development and learning.

Commitments

3.1 Observation, Assessment and Planning: Babies and children are individuals first, each with a unique profile of abilities. Schedules and routines should flow with the child's needs. All planning starts with observing children in order to understand and consider their current interests, development and learning.

3.2 Supporting Every Child: The environment supports every child's learning through planned experiences and activities that are challenging but achievable.

3.3 The Learning Environment: A rich and varied environment supports children's learning and development. It gives them the confidence to explore and learn in secure and safe, yet challenging, indoor and outdoor spaces.

3.4 The Wider Context: Working in partnership with other settings, other professionals and with individuals and groups in the community supports children's development and progress towards the outcomes of *Every Child Matters*: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being.

Observation, assessment and planning

In high-quality, effective settings, practitioners observe and assess children regularly as part of the day-to-day practice. They use their observations and assessments to identify children's interests, identify next steps in learning, and plan exciting and motivating experiences for each child. As part of this process, practitioners should be systematically observing and assessing all areas of the child's development, and planning to meet their individual needs. A child with autism might not be excited or motivated by experiences that the majority of children enjoy. This makes careful observation and assessment all the more important, as it will be vital for the practitioner to provide appropriate experiences that the child is able to engage with, which build upon the child's current level of development and address areas of particular need. All routines and schedules should flow with the needs of the child rather than being based upon what is most convenient for the adults in the setting.

Use the knowledge and information that you gained from the A Unique Child section of this handbook and the DVD-ROM to help inform your assessment of the child with autism.

Supporting every child

A well-planned environment will support every child's learning, regardless of their needs. It is important that the environment is adapted to meet individual needs and that planned experiences and activities are challenging but achievable. The next section describes how the learning environment can best be arranged to meet the needs of a child with autism. However, it should be remembered that such an environment will also support the learning of other children in the setting.

The learning environment

Practitioners need to reflect on the environment that they are providing and consider how it impacts on children's learning. Think about both the positive aspects of the environment, which are supporting the child with autism, and also about any negative aspects of the current environment which may be hindering the child's learning and which need adapting to better meet the unique needs of the child.

When thinking about the environment, you should consider:

- the physical environment, both indoors and outdoors;
- the emotional environment, or conditions for learning;
- the wider environment – the contribution of other professionals to children's learning.

The physical environment: indoors and outdoors

In the Positive Relationships section of this handbook we talked about 'entering the child's world' and seeing things from their perspective. This also applies to thinking about the setting's physical environment from the child's point of view, and considering how you can make it as 'autism friendly' as possible. The following points will help you, and can be adapted as necessary to meet the needs of the children in your setting.

Visual support materials

A busy setting can be a confusing place for any child, but particularly for children with autism. Visual support materials such as concrete objects, photographs, pictures and symbols can often support the child's learning. However, it is important to use the right visual support material to suit the child's level of understanding. For example, many young children will not make the connection between a symbol and what it is intended to represent and they are more likely to recognise photographs, at least initially. A speech and language therapist, area SENCO or specialist teacher can help you to decide which forms of visual support are likely to be most effective for a particular child. Real objects are often used to prepare children for what is coming next – for example, a fork might be used to indicate to the child that it is nearly lunchtime, objects used in this way are sometimes referred to as 'objects of reference'. Items such as sand timers can also be useful to help the child to understand how much time is left before the next thing happens, such as tidy-up time, or the next child's turn on the computer or a bike. Preparing a child for change in this way will often help to reduce frustration or anxiety. More information about the appropriate use of visual support systems can be found on the DVD-ROM.



A practitioner asks:

A speech and language therapist has suggested that we use a visual timetable with a child with autism in our setting? What is this, and how does it work?

A visual timetable is a useful resource to help a child understand a sequence of steps or the order in which activities will be taking place. For young children, a visual timetable is usually very simple: you would put photos or symbols that represent an activity, or part of a task, in order so that the child can see what will happen first, next and so on. Include a word below the picture – that way anyone who uses the timetable with the child will use the same word to avoid confusion. In some settings visual timetables are pinned up on a board in the same place every day, in others the child keeps it with them at all times. You could try using Velcro® to create a timetable that is easy to change, and remember to keep it short and simple.

The speech and language therapist who has suggested using a visual timetable will be able to tell you more, and can help you to decide whether symbols or photos would work best for a particular child. Visiting professionals such as area SENCOs should also be able to give you advice and support in using a visual timetable with a child with autism.

Noise levels

Some children with autism can be very sensitive to loud noises, or even certain noises that are not loud, such as a flushing toilet. The child will often cover their ears when there is a loud noise, and will have a pained expression. However, recent studies suggest that where children with autism are particularly sensitive to loud noises, this is due to fear rather than pain. We don't yet know why they are afraid of loud noises, but the child's fearful response to loud or disliked noises can often be decreased if they are gently exposed to the loud noise while feeling safe. This process is often referred to as 'desensitisation'.

You can read more about this in the following 'A practitioner asks'.

A practitioner asks:

A child with autism in my Reception class gets very distressed whenever there's any loud noise, such as a banging drum or a child shouting. What should I do?

It is neither realistic nor desirable to stop all loud noises in a setting. However, practitioners can remind other children that loud noises upset the child with autism, and perhaps have a rule that, in general, loud noises should be limited to a particular area such as the music corner or outdoor area. It is a good idea to discuss with parents the strategies they use if there is a sudden loud noise that cannot be prepared for and the child becomes very distressed.

Where practitioners know that there is going to be a loud noise, for example diggers working on the road outside, prepare the child by warning them that this is going to take place, explaining what will happen and the reason why. It may also be a good idea to make a recording of the noise of diggers, and play it back to the child at reduced volume so that they know what it will sound like. When the child is feeling relaxed and safe, recordings of noises that usually distress them can be played back to them, very quietly at first, and then at increasing volume, monitoring the child's response carefully to ensure that they do not get distressed. This could even be made into a game, where the child is in charge of the volume control and the adult has to guess how loud they will make the noise. Over time, most children with autism will learn to cope better with loud noises, even if they continue to dislike them.

It is recommended that practitioners seek advice from other professionals before using a desensitisation programme.



Visual distractions

In the same way that some children with autism dislike loud noises, some can become over-stimulated if there are lots of visual distractions in the setting. This is known as 'hypersensitivity', and children with autism can be hypersensitive to sounds, visual stimuli, smells, tastes, touch or any combination of these. If there are lots of visual distractions in a setting, or simply 'too much to look at', the child can become disorientated and not know what to focus on. Alternatively, they may simply focus on one small thing such as a raindrop on a window pane and become oblivious to everything else in the room. Find out more about visual distractions by reading the following 'A practitioner asks'.

A practitioner asks:

I've heard that you shouldn't have any pictures or displays on the walls in your setting if you have a child with autism. Is this true?

Many children with autism are easily distracted by visual stimuli, and can become over-stimulated if there are lots of things on the walls or hanging from the ceiling. For this reason, it is a good idea to have an area of your setting where the walls are not filled with busy displays, away from doors and windows and other visual distractions. This area should also be as quiet as possible, so that the child is not distracted by noise. You may wish to separate this area from the rest of the setting with screens or room dividers.

This 'calm area' can be used by any of the children to retreat to if they are feeling overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of the setting, and can also be used for individual or small-group activities that are led by an adult, where the child needs to focus on the activity in hand and what is being said by the adult.

It is not realistic to expect that the whole of the setting should have bare walls with no displays – think how uninteresting this would look, with no opportunity to celebrate children's work or stimulate their learning through exciting displays. As long as there is one area of the setting where the walls are kept relatively bare, it is important to make the rest of the setting as attractive and interesting as possible.

Lighting

Many settings are lit with overhead fluorescent lights and some children with autism are particularly sensitive to this type of lighting. This is because it appears to be constantly flickering to them, causing them distress or discomfort, or leading to an increase in repetitive behaviours. If this is the case for a child in your setting, you should plan to replace fluorescent lighting with soft, non-flickering lighting. If this is not possible, you should aim to minimise use of fluorescent lights – if it is a bright day, consider whether the lights really need to be on. Other tips include replacing the existing fluorescent bulbs with new ones, which flicker less, or placing a lamp with an ordinary, incandescent light bulb near to where the child is playing, out of children's reach.

Giving the child space

Children with autism should have a quiet area to which they can retreat when they are feeling anxious, distressed or overwhelmed. This should have comfortable seating and will be appreciated by all children, not just the child with autism.

Practitioners should be aware that the child may find it very difficult to join in with all the activities on offer, and can easily become tired or overwhelmed by having to sit among a group of children for any length of time. For this reason, practitioners need to be flexible and adjust their expectations as necessary to meet the needs of the child. For example, it might be appropriate for the child with autism to join in for the last five minutes of story or circle time. This provides an opportunity for a member of staff to introduce the group activity on an individual basis – for example, sharing the book with the child

– and then joining the whole group for the end of the story. At times, it might be more appropriate for a child to join in with the beginning of a group session and then to do a quiet activity with an adult in another area of the setting. Be aware, however, that this might encourage the child to get into the habit of leaving activities part-way through. Over time, the child should be able to spend longer in the group and may eventually be able to manage a whole-group session.

As children with autism tend to prefer their own company, practitioners should aim to increase their social interactions both with adults and peers. This is an important goal, but alongside this the child should also have opportunities to spend some time alone each day if this is what they want to do. We all need some time to ourselves!

Clearly defined areas

To make a setting less confusing and more predictable, it is a good idea to have clearly defined areas for different activities. For example, you may use different coloured tables for different activities, or label areas with words and photographs of what they are used for. Practitioners should avoid changing areas around, as this is likely to be confusing or distressing for the child with autism.

Many children with autism feel more secure if they know exactly where they will sit. Consider giving children their own cushion or a carpet tile marked with their name for carpet sessions. By doing this for all children you can avoid singling out the child with autism. Where children attend a setting for a full day, you might prefer them to be able to choose where they sit for lunch, rather than having fixed places. Be sensitive to the needs of the child with autism, however, who may prefer to sit in the same place each day, and may even find it difficult if the children sitting next to them change from day to day. If children do not have fixed places, they can at least be given their own place mats, with their names or photographs, and then it is clear where each will sit, even if this is not in the same spot each day.

Keeping things the same

As you will know by now, most children with autism find any kind of change difficult. Strategies such as using a visual timetable and having clearly defined areas will help children to feel more secure. In addition to this, practitioners should aim for the structure of the day to be as consistent as possible, so the child has a good idea of what will happen and when.

When something new is going to happen, the child should be prepared for this, by the adult warning the child what will happen, when it will happen, and why. Using a home-made book with photographs about the new event will be helpful in preparing the child for a new event, such as a visit from the community dentist. On a visual timetable, you might use a certain symbol to indicate 'surprise' or 'something different'.

At times, changes may be unexpected, such as a member of staff being absent due to illness, and supply staff being used to replace them. Where this is the case, care should be taken to minimise distress to the child, through, for example, another member of staff who is familiar to the child taking the main responsibility for their care if the child's key worker is absent. Practitioners should think about all the unexpected events and changes that might potentially happen in their setting, and think in advance about how these will be managed to minimise anxiety or distress in the child with autism. Parents also have an important role to play in discussing changes with their child and preparing them for new events in the setting.

Keeping children safe

Children with autism tend to have little awareness of danger, and may not appreciate that things such as electricity, jumping from a height or moving cars are dangerous. Some children with autism may be particularly interested in climbing or locks and, in such cases, practitioners will need to be particularly attentive. Before a child with autism starts in your setting, you should carry out a risk assessment of

their physical environment, considering each area in turn and thinking about the potential dangers. Remember that parents are the experts on their child and know the risks better than anyone. They are experienced in scanning new environments and spotting potential pitfalls for their child, so invite them to help you do this in your setting.

Of course, risk can never be completely eliminated, and it is important that children are able to take some risks in their play. Equally, all children need to be protected from significant harm, and for the child with autism particular care needs to be taken. Even though children with autism will find it difficult to understand, practitioners should nonetheless explain why certain activities and behaviours are dangerous. Careful supervision by practitioners is obviously an important part of keeping children safe, but this does not mean that they should be constantly by children's sides.

In carrying out a risk assessment, practitioners should consider the following.

- What equipment is potentially dangerous (such as scissors, tools), where are these things kept, and how is children's use of them supervised?
- Is the furniture in the setting safe? For example, are there sharp edges on tables or unstable pieces of furniture that could topple over if climbed on or pulled?
- Are there safety surfaces under climbing equipment, and also other outdoor equipment that the child may climb on?
- Are doors, windows and the perimeter fence of the outdoor area secure?
- Are there any things in the setting that are toxic if put in the mouth?
- Does the child with autism have any known food allergies? If so, it should be explained to all parents that these things are not allowed into the setting, as it is not realistic to expect the child to understand that they must not eat them.

In addition to risks in the physical environment, at times some children may also self-harm. This is not necessarily intentional, but is nonetheless distressing for the practitioner to witness. In the same way that some children with autism are over-sensitive (hypersensitive) to certain sensory stimuli, other children may be under-sensitive to sensory stimuli. Children who are under-sensitive may, for example, flick a light switch on and off repeatedly to stimulate their vision. Under-sensitivity may also lead to self-harming behaviours such as bumping into things or head banging for stimulation. In cases such as these, where the child is at risk of harm, the practitioner should aim to distract the child's attention away from the self-stimulating behaviour and refocus them on a more positive activity. Advice may need to be sought from other professionals.

The emotional environment: conditions for learning

The emotional environment that you create for children in your setting is just as important as the physical environment. It is vital that all children – especially those with autism – feel comfortable, confident, secure and welcome in your setting and that they have a sense of belonging and well-being. They need the support of adults who are sensitive to their needs and understand how important children's well-being is to their learning. To begin with, a child with autism is likely to need adult support in order to feel comfortable and secure in your setting, but the way in which the practitioner provides that support may well be different to how it would be provided for a typically developing child. Comforting a distressed child, for example, might take the form of giving them a cherished object rather than the cuddle that most other children would appreciate.

It is important to provide an environment that supports the building of relationships, as described in the Positive Relationships section of this handbook. Although children with autism find establishing relationships difficult, it is important that their social development is promoted and extended in order to meet their emotional needs and prepare them for life both within and beyond the setting.

Ideas for enhancing the emotional environment of a setting are found throughout this handbook, but include:

- developing positive relationships through explicit teaching of how to play with other children and modelling of interaction;
- making sure that the child with autism has understood instructions, knows what they are supposed to do, and has support as necessary to do it;
- being aware of potential difficulties, such as toileting, and working with parents to address these. For example, the child may use places other than the toilet, not realising that this is inappropriate. The child is not being 'naughty' and rather than making them feel that they have done something wrong, the practitioner should establish a routine, for example taking the child to the toilet or potty shortly after every drink or meal, and praising them when they use the toilet;
- anticipating and identifying situations that are likely to cause confusion, frustration or upset before they arise, and taking appropriate action – for example, noticing that a peer is starting to annoy the child with autism by following them around, and sensitively redirecting the other child to a different activity.

You can download a set of training materials for early years practitioners, called Personal, social and emotional development, from www.surestart.gov.uk

Social and Emotional Aspects of Development (SEAD) is another resource for early years practitioners which will support practice in this area. This is available from www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies, search by reference 00707-2008BKT-EN.

When referring to other publications and resources which focus on promoting children's emotional development, practitioners should appreciate that most of these will have been written with typically developing children in mind, and ideas and activities may need to be adapted to make them more appropriate for the child with autism. You can get advice on how to adapt existing materials from your SENCO, area SENCO or other professionals who may be working with a child.

The wider environment: working with other professionals

All practitioners working with young children work in a 'team'. If you are a childminder, the team may consist of just you and the parents; other practitioners working in settings will have much larger teams. All teams need to work closely together. They need to develop good professional relationships, respecting each other, implementing the setting's policies, sharing information about children, planning learning opportunities and reflecting on their practice.

All practitioners are responsible for ensuring that children's individual needs are met, and in early years settings, the SENCO is the member of the team who has responsibility for coordinating the setting's approach to children with identified additional needs. The SENCO is also the member of the team who will coordinate links with professionals from outside the setting. *Every Child Matters: Change for children* (DfES, 2004) reminds us of how important it is for every setting to work with outside professionals. Collaborative working is essential if we are to meet the needs of all children. Depending on the needs of the child, services may be coordinated through the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) or the Early Support Programme. Either of these might be used with a child with autism, particularly where there are also identified needs in addition to those associated with autism.

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

The Common Assessment Framework provides an effective way of identifying children's additional needs early, and aims to improve partnership between agencies. All LAs are now using the CAF, visit www.everychildmatters.gov.uk for more information. A link to the practitioner guide is also included in the EYFS CD-ROM (A Unique Child – 1.2).

Early Support

Early Support is the Government programme for achieving well-coordinated family-focused services for very young disabled children and their families. It improves multi-agency service delivery to families with young disabled children or emerging special educational needs. It is relevant to anyone who works with young children and their families and particularly useful when families are in contact with many different professionals supporting their child.

Early Support provides a range of materials to help professionals working with families to coordinate their activity better and to work in partnership with parents. There are also information booklets for parents, the materials are supported by a training programme and all materials are available free of charge. To find out more, or to order materials, visit www.earlysupport.org.uk

In a setting, your first point of contact for advice and support in meeting the needs of a child with autism is likely to be the setting's SENCO. However, it is likely that other professionals from outside the setting will also be involved with the child. Professionals from the LA who may be involved include EYATs and area SENCOs, who can offer advice and support in meeting children's needs and facilitate links with other agencies.

Health professionals who may be involved include speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. Speech and language therapists work with children with autism and their families and practitioners to develop communication and play skills. Occupational therapists use a wide range of techniques and strategies to help the child with autism to learn daily tasks such as getting dressed, using the toilet and completing activities in the setting. Increasingly, these professionals will work with a child in their setting, and should work in partnership with setting staff and parents to meet the child's needs, explaining to staff how they can support the therapy programme. Clearly, it is important that time is made available for communication between visiting professionals and setting staff.

If a child is undergoing assessment with a view to formal diagnosis of autism, it is likely that a multi-agency team will also be involved, and this team will probably review the child's progress periodically following diagnosis.

Generally speaking, for children who are diagnosed with autism prior to starting in a setting, these professionals will already be working with the child, and it should not be necessary for setting staff to make a referral. However, practitioners can ask about additional sources of support from the LA and other agencies via their SENCO. In cases where children's needs become apparent after starting in the setting, it may be appropriate for practitioners to refer to other professionals, having discussed and agreed this with parents.



Transitions between settings

The transition from one setting to the next, for example from a childminder, pre-school or day nursery to a Reception class is a significant event in children's and families' lives. The EYFS CD-ROM gives practitioners a great deal of guidance on how these transitions can be made as easy as possible, with minimal disruption to children's learning journeys (see Enabling Environments – 3.4).

For children with autism transferring from one setting to the next, you should take into account the following points when planning transition.

- Transition is a process rather than a single event and planning for transition should begin as soon as it is known which setting the child will be transferring to. As children with autism tend to find any degree of change difficult, a change as significant as moving from one setting to another will require very careful planning and management.
- Ideally, a transition planning meeting should be held, where everyone who has been working with the child has an opportunity to meet together (either in the existing setting or the receiving setting) to share information and clarify everyone's role in supporting the period of transition and how people can best work together to make the transition as smooth as possible. If they cannot attend in person, it is vital that they are given the opportunity to contribute to transition planning, perhaps through providing written information or telephone contact.
- The child should have opportunities to visit the new setting prior to starting there, ideally with both parents and a member of staff from the child's current setting. While visiting it is a good idea to take photographs of the new setting – for example, different rooms and areas within the setting, different activities and equipment and members of staff. These photographs can then be used to make a book about the new setting to help to prepare the child for their start there. It is important that the receiving setting considers how it will adapt its current routines
- A key person in the new setting should be identified for the child with autism before their entry, and that person should be given time to prepare for the child's start in the setting. If possible, the key person in the receiving setting should visit and spend some time with the child in their current setting. Such visits would also provide an opportunity for staff from the current setting to share information and records with the child's new key person.

The following two valuable resources about transitions are available.

Seamless Transitions – Supporting continuity in young children's learning (DfES

0267-2006PCK-EN), aimed at all practitioners, is available from dcshf@prolog.uk.com and can also be downloaded from www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications

eOrderingDownload/0267_2006_DCL_EN_web_book_edition.pdf.

Continuing the Learning Journey for practitioners in schools, can be downloaded from www.naa.org.uk/naa_17856.aspx

Reflecting on practice

Refer to the Reflecting on practice section on the Principles into Practice cards for Enabling Environments (3.1–3.4) and the Effective practice guidance on the EYFS CD-ROM, and consider these in relation to children with autism.

How well do you as a practitioner...

- observe and assess the child's progress, taking into account the impact of autism?
- use appropriate visual support materials to support the child's learning?
- manage noise levels to minimise distress, while at the same time aiming to desensitise the child with autism to loud noises?
- consider possible visual distractions and address these as necessary?
- ensure that lighting in the setting does not cause distress or discomfort to the child with autism?
- ensure that the child with autism is given personal space where needed, and explain to other children why this is important?
- create clearly defined areas to help the children to know what happens where?
- try to keep the structure and routines of the day the same, while at the same time sensitively introducing new activities and experiences as appropriate?
- assess potential risk within your setting, balancing the need to keep children safe with the need for them to be able to take some risks in their play and learning?
- anticipate and identify potential difficulties, and take necessary action to minimise frustration?
- create an emotionally secure environment that helps children to feel comfortable, confident, secure and welcome in your setting?
- work in partnership with other adults in your setting and with professionals from outside the setting?
- understand the role and contribution of outside professionals who work with the child with autism?
- plan a smooth transition that enables the child to move between settings with minimal upset?

How well do you as a SENCO...

- advise and support staff in developing environments which promote children's learning and well-being?
- coordinate links with professionals from outside the setting?

How well do you as a leader or manager...

- identify and secure funding to make any necessary adaptations to the setting environment?
- ensure that your setting is as safe as possible for children with autism?
- ensure that your setting has an effective transition policy which is regularly reviewed?

Learning and Development

EYFS Principle

Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates and all areas of Learning and Development are equally important and interconnected.

Commitments

4.1. Play and Exploration: Children's play reflects their wide ranging and varied interests and preoccupations. In their play children learn at their highest level. Play with peers is important for children's development.

4.2. Active Learning: Children learn best through physical and mental challenges. Active learning involves other people, objects, ideas and events that engage and involve children for sustained periods.

4.3. Creativity and Critical Thinking: When children have opportunities to play with ideas in different situations and with a variety of resources, they discover connections and come to new and better understandings and ways of doing things. Adult support in this process enhances their ability to think critically and ask questions.

4.4. Areas of Learning and Development: The EYFS is made up of six areas of Learning and Development. All areas of Learning and Development are connected to one another and are equally important. All areas of Learning and Development are underpinned by the Principles of the EYFS.

'Teaching' children to play and explore

For most children, play comes naturally and does not need to be explicitly taught. However, many children with autism do not have well-developed play skills, and you as the practitioner have an important role to play in helping them to develop and extend their play, particularly their imaginative play.

The starting point for teaching play skills is to identify what interests the child, and to use this as a way into engaging with them. To begin with, you might have to initiate most of the play, but over time most children will start to initiate some play, given the right support from skilled practitioners.

Let's take Jamal as an example:

Case study: Jamal

Jamal is a four-year-old boy who has autism and who has recently started to attend his local children's centre. Jamal has a special interest in dinosaurs, and will quite happily play with them all day. However, his play is currently quite limited, and mainly consists of lining the dinosaurs up and naming them. His play tends to be solitary, although Jamal will accept other children playing alongside him.

The practitioners in Jamal's setting agree that they would like to encourage him to play more imaginatively with the dinosaurs, and also to begin to play with his peers. The children in Jamal's room in the children's centre have enjoyed listening to the story *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, and Jamal himself has shown some interest in this and likes to join in with all the actions. Jamal's key person decides that she would like to plan some activities around the topic 'We're going on a dinosaur hunt', to further engage him. The group act out their own version of the story, and then make dinosaur costumes from fabric and junk modelling materials.

Over the following week, the children design and make a dinosaur cave, using sheets and large cardboard boxes. Jamal is keen to take a lead in this activity, and interacts with his peers as he shares his ideas for how the cave should look. Once the cave is completed, the children wear their dinosaur costumes and act out the story, crawling through long grass, wading through a river, squelching through mud, to end up in the dinosaur's cave, which is reached by crawling on hands and knees through a tunnel made from smaller cardboard boxes.

Later, supported by practitioners, the children make their own book *We're going on a dinosaur hunt*, and Jamal takes photographs of the children wearing their costumes and acting out the story to illustrate the book. Now, this book is the first thing that Jamal looks for when he arrives at the children's centre every morning. He still enjoys playing in the dinosaur cave, and calls other children by name to come and join him in the cave. When playing with toy dinosaurs, he now uses them to act out the story, rather than simply lining them up and saying their names.

On the next page you will see a child plan for Jamal which includes the above activities and shows how his interest in dinosaurs has been taken as the starting point for planning exciting activities in each of the areas of Learning and Development.

You will find more examples of child plans in the Learning and Development module of the accompanying DVD-ROM, which, in the case studies, show how learning and development is supported for four very different children with autism.

A practitioner asks:

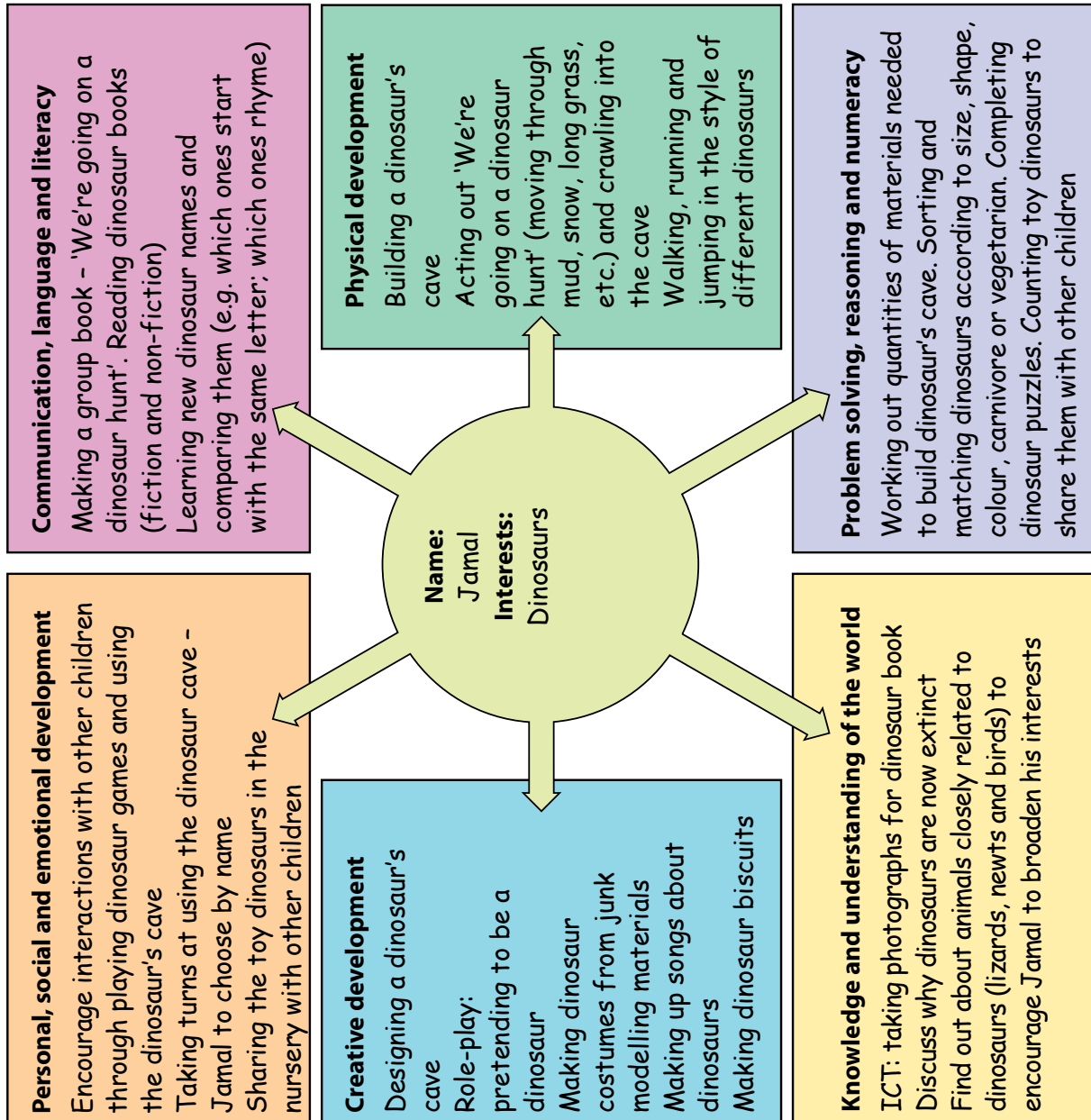
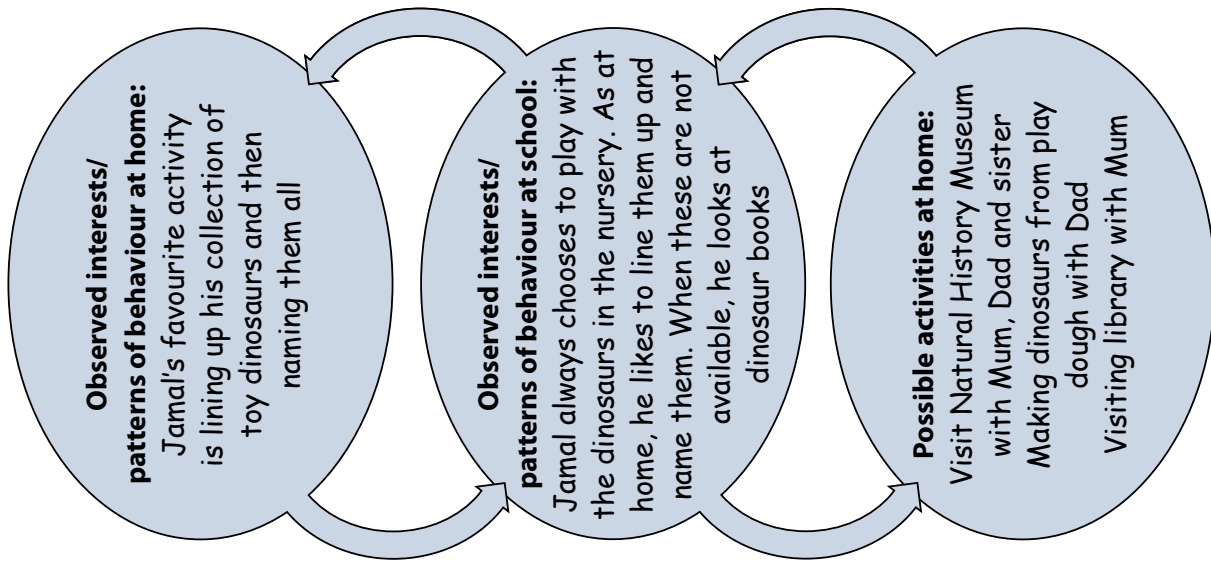
A child with autism in my playgroup is obsessed by trains and talks about nothing else. All he wants to do all day in the playgroup is play with the toy trains. I'm worried that he'll never learn anything else. How can I make sure that he accesses a broad range of activities, as the EYFS says he should?

Although child plans focus on children's special interests as the starting point for planning, as suggested by the EYFS, this does not mean that children will not be encouraged to broaden their interests. Looking at the example of Jamal, you will see that under 'Knowledge and understanding of the world', Jamal will be encouraged to find out about animals that are closely related to dinosaurs, in the hope that this will lead to a wider interest in animals. Jamal will also be taking part in group sessions, which will focus on other areas besides dinosaurs.

Practitioners should not worry about encouraging children's special interests; thinking about these as 'obsessions' is not helpful, and the practitioner should instead welcome the fact that the child has a strong interest, use this to their advantage in planning a stimulating range of activities, and seek over time to broaden the child's interests to allow maximum access to the EYFS.

On the very rare occasions that a child struggles to engage with anything other than their special interest, it can be used as an incentive to encourage them to take part in a different activity. For example you might say, 'Let's read this story together. When we've finished, we can look at a book about trains.' Using a visual timetable is also helpful, as the child is able to see which activities are coming up and when they will be able to play with the trains.

Not all children with autism will have an obvious special interest in one area. Some children will be interested in a broader range of activities, and you will be able to plan around these. Remember that some children's interests might be based upon a schema (a pattern of repeated behaviour in young children's play), such as rotating, enclosing or transporting. You can find out more about schemas by visiting www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies, search for 00266-2008BKT-EN.



Supporting children with autism in each of the areas of Learning and Development

As the EYFS makes clear, all areas of Learning and Development are equally important, are connected to one another, and progress made in one area is likely to impact upon other areas. Below are some pointers for supporting children's development in each area.

Personal, social and emotional development

- Listen carefully to what parents have to say about their child in relation to likes and dislikes and things their child finds frustrating or stressful. Aim to minimise frustration and stress and anticipate difficult situations before they become a problem.
- Make sure that the child understands the structures and routines of the setting, supported by a visual timetable if appropriate.
- Make sure that rules are clear. For more able children, you may wish to give a simple explanation of why the rule exists, but be aware that many children will not understand a reasoned explanation.
- Value any special interests and use these to 'connect' with the child.
- Don't insist on the child making eye contact.
- Encourage friendships with peers by modelling appropriate interactions and teaching the rules of engagement (for example, listening to what the other person is saying). However, also allow the child to have some time to themselves and a 'safe' area to retreat to if needed.
- To begin with, limit the number of children who play alongside the child with autism. Watch out for children who may try to annoy them to get a reaction.
- Address any sensory processing difficulties to minimise discomfort to the child.
- Remember that the purpose of adult support is to develop the child's independence, not to do everything for them.
- Match your practice to the needs of the child, rather than expecting them to fit in with the way you have always done things.

Communication, language and literacy

- Keep language simple and positive and say what it is you want the child to do. Avoid using idioms, sarcasm, jokes or any other non-literal language. Where such language appears in stories, for example, make sure that you explain to the child what it means.
- Use visual support materials such as symbols, photographs and objects of reference to support the child's understanding.
- Introduce stories and songs in a smaller group before expecting the child to take part in the whole group.
- Respond to, celebrate and praise all attempts at communication, not just speech. Remember that praise and reward needs to be meaningful to the individual child.
- Be aware that children may not understand everything they say. For example, the child with autism may know the words to a song by heart, but have no understanding of them, or even that they carry meaning.
- Say the child's name before speaking to them, to make sure that you have their attention.
- Give instructions one at a time and break longer instructions down into smaller steps.
- Set up situations that will encourage the child to communicate, for example, offering a choice of two objects that are just out of reach.

- Decide on some important words or the core vocabulary to be taught in key areas and make use of any special interests to extend vocabulary.
- Teach the child the rules of communication, such as taking turns in conversation, responding to what has been said.
- If a speech and language therapist is working with a child, seek advice from them on appropriate strategies to use with the child. Make sure that strategies are shared with parents and other caregivers.

Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy

- Encourage the child to count real objects rather than simply reciting numbers. Many children with autism learn to say number names in order, but do not know how to count.
- If the child has a particular interest in numbers, make sure that you take advantage of this and plan activities that allow the child to apply their knowledge of numbers to real-life situations.
- Teach the language of mathematics, such as words for ordering, sorting, comparing; words related to shape, size, weight and so on.
- Create opportunities for children to use their number language in meaningful contexts, such as working out how many cups are needed for snack time.
- Plan activities that relate to the child's special interests. For example, can the child work out the shortest route across the setting for trains to travel? How many different ways can they lay the train track?

Knowledge and understanding of the world

- Use a visual timetable to help a child understand the passing of time and the concepts of past and future.
- Focus on concrete ideas, supported by visual materials and real objects.
- The child's special interests might be a good way of teaching more complex, abstract ideas, such as why dinosaurs are no longer alive.
- You will need to explain the reasons why people behave as they do, at a very basic level and embedded in real-life concrete situations as they occur (for example, why a particular child is crying). The child with autism is unlikely to be able to see things from other points of view.
- Encourage the child to investigate new objects and materials, preparing the child for what is coming and introducing these gradually.

Physical development

- Teach specific skills such as throwing and catching a ball and pedalling a bike, and help the child to appreciate that such activities are fun.
- Some children may be fearful of certain physical activities, and will need lots of encouragement to try them. Others may appear fearless, and will need careful supervision to ensure that they do not put themselves or others in danger.
- Some children will need help to develop their bodily awareness and where their bodies are in space, to avoid bumping into objects or other people.
- Fine motor skills such as fastening buttons or holding a pen may need to be explicitly taught.
- Be aware that physical activities tend to be unpredictable, and that children may become very excited and noisy when playing outdoors or in a large hall. This environment may be overwhelming for a child with autism, and it is important that they are able to withdraw if needed.

Creative development

- Encourage the child to experience different materials and textures. Where the child is reluctant to try 'messy' activities, try to link these to any special interests, for example making a dinosaur swamp from coloured water and cornflour.
- Model imaginative and role-play and link this to the child's interests, for example pretending to be a train driver.
- Show the child that objects can be used to represent other things, for example that a pan full of building bricks can represent dinner.
- Be aware of the volume during music activities, as the child can easily become overwhelmed if it is too loud.
- Limit the choice of materials during activities such as collage because if the child has too many things to choose from they may not be able to choose at all.
- For children who really cannot tolerate anything even slightly messy, remember that cameras and computers can be used to create art works.

By developing plans for individual children, based upon their interests and covering each area of Learning and Development, you can effectively support their progress in your setting. You will find the 'Development matters' columns in the *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage* useful for identifying the developing knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes that children will need to achieve the early learning goals, but be aware that the age bands are based on typically developing children, and therefore may not apply to children with autism in certain areas. The Early Support material in the EYFS will also be helpful in thinking about how to adapt activities and experiences to meet individual needs.

Settings need to have a clear strategy for recording children's progress and achievements in all areas of Learning and Development, and need to review progress regularly as a team. There is no reason why children with autism cannot make good progress in an effective, high-quality early years setting. If a particular child is not making good progress, the staff team, supported by leaders and managers, will need to reflect on why this is the case, identify the barriers to progress, and plan ways around these. Autism should never be used as an excuse for underachievement



Reflecting on practice

Refer to the Reflecting on practice section on the Principles into Practice cards for Learning and Development (4.1–4.10) and the Effective practice guidance on the EYFS CD-ROM, and consider these in relation to children with autism.

How well do you as a practitioner...

- help children to develop and extend their play?
- identify what interests the child and use this as a way of engaging with them?
- strike a balance between initiating play yourself and letting the child initiate play?
- take the child's interests as a starting point for planning activities that will interest the whole group, increasing interactions between the child with autism and their peers?
- develop plans that are based upon each child's interests, and which cover all areas of Learning and Development?
- broaden children's interests by extending them into related areas?
- identify children's schemas and use these to inform your planning?
- know how to support children's learning in each of the six areas of Learning and Development?
- know how the learning and development of children with autism might vary from that of typically developing children?
- assess, record and analyse children's progress and achievements across all areas of Learning and Development?
- plan ways around any barriers to learning and development?

How well do you as a SENCO...

- support practitioners in developing child plans that are based upon children's interests and which cover all areas of Learning and Development?
- support practitioners in breaking down learning steps into smaller, achievable ones?
- support practitioners in recording and analysing the progress and achievement of children with autism?

How well do you as a leader or manager...

- understand the learning needs of children with autism, enabling you to evaluate the effectiveness of provision in your setting?
- ensure that all staff are committed to meeting the learning and development needs of children with autism, and that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to do so?
- analyse children's progress and achievements, share this analysis with all practitioners, implement reviews of practice, and support improvements?

Appendix: Case studies

Ben

Name: Ben

Age: 2

Family details: lives with Mum, Jennifer

Early Years setting: childminder Lisa looks after Ben in her home full-time while his Mum works

Ben's childminder, Lisa, says:

The first thing I thought when I met Ben was, 'Oh, goodness, this little boy is going to be a handful!' He was into everything in the playroom. If my other children were in his way, he just pushed them away. Since then, I've got to know Ben better and I understand why he behaves this way. I have one young boy of my own, and care for Ben and a slightly older boy, Jacob. I plan lots of activities for the boys, but it takes extra thinking to work out how to involve Ben.

One of the first things I learned about Ben was, don't try to vacuum the carpet when he's in the room! My son knocked over a plant and I quickly tried to clean up the mess – and the next thing I knew, Ben was on the floor, screaming with his hands over his ears. It was so obvious that the sound really distressed him. Since then I've noticed that any sort of loud noise startles him, even though he often makes loud noises himself.

This is how I answered an observation questionnaire about Ben:

Does the child respond when you call their name?

He definitely knows his name.

Does the child respond when you point to a toy?

Most of the time, if he's interested in the toy. He will just grab it if he wants it though.

How does the child indicate what they need?

Usually he just goes to get it, without asking – even if another child is holding it!

Does the child ask verbally?

Not really, he only has a few words. He said 'bi' for a biscuit the other day though.

Does the child point or vocalise?

I don't think I've ever seen him point at something he wants. He does make sounds.

Does the child point to get your attention or use eye contact?

No, he will actually take your hand and lead you to what he wants you to see. He makes eye contact now and then, but not as much as other children.

Does the child show or share things with others?

He kept giving Jacob cars the other day until there was a great pile of them on the table. He didn't say anything to him, but I really think what Ben wanted was to play with Jacob.

Does the child join in with others' activities?

He watches sometimes but doesn't join in.

Does the child show any interest in what you are doing?

Yes, sometimes, but you have to work hard to get his attention.

Ben's Mum and I agree that he's definitely behind in his speech. He's an only child so she wasn't sure at first. Now she has watched him with my son Callum, who is five months younger, and she can see that he's using even less speech than Callum does. Also, Callum tags around after Jacob and tries to do everything he does. Ben watches them but doesn't join in, or he takes toys from them and runs away. I think he wants to play, but doesn't know how. We've agreed to keep an eye on things for just a bit longer.

I always spend time chatting with Ben's Mum, Jennifer, when she comes to pick him up, and she has been very helpful. She says Ben never made baby noises when he was little, just a lot of grunts and shrieks. On the other hand, he crawled, walked and learned how to climb things faster than any baby she's ever seen. Jennifer says his paediatrician thinks he might have ADHD, but we are both more worried about the way he plays with other children, and that he isn't really talking yet.

Jennifer has asked if I will write a letter about Ben's speech and play needs, to take to his paediatrician. The last time he had a well-baby visit, she talked to the doctor about her concerns, and the doctor said he might grow out of it. He hasn't, and she wants to show that she isn't the only one who's concerned. In the meantime, we're both trying to find out about how to help Ben play with the other boys.

Yesterday, I watched Ben really carefully and saw that he was looking at Callum out of the corner of his eye. Callum was playing with some big cardboard blocks. I took four of them over to Ben. He stacked them up – and watched Callum even closer. They weren't quite playing together, but it's a start, and Ben concentrated on this for quite a while.

I decided to see whether I could teach Ben to point at something, using Callum and Jacob as my helpers. I handed the big bear toy to Callum and got the baby bear toy to say to Jacob, 'Who's got the big bear?' He pointed to Callum, and Callum made the bear growl – this always cracks Ben up. Then he passed the bear to Ben, and we kept playing, taking turns. I helped Ben to point when it was his turn. He isn't doing it on his own but it might help him learn, because he definitely looks and laughs.

Ben can be very sweet. He loves to give the other boys hugs (even if he almost knocks them over when he does it). I have to work on making sure he isn't too physical with them, and that he is actually taking part in play, not annoying them. Ben, Jacob and Callum make a good team. Jacob can be quite patient with both of the younger lads, and Ben is happy to follow his lead a lot of the time.

Knowing that Ben reacts badly to loud noises has made me change some of the activities we do. I used to try loud songs and clapping games, now we have more quiet ones, and even with the others we start out quieter. And I tell Ben if we're going somewhere that there are likely to be loud noises, so he knows what to expect.

As it gets colder I had been having a hard time getting Ben to get ready to go outside, and an even harder time getting him to put away his coat, hat, gloves and boots when he came in. I took photos of these things, put them on my computer, printed them out and laminated them. Then I put Velcro® strips on the back of each and a piece of the same stuff on the wall by the pegs and the box where boots go. Now I 'trade' a picture for each item, and we have made a game out of putting things on and putting them away.

Ben keeps his cars in a shoe box and loves to arrange them. I've joined in his games by trying some new 'arrangement' – all the red cars in a row, all the blue cars in a row, that sort of thing. Ben can be quite single-minded about how he wants to play but he can be convinced that my games are fun, too. When it works, it's nice to feel like I am sharing something he enjoys with him.

Ben loves to play with cars so when I saw a play garage at the toy library the other day, I brought it home to see if I could use it to get Ben and Jacob to play together. I asked Jacob to be 'in charge' of Ben, telling him where to put the cars, telling him to make them go up in the lift and when to open the door so they would roll down the exit. They had a great time. Then I made Ben the 'boss'. He doesn't have the words, but with support he made an attempt at a few and took Jacob's hand to show him what he wanted him to do. I stayed there to help Jacob play his part in the game.

I wrote some plans for the kind of activities I will be doing with Ben:

Personal, social and emotional development

I am going to involve Ben in turn-taking games involving cars and animals. Inviting Jacob to play race track could be the focus.

Communication, language and literacy

Ben likes animals and finds animal sounds very funny. We're going to use this in hide and seek, naming, matching, and reaction games. We'll use objects of reference to help him with 'first this/then that' tasks.

Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy

We'll work on hand-eye coordination using car driving and learn to time car races, like they do on *Top Gear*.

Knowledge and understanding of the world

We are going to choose pictures of things to see on a journey and will talk about them. I want to extend his car interest to other modes of transport.

Physical development

I'm going to use physical activity to channel his energy. Obstacle course or circuit course could help teach sequencing activities.

Creative development

We are going to develop a collection of cars of different attributes and make garages for cars. I've been designing a race track for him – making scenery as well as a route. We are going to make a pretend car and go on a car journey.

I had to think fast yesterday, as the evening before my son broke the ladder off the big fire engine that is one of Ben's favourite toys. It's often the first thing Ben looks for when he arrives in the morning. I called his Mum and we decided to tell him the fire engine was 'in the repair shop' and would come back to my house when it's fixed. It seems to have worked. We reminded him again when he arrived, and there was no big scene about the missing toy.

Ravi

Name: Ravi

Age: 4

Family details: parents Raj and Kajal, younger brother Suresh, and another sibling coming soon

Early Years setting: private nursery, part-time

Ravi's key worker, Shani says:

Ravi is only four, but sometimes you would think he's 40, the way he says things with this serious look. The other children are just starting to learn their numbers, but Ravi's father tells me Ravi likes to do maths problems on a calculator just to see if he can guess the right answer. He already knows how to read a little.

When he first started at the nursery he cried if dirt got on his clothes or shoes, and held back from playing with other boys. When he finally started to mix in, he got upset if children broke the rules of games.

I mentioned that Ravi hates to get dirty. This is true in nursery, too. We have sand and water tables, and most of the children love playing with them. Not Ravi, he hates the way the sand feels and he isn't much happier about water. He is also very particular about his clothes. He wears loose trousers or tracksuit bottoms and loose tops instead of jeans and T-shirts. If you put Ravi in something tight or scratchy, he will squirm and moan all day.

This is how I answered an observation questionnaire about Ravi:

Does the child respond when you call their name?

Yes.

Does the child respond when you point to a toy?

Yes.

How does the child indicate what they need?

He always tells me or another member of staff if he needs anything.

Does the child ask verbally?

Yes, and he is quite polite as well! I find that very refreshing, even though sometimes it sounds funny coming from such a young lad.

Does the child point or vocalise?

Yes, both.

Does the child point to call your attention or use eye contact?

He points and uses eye contact. I have noticed that sometimes he uses a little too much eye contact, like he's staring at you.

Does the child show or share things with others?

He shows things to staff all the time, but not so much to other children.

Does the child share in the activities of others?

I would have to say that sharing is not one of his strong points. Although he is a very well-behaved little boy, he doesn't like to swap drinks at snack time or share a favourite toy.

Does the child show any interest in what you are doing?

Quite often, I would say he is more likely to talk to adults than to other children.

Ravi certainly seems to be quite ahead of many of our children. I am sure he will do very well in primary school. I am worried that he has trouble playing with other children, though, and that he talks more like a grown-up than a little boy. You know how unkind some children can be... he might be bullied in the future, and that would be a shame. His parents have asked whether he could be assessed – they think it might be a form of autism, as he has a cousin who is autistic. My manager said she would contact the Early Years team at the local authority.

Raj finds it puzzling that Ravi is so advanced at maths and reading for his age, but is still regularly wetting the bed. I think he's also behind most other boys his age when it comes to play skills, although he does try very hard most of the time.

This week we've had two visitors from the local authority come to see Ravi. I was surprised that one was a speech and language therapist, as Ravi has very good speech. She said she wanted to have a look at how he communicates – and after a little explanation, I understood what she meant. Ravi speaks well, but he does 'talk at' people at times, and he struggles to have conversations with children. The other was an educational psychologist, who observed him in the playroom, at dinner and outdoors. This is all part of trying to see whether Ravi has Asperger syndrome.

Ravi learns games and songs very quickly – once he knows the rules or has heard the words, he's away. It's harder if a game includes more than two or three children, though, or if the children want to play differently than they were told to. Also, every now and then he has a surprisingly hard time learning something, which makes him quite upset. He still hasn't quite got tying his shoelaces, for example. I tried to teach him and had to give up. It was the first time I'd seen him have a tantrum.

It's funny, I've never really talked to Ravi about the other lads. I made some time to do that today and it was a real eye-opener. I asked who his best friend is, and he said it was Ajay – the only boy in the group who is actually a bit unkind to him at times. I asked Ravi's father if the boys are friendly outside of school, and he said they weren't, but that Ajay does live in their street. I think Ravi and I need to have a chat about what a 'friend' is, and what you might do with one.

Raj, Ravi's Dad, has been to see me with some ideas he's picked up from reading about Asperger syndrome, a form of autism. I have to admit, the things he said about it sound a lot like Ravi! He said it might be easier for Ravi to learn to play with just one other child, instead of trying to mix with the whole group. I've decided to try a board game that I think he will like, and pair him with Jason, who is easy-going – let's see how it goes.

I've been working on helping Ravi get used to different textures so that things like sand and water don't bother him so much. It wouldn't be smart – or kind – to try to force him to get his hands messy. It's easier for him to handle if he feels like he's in control, and if it's part of doing something fun. We have tried finger painting and sand painting, for example.

Ravi listens well, and if he needs to be reminded about something I write it out in words so he has a written timetable. He is very proud that he can read, and if I accidentally use a word he doesn't know he will look it up. Of course, our days at nursery are very predictable... when Ravi gets older and there are more changes in his daily schedule, I imagine a planner with everything written in would be good, like the one I use myself.

Since I know Ravi likes to do maths problems on his Dad's calculator at home, I thought he might enjoy having a calculator here, too. I also wanted his play to involve the other children. I got an idea from a wall chart that showed how tall a fire truck was, comparing it to three firefighters standing on each other's shoulders. We played for nearly 45 minutes, using a measuring tape to measure the children and then adding up all the heights.

Ravi knows all the football rules and would shout if one of the boys picked up the ball and ran with it. He told Mrs Beecher that he wanted to give George a red card for saying a naughty word. George thought that was hilarious, and that made Ravi even madder. I decided to introduce a structured game, with a little help from a football-mad colleague who works with another class. He showed me simple passing and shooting exercise for pairs. I stayed with Ravi and George to provide support and make sure Ravi

didn't dominate too much. I think if we keep repeating this, he can build some teamwork skills. He definitely enjoyed it.

I wrote some plans for the kind of activities I will be doing with Ravi:

Personal, social and emotional development

Find ways to share his interests with others, maybe football card trading?

Communication, language and literacy

Ravi has excellent speech but needs to work on real communication. Can work with speech and language therapist to help him to read non-verbal signals that someone is bored or interested.

Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy

Work on time concepts using a stopwatch to time 'football trials' game, learning to tell time. Needs to work on adding and subtracting as it relates to time to help him prepare for events.

Knowledge and understanding of the world

Gain a deeper understanding of minibeasts and small animals and their habitats through observation.

Physical development

Use his interest in football in lots of ways. This can include explaining to him that tackling means getting muddy, and that footballers exercise to get fit. Work on coordinating football skills so he can keep up with the other boys, and on cooperative play in the playground.

Creative development

Continue working on handling different textures, could make this more interesting by tying it to minibeasts, football or mathematics somehow.

Ravi has a visit to the Reception class next week. I called the teacher and she helped me make a written schedule for him that says when he will arrive, how long he will stay, and what will happen while he's there. It's for a half-day so he will be trying some of their activities. I left blank spots for his Dad to add what time he needs to get in the car to go, and what they will do after he picks Ravi up. This should take some of the stress out of the visit.

Kyle

Name: Kyle

Age: 3

Family details: Mum, Stacey, and Dad, George, are separated. Kyle lives with Mum. One older sister, Lucy, 7.

Early Years setting: Local authority children's centre, full-time

Kyle's key worker, Amanda, says:

Kyle's Mum and Dad had just separated when I started working with him. Stacey says Kyle's behaviour had been more difficult because of the changes, and now that things are calming down I can see that she's right. He isn't usually agitated, quite the opposite really. I worked with a similar child before at a nursery right after I left school, so that helped me know how to work with Kyle to a certain extent. Stacey has been brilliant about trying to help me learn how to work with him, and we have even talked about me doing a short course.

I had never heard of sensory problems before. It's about children being over- or under-sensitive to things like sounds or what they feel. Now that I have been learning about them from Stacey it really makes me think about another little boy I used to work with. One worrying thing is that Kyle doesn't seem to notice when he bumps into things. I have to keep an eye on him all the time. He has a scar on his arm where he burned it by pulling a full kettle off the kitchen worktop. It's a wonder that it wasn't worse. His Mum was next to him at the time, luckily. She said he showed no sign of pain or distress, until they got to A&E and strange people started doing things to his arm.

This is how I answered an observation questionnaire about Kyle:

Does the child respond when you call their name?

If you say his name first he will give you some attention.

Does the child respond when you point to a toy?

Yes, if you make it part of a game.

How does the child indicate what they need?

He'll try to take you to it if he wants it badly enough. I've been working on getting Kyle to make choices – such as asking whether he wants apple juice or blackcurrant juice. If I make a big thing out of it and get his attention, he will point – as long as he can't reach it.

Does the child ask verbally?

He can ask for some things but you have to remind him to use his words.

Does the child point or vocalise?

He points sometimes, and he will use words occasionally.

Does the child point to call your attention or use eye contact?

He uses eye contact or points sometimes, but only if he is very interested.

Does the child show or share things with others?

If he's very excited about something he will, but that is rare for Kyle. He is quiet-natured, and prefers to keep himself to himself.

Does the child share in the activities of others?

Yes, he loves chasing and hiding games, but he will get over-excited if I'm not careful.

Does the child show any interest in what you are doing?

Yes, and he is even more interested in anything his sister does. He would follow her all day if allowed. He mostly watches her play though, instead of joining in.

I know that Kyle had a lot of developmental issues. It was only a few months ago, not long after I started, that he was diagnosed with autism. Stacey said the process was very difficult for her and her ex-partner, George. I think it may have been something they argued about. She said the first clue was that he just didn't respond to being made a fuss of and talked to like most babies. He laughed and smiled sometimes, and didn't mind a cuddle, but he wasn't very interested in people. At first they thought he might be deaf. I imagine that's what a lot of parents of children with autism think at first.

Stacey says Kyle was really funny about crawling. He wouldn't use his legs – at first, he pulled himself around by his arms. The day after he worked out how to get up on his hands and knees, he stood and then walked almost straight away.

He started making sounds at the usual time, but his first word wasn't 'Mama', it was 'Bob' for his favourite character on telly! That reminds me of something else Kyle does that makes us all wonder. The only words he uses to talk are short words, like 'Mama', 'Dada', 'Lulu' (that's Lucy, who thinks it's not a funny nickname at all), 'More' and, most importantly, 'No'. But he knows all the words to the 'Bob the Builder' song, and goes around saying the words from the show at odd times.

Stacey was home early today and we had a chance to chat. I asked how she'd found out that Kyle had autism. She said he had been referred to a child development team by his paediatrician. They had looked at a lot of things – hearing, eyesight, whether he was on track physically – as well as development. The child psychologist on the team screened him for autism, and he met the criteria. The process took quite a while. The team also noticed that Kyle has some difficulties with what they described as 'activities that involve a sequence of steps' and the occupational therapist will be looking at this in more detail.

Making choices seems to really frustrate Kyle but Stacey says it's very important. Mostly he will happily take whatever you give him. I've been trying with the modelling clay, which is something he likes, to let him have just one tool at a time. That way he has to choose something. Dinner time is also a good time for giving choices. If you let Kyle choose all the time, it would be his favourite DVD every time, but the more he gets used to choosing, the more we know what he really wants.

Stacey told me Kyle's sister Lucy was at home today because of a teacher-training day. She was getting really irritated with Kyle because he kept following her everywhere. Stacey asked Lucy to try something with her. She said, 'It's time to chase Lucy!' and they both did. Then she said, 'Now it's time for Lucy to go bye-bye', and Lucy went into the next room. When Kyle tried to follow Stacey stopped him and said, 'Bye-bye Lucy' and waved. Eventually he did it too, and Kyle and Stacey started playing together. It took a lot of repetition, and Lucy's help.

Kyle's biggest difficulty with other children is that he has a limited idea of how to play. If I can find a 'car' angle he will try anything for a while, though he can be too rough sometimes. He needs an adult's help to stretch his interests beyond his special topic, and other children may need an adult who can help them get interested in what Kyle thinks is fun, too.

I've had some advice about working with Kyle on his coordination difficulties to help him be more aware of where his body is in space. We got some stretchy bands from a catalogue and he can use them to pull with one hand, the other hand, and both hands. We make a 'How strong is Kyle?' game out of it. I've even involved his sister, which is great.

Kyle is too young to use a timetable, but I do use visual supports for other things. He doesn't have a lot of speech, but he is slowly adding more words to his vocabulary. I've made a card game using pictures from his favourite book. There's a picture and a word on each card. Even though we must have played it a dozen times by now, Kyle is still excited when he 'wins' the picture by saying the word.

I am so glad that Kyle likes 'Bob the Builder' because it opens up all sorts of possibilities for teaching him! There's a whole series of books based on the character that I can use to teach names of objects, colours,

and concepts like up/down and over/under. It's also a show that lends itself to pretend play, like building things together with blocks or turning the kitchen table into a hut with blankets.

It can be hard for Kyle and Lucy to play together, because of their age difference and Kyle's difficulties. Still, he is in many ways a typical little brother, interested in what Lucy is doing and trying to tag along after her. I've used this to encourage him to play longer with her. Hide and seek is a game that will hold his attention for a long while, and Lucy quite enjoys it too, most of the time. He will get overwhelmed if it gets too frantic though, so I whisper my clues some of the times and we sneak around instead of dashing if he seems to be tiring.

I wrote some plans for the kind of activities I will be doing with Kyle:

Personal, social and emotional development

Kyle needs to work on taking turns and feeling connected to others at home and when playing with others.

Communication, language and literacy

We need to build Kyle's vocabulary up – can use picture books, cards and games to encourage new naming words, then songs, games and modelling speech to add adjectives and nouns.

Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy

He can sort and match cars, broaden this out to other objects. Use songs and board games for learning to count.

Knowledge and understanding of the world

Kyle learns best by doing, so I come up with activities that walk him through doing tasks in order (cooking, dressing/undressing and so on) I encourage him to explore new environments.

Physical development

Kyle has lots of energy and likes swimming and chasing games. Maybe swimming lessons or play sessions at the children's centre or park would be good.

Creative development

His interest in 'Bob the Builder' is useful for getting Kyle to try new things like colouring or pretend play.

Kyle's Mum Stacey and I have been using pictures of her and his Dad to solve a problem that happens when he expects her to arrive at the end of the day, but his father appears instead to take him for the weekend. As you might imagine, it made his Dad feel terrible if Kyle didn't seem at all happy to see him when he arrived! I took a photo of Stacey, and another of George with his car. Every day I put the correct photo on the fridge, and I mention who is coming to Kyle as it gets closer to 5:30. Often he checks the photo several times – and now he is happy, not surprised, no matter which parent

Sally

Name: Sally

Age: 5

Family details: parents Ian and Sharon, older brother Tim

Early Years setting: Reception class at primary school with teaching assistant

Sally's teaching assistant, Gemma, says:

I have been Sally's teaching assistant for a few months now. At first, I didn't think we could manage a child who had learning difficulties and autism as well. She does have her off days, of course, and she is definitely unique, but all of us are fascinated by how she learns. Every new thing she learns is a cause for celebration.

Sally would be happy to just watch her fingers move for hours. I let her do a bit of that because she enjoys it, but she also likes matching games, our special swing in the outdoor play area, and playing on the tumbling mats.

I have become a proper detective when it comes to sensory issues. They are the secret behind some of Sally's behaviours, but they aren't always easy to find out about. When she first started at school she was very unsettled whenever we went into the soft playroom, where the tumbling mats are. I couldn't work out whether it was the activity or something else, so I asked Sally's Mum. She looked around, and then looked up and said 'Aha!' Sally's mum had already found out, when visiting a leisure centre, that fluorescent lights make Sally frantic. She looked it up on the internet and found out that some people with autism can see them flickering, when we can't.

This is how I answered an observation questionnaire about Sally:

Does the child respond when you call their name?

Not very often.

Does the child respond when you point to a toy?

No, you need to really work hard to engage Sally. Often I need to put the toy in her hands and help her to start playing. Now that she knows me, this doesn't bother her very much.

How does the child indicate what they need?

We still have to guess about lots of things by watching her behaviour, but for the last year we have been teaching her to use a picture system for communication. She still needs to be reminded, but she can use her picture cards to get food or a drink. She is very motivated by her favourite foods!

Does the child ask verbally?

No, Sally is non-verbal.

Does the child point or vocalise?

She doesn't point. She does make some sounds but not words. She'll let you know if she is upset, and she has some happy sounds too.

Does the child point to call your attention or use eye contact?

I sometimes get a bit of eye contact from Sally when we are playing together, but she wouldn't do it deliberately. She doesn't point.

Does the child show or share things with others?

The first time we saw her do anything like this was with the picture cards. It still isn't easy for her, and it's only to get what she wants.

Does the child share in the activities of others?

Not in the usual way. She will play near other children but doesn't usually approach them. I can get her to play with me for a few minutes at a time, with stacking blocks or doing simple puzzles.

Does the child show any interest in what you are doing?

Sometimes – she is very interested in my keys and handbag! I have brought in an old handbag and put a set of plastic keys and other things in it. If I carry this with me (instead of my own) sometimes Sally will come up and tug at it, then pay attention to what is inside.

When we first met Sally's Mum and Dad, they told us all about what she was like as a baby and a toddler. They knew from very early on that she was different from their son, who is two years older. She wouldn't be held or cuddled, she didn't look at her Mum, and she had difficulties with feeding. She wasn't diagnosed with autism until she was three years old, but they knew she was not developing on schedule, and their paediatrician had recognised the early signs of autism and referred her to the local child development centre.

I have done some reading on autism now, and it says there is usually an uneven profile of development. This means she might be developing as expected in some areas, but might be a bit behind expected development in others. This isn't really true for Sally, maybe because she also has learning difficulties. She is behind her age group in just about everything.

The local authority autism specialist came in to show us, and Sally's Mum, how to help Sally communicate with symbols. Teaching her was very time-consuming and at times frustrating but one day she just sort of 'got it'. We used it only for food at first, but now we are slowly trying it for different things. Our next goal is to help Sally learn to ask for the toilet. This will be crucial for her independence when she moves on next year. We can read the physical signals and help her stay clean and dry, but we want her to tell us with a symbol card. I'm going to work with a learning disability nurse and her Mum on this.

It isn't easy knowing what Sally would prefer. I've learned that giving her a simple choice is best – this or this? Too many choices can confuse her.

Sally finds pretend play very difficult. This is normal for children with autism. The other children like to use the play kitchen, and because she is interested in food I think she might be able to join in eventually. For now, we are doing simple things together. We have tried pretending to stir something with a spoon and bowl, and 'baking' modelling clay 'cookies'. I keep these activities short but repeat them often.

Sally has a hard time making connections with other children, and they aren't sure what to make of her either. I try to act as a 'social interpreter', helping her find a role in their games and activities, even if it's a small one. She can only tolerate a little time in a group of children before she needs to have some time alone though.

Since fluorescent lights bother Sally we asked the premises manager at the leisure centre to see what they could do. It turns out there is a way to reduce the flicker with a bit of new kit, and newer bulbs. That's better, but we still limit our stay. On bright days we ask if they can turn them off and open the blinds all the way. That's much better for everyone.

Every year the children in Reception have a 'Spring Fling'. There are games, songs, and a costume parade, and parents can visit. We wanted Sally to join in so we showed her pictures from last year, and asked her to choose between a ladybird and a robin costume. She chose the robin, and we practised 'costume parade' many times. On the day Sally was there for two parts of the event, the parade (which she did very well in) and a race. Sally also has a visual timetable on the wall for the day and week, using symbols and words for all her activities, like home, minibus, and leisure centre. When it changes, we can show her so she knows what to expect.

At first we had trouble finding suitable toys for Sally, as she is not at the same developmental level as other children in the group. We've stocked up on stackable blocks and simple puzzles, now the challenge is finding ways to involve other children in Sally's play. She tends to repeat the same activities

with them over and over, and doesn't bring in pretend play elements that the others would enjoy more. It helps if I stay with her and another child, to bring them into Sally's way of playing and also to help Sally stretch towards more complex play.

Sally is still at the stage of playing alongside other children instead of actually with them. She is more interested in the toys than the children, to be honest. That's why sometimes when I see that she is playing near the others, I join in and model participating in their play in some small way, then encourage Sally to try too. The other day, she was near the play kitchen when some children were 'cooking'. I asked Sally if we should put something in the pot, too. When we approached the group with a plastic potato, I said, 'Sally wants to put a potato in your soup! Can she do that?' And since it fitted with their game, they said yes – and thanked her for 'helping'. Just a small thing, but it's something to build on.

I wrote some plans for the kind of activities I will be doing with Sally:

Personal, social and emotional development

The goal is connecting with others in fun ways – learning to join in activities, to ask others to join her. We can use pictures to show what should happen in advance, and songs like 'Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush' that sequence activities for a group. It would be good for Sally to help with cooking, laundry and gardening at home.

Communication, language and literacy

We need to keep our language simple in requests, and help her learn to use symbols effectively to make her own requests. Use visual photographs on her timetable to help her predict what's next. Learning new songs – she does like music.

Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy

Working on basic concepts – sorting and matching.

Knowledge and understanding of the world

I'll use her interest in handbags to match contents to purpose, for example, keys for doors and lipstick for lips. We'll play counting and matching games, matching keys and objects to holes. We'll use a visual timetable to prepare for activities and get her excited about what comes next.

Physical development

Build on her enjoyment of swinging and spinning by trying new equipment and games, dancing to music. See whether physical activity before a task helps her concentrate.

Creative development

We'll use Sally's visual interest and music to grab her interest and extend her attention. We'll do the same with paints and crayons.

We've been using a visual timetable every day with Sally. At first we tried using symbols, but photos work much better for her. We have a photo of circle time, the pretend play area, the playground and so on.

We keep Sally on a very stable schedule, but of course sometimes due to staff illness or other issues there are changes. When that happens, we point it out first thing when we go over Sally's schedule with her. This is something we start every day with, and repeat as needed.

Audience: Early years practitioners, leaders and managers of early years settings, headteachers and local authority advisory teams.

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