

TACKLING THE AUTISM ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT CRISIS

Guide for education colleagues

What is the problem?

- The current system for diagnosing and supporting autistic children and young people (CYP) is under severe strain, leaving many pupils without timely access to the help they need.
- Inequities in identification persist, with girls, children from ethnic minority backgrounds and those from lower income families disproportionately overlooked.
- Relying on diagnoses to trigger support, often leads to missed chances to support unmet needs early and effectively.

What can we do in our school?

- Don't wait for a diagnosis, adopt a **needs-led approach**.
- **Integrate Early Years Foundation Stage Profile** data into data systems, including at secondary level, as it is highly predictive of autism diagnoses.
- **Be a neurodiversity friendly school** e.g., reduce sensory triggers such as bright lights, loud noise and visual clutter; have calm, consistent routines; give short clear instructions in a calm tone backed up by visual prompts; explain and prepare for transitions and changes; celebrate neurodiversity. Use existing resources e.g., <https://www.inclusioned.edu.au/> or <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources>
- **Support partnerships between education, health, social care and parents**, working together to share observations and deliver in-school assessments where possible.
- **Seek out continuing professional development (CPD)** to improve understanding of autism especially in overlooked groups, e.g., "masked" autism in girls may result in anxiety, friendship difficulties or absence from school despite academic success. Check the info in this report or with the National Autistic Society for pointers.

Evidence-based insights

3 in 4 parents stated their autistic child's school did not fully meet their needs and only **26%** of autistic children feel happy at school.

Pupils who failed to reach a good level of development in the EYFSP were **4.8** times more likely to have an autism diagnosis than those who did.

Examples of good practice that you may wish to explore:

Using education data to identify autistic CYP

The EYFSP can serve as a powerful early indicator of unmet needs, by identifying children at risk through classroom observations, thereby enabling earlier support.

SUCCESS - Supporting Understanding of Children's Communication, Emotional and Social Skills

The *SUCCESS* project deployed multi-disciplinary teams to conduct assessments in schools to identify pupils who may need additional support, thus reducing barriers and missed appointments.

Tailored approaches to places

Programmes such as the *Cambridgeshire Girls Pilot* and *Nottinghamshire Early Identification of Autism* were adapted by place, offering guidance and methodologies to help local leaders create tailored programmes with and for their communities.

Psychoeducation for autistic CYP

A programme designed to help autistic CYP build on their strengths by supporting advocacy, improving professional practice, and creating inclusive environments.

Check out the useful approaches outlined in this briefing and **see what we can adapt for our school.**



Scan the QR Code for the report

Please share this guide and start a discussion in your school about how we can all play our role in building a country that works for all children and young people.

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Guide for Child Health Colleagues

The problem

- Long waits for autism assessments leads to child difficulties becoming entrenched, where initial concerns are forgotten or normalised.
- Diagnosis being prioritised over early intervention and support leads to mental health problems and school exclusions for these children, and families are left frustrated and exhausted.
- Inequities in diagnosis and lack of advocacy means girls and children from ethnic minority backgrounds are disproportionately affected.

What you can do as a child health practitioner

- **Adopt a 'needs-led' approach** by supporting CYP showing signs of developmental differences – even without a diagnosis.
- **Engage in multidisciplinary CPD training** on autism, especially the different presentations in girls and ethnic minority groups.
- **Advocate for effective data sharing** using tools like NHS numbers to bridge gaps between health, education, and care services.
- **Participate in place-based solutions** by tailoring strategies to your community's cultural and social contexts.
- **Build cross-sector teams** with schools to deliver assessments on-site and co-design tailored support plans.

Evidence-based insights

There has been a **306% increase** in the number of children waiting for an autism assessment since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Autistic people have a **shorter life expectancy by up to 30 years** and **4 in 5** have co-occurring mental health conditions.

Examples of good practice that you may wish to explore:

SUCCESS Project

Multi-disciplinary teams conducted assessments in schools, reducing barriers, and missed appointments.

Tailored approaches to places

Approaches are adapted by place, offering guidance and methodologies to help local providers create tailored programmes with and for their communities (e.g., Cambridgeshire Girls Pilot, Nottinghamshire Early Identification of Autism).

Psychoeducation for autistic CYP

A programme designed to help autistic children build on their strengths by supporting advocacy, improving professional practice, and creating inclusive environments.

Oral health approaches for autistic CYP

A co-designed autism-sensitive oral health support and training package that addresses the complex challenges of tooth decay prevention and aims to reduce health inequalities through accessible, tailored interventions.

Check out the innovative approaches outlined in this briefing and **consider taking inspiration from these approaches to reflect on how you can help create positive change.**



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TACKLING THE AUTISM ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT CRISIS

Guide for local authority colleagues

The problem

- There is a crisis in the diagnosis and support of autistic children and young people (CYP), with many struggling to access the necessary diagnostic and support services.
- Systematic inequalities exist in both diagnosis and support, leaving girls, children from ethnic minority backgrounds, and those from poorer families less likely to receive help.
- The life chances for autistic CYP with unmet needs are seriously impacted – they often experience poorer educational outcomes, higher rates of school exclusion, as well as poorer overall health and reduced life expectancy.

What you can do at a local level

- Foster a **needs-led approach** where support can be accessed independently from formal diagnoses. This should be integrated into the structures of local education, health, and care settings.
- Build and support **ward-level partnerships between education, health and social care professionals** for assessing and supporting autistic CYP.
- Prioritise **early identification and intervention**, tailored to the local population. Support should be delivered at the point of need, with strategies informed by community-specific barriers and facilitators.
- Promote **data-sharing systems across local services** to support the goal of early identification and intervention.
- Provide and **extend access to mandatory continuing professional development (CPD) courses** for local health, education, and social care professionals to improve understanding and awareness of autism.

Evidence-based insights

Autistic children are **2x** as likely to be excluded from school compared to children without special educational needs (SEN).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a **306%** increase in the number of children waiting for an autism assessment.

Examples of good practice that you may wish to explore:

Early identification using existing educational data

Education data from existing cohort studies (e.g., Born in Bradford) or population-linked administrative datasets (e.g., Connected Bradford) have been used to support effective early assessment and intervention, leading to better support and provision for autistic CYP.

Assessment in schools by multi-disciplinary school assessment teams

Improving service accessibility can reduce missed appointments, lowering overall service costs. Evidence from the SUCCESS project indicates that such approaches could deliver long-term savings and reduce waiting times for autism assessment and support.

Psychoeducation for autistic CYP

Psychoeducation can help autistic CYP build on their strengths by supporting advocacy, improving professional practice, and creating inclusive environments.

Neurodiverse-friendly schools

Building an inclusive environment can better support autistic CYP and their families, leading to improved educational and social outcomes. Inclusive practices not only benefit autistic CYP, but the whole school community.

Check out the innovative approaches outlined in this briefing and **consider implementing these practices into your local area/constituency.**



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