

Autism in schools *crisis or challenge?*

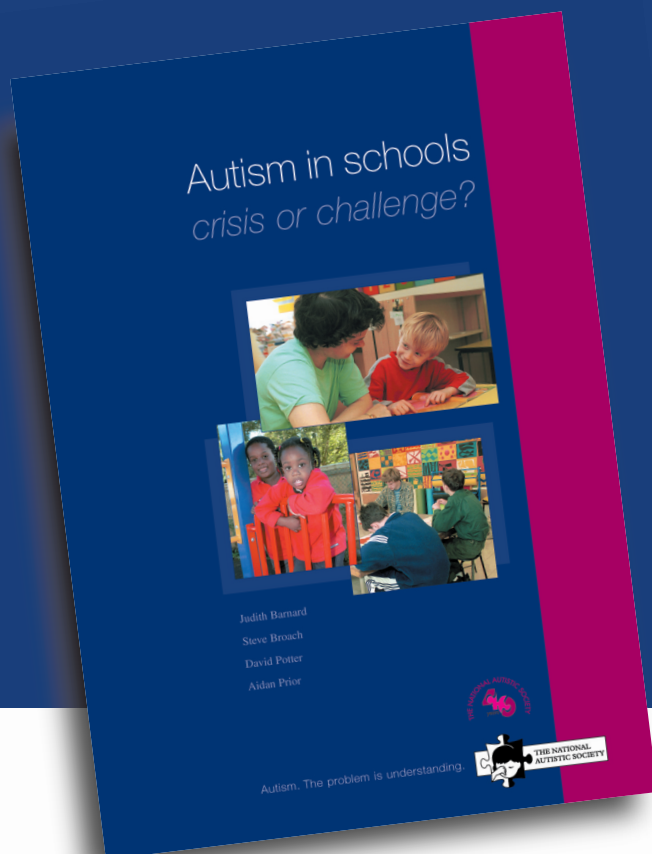
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THE NATIONAL
AUTISTIC SOCIETY



Autism. The problem is understanding.



Executive summary

The National Autistic Society has sought the views of teachers on the numbers of children with autism spectrum disorders and the provision available to them. This builds on the parental perspective which was reported in the 2000 Autism Awareness Week report. The present survey indicates that the number of children with autism spectrum disorders throughout the school environment in Britain exceeds current prevalence rates. The National Autistic Society estimates the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in the total population to be 1 in 110. The recent Medical Research Council review of autism determined a prevalence estimate of 1 in 166 in the population of children under eight (MRC, 2001). This report also gives the schools' perspective on the major barriers to education service provision for children with autism spectrum disorders, and to what extent these barriers are being surmounted.

Methodology

This report has been compiled from the findings of a survey carried out in seven local education authorities (LEAs) across England, Wales and Scotland. The Scottish findings are contained in a parallel report. A total of 373 completed surveys were analysed from the five English and Welsh LEAs, a response rate of over 30%, which is high for an unsolicited postal survey. This represents a total pupil population of 132,646.

How many children with autism spectrum disorders are there in schools?

Two-thirds (67%) of teachers felt that there were more children with an autism spectrum disorder now than five years ago. This was consistent across age groups and in all types of educational provision (special and mainstream).

Teachers in the surveyed schools told us that 1 in every 86 children they teach have special educational needs that are related to an autism spectrum disorder. The schools also reported that 1 in every 152 children in their schools had a formal diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder. This is far higher than the most recently issued official prevalence estimates, including that of the Medical Research Council.

Children where autism spectrum disorder is on statement or needs are met at school-based stage*

Statement	School-based stages	Total	Number per 10,000	Ratio
561	990	1551	117	1 in 86

*Intervention and assistance through School Action or School Action Plus (*Special Educational Needs Code of Practice 2001*)

Discrepancies between primary and secondary schools

The rate of autism spectrum disorder reported by teachers is more than three times higher in primary than in secondary schools.

Children where autism spectrum disorder is on statement or needs are met at school-based stage

	Statement	School-based stages	Total	Number per 10,000	Ratio
Primary	250	712	962	125	1 in 80
Secondary	75	124	199	37	1 in 268

This startling finding immediately poses some further questions:

- Is the higher rate of autism at primary level a result of higher levels of awareness and better diagnosis?
- Are there 'missing children' at secondary school level?
- Does this give credence to those who claim that we are witnessing an 'autism epidemic'?

Many experts believe that perceived increases in the number of people with autism are better attributed to improved diagnosis, although it remains the case that the quality of autism diagnosis and assessment is patchy and variable. If it is indeed true that diagnosis has improved in recent years, what does this mean for the children now in secondary school who remain undiagnosed or misdiagnosed? How many of the children currently being excluded from mainstream secondary schools might be found on assessment to have an autism spectrum disorder? Improving the level of autism awareness and training in secondary schools would seem to be the only way to verify whether there has been a real increase in the incidence of autism in the primary years. It will also enable young people who are currently struggling through their teenage years, undiagnosed, to access vital support.

Whatever the cause, the consequence of this finding is that secondary schools will shortly be faced with higher numbers of children with autism spectrum disorders than they have previously experienced. The strain on schools will be greater still if educational inclusion continues without additional resources and specialist support made available to enable children with autism spectrum disorders to fulfil their potential.

Special schools

One in three children in the special schools surveyed has educational needs related to autism:

Children where autism spectrum disorder is on statement or needs are met at school-based stage

	Statement	School-based stages	Total	Number per 10,000	Ratio
Special	286	241	527	3084	1 in 3
Mainstream	275	749	1024	78	1 in 128

This ratio must be disproportionate to that of other disabilities or educational needs, raising questions as to why children with autism spectrum disorders are so likely to be educated in a special setting. Does this suggest an increase in the rate of classic Kanner autism, or autism with accompanying learning difficulties? Or is it that children with autism spectrum disorders are being educated in special school settings because mainstream schools simply cannot manage their behaviour or provide an appropriate education with current levels of training and resources?

Problems with support

- 44% of schools which identified children with autism spectrum disorders say that significant numbers of them are not getting the specialist support they need.
- 55% of those responding felt that support was not forthcoming because of problems or delays with diagnosis or statementing. Around a third (30%) of responders mentioned insufficient resources, both human and financial.
- 47% of those responding would like to see training and advice provided by or through the LEA.
- 31% of schools with pupils with autism spectrum disorders have no speech and language therapy.

'Although the child has been with us for three years, we have not yet managed to get an educational psychologist to see the child, never mind make a diagnosis.' (LEA Mainstream Primary)

'Funding. Inclusion is not a cheap option but seems increasingly to be used as such. A child with autism is autistic all day, not just for 18 hours per week.' (LEA Mainstream Primary)

'No statement = no money = no support.' (LEA Mainstream Secondary)

Training

Three quarters (72%) of schools were dissatisfied with the extent of their teachers' training in autism. There is no evidence of LEAs centrally recording staff training so it is difficult to know the extent of autism specific training in schools.

In schools identified as having pupils with autism spectrum disorders, only 22% of teachers had received some autism-specific training but the majority only between one and four hours. One in five schools (21%) with pupils with autism or Asperger syndrome have no teachers with autism-specific training at all.

Is inclusion working?

Twelve per cent of responding schools felt that their answer on inclusion depended on the severity of the disability; ie inclusion worked for some, but not all, children. One-third (32%) of schools with insufficient training in autism were negative about inclusion, as opposed to only one-fifth (19%) of schools where autism training was felt to be adequate. But overall, two thirds (65%) of respondents felt that inclusion was working. There is strong support for the policy of inclusion but the need for training is a major concern in making it work in practice.

'For some people it works brilliantly but there are some for whom its an absolute disaster. I think we need more provision for movement between establishments. We also need to be aware of the needs of the vast majority of pupils in a class as well as those of the individual who may have difficulties.'
(LEA Mainstream Secondary)

Conclusion

Further research will be necessary to determine whether the large jump in numbers at primary compared with secondary level represents an underlying increase in the prevalence rate of autism spectrum disorders. If the rate of autism has not changed in recent years, the situation of the 'missing children' at secondary level demands further investigation. Whether misdiagnosed, undetected, excluded from school or educated in alternative settings, they cannot be benefiting from supported inclusion in a mainstream setting, the government's chosen policy.

Whether or not the underlying rate is increasing, there are more children with autism spectrum disorders in English and Welsh schools than ever previously reported. Resources must be found to meet the needs of these children if the policy of inclusion is to work in practice. The government must act now to fund training and employ qualified specialist practitioners to prevent the failure of the policy of educational inclusion. Continuing to place children with autism spectrum disorders in mainstream classrooms without adequate support places unfair pressure on teachers. For the child in question, it will lead to integration without social inclusion or educational progress at best, and destructive behaviour and exclusion from school in the worst cases.

Key recommendations

- The Department for Education and Skills should sponsor research to establish minimum standards for the education of children with autism spectrum disorders. Systems for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of a school's work with these children and of LEAs' planning and support should also be implemented.
- LEAs should retain special educational needs budgets to allow funding to follow children and be directed at appropriate provision for children with autism spectrum disorders.
- Government departments should collaborate to increase the recruitment and retention rate of specialist professionals such as speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and occupational therapists.
- LEAs should plan to train all teachers, assistants and specialist professionals in awareness and understanding of autism as part of the accessibility planning duty introduced by the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act*.
- The Teacher Training Agency should include modules in basic teacher training on how children with autism spectrum disorders learn.
- All schools should ensure that at least a proportion of their teaching staff have substantial training in autism, preferably at least a full day's training from an accredited training provider.
- LEAs should be required to collate and make use of data on the number of children with autism spectrum disorders, facilitating planning for future provision.



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