

# RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE



# AUTISM: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CLASS TEACHERS



**“We never really recognised just how unhappy (this) child might have been at school... We hadn’t expected to find something that would have such a deep impact.”**

## CONTENTS

|   |         |
|---|---------|
| <b>1. Introduction</b>                        | page 4  |
| <b>2. Research into Practice series</b>       | page 5  |
| <b>3. Background and Context</b>              | page 6  |
| <b>4. The Research Project</b>                | page 7  |
| <b>5. Case Studies</b>                        | page 12 |
| a) Alfred Salter Primary School               | page 12 |
| b) Ann Bernadt and Nell Gwynn Nursery Schools | page 14 |
| c) Camelot Primary Schools                    | page 16 |
| d) Charles Dickens Primary School             | page 18 |
| e) Prendergast Primary School                 | page 20 |
| f) Redriff Primary School                     | page 22 |
| g) Robinsfield George Elliot Federation       | page 24 |
| h) Southwark Park Primary School              | page 26 |
| i) Surrey Square Primary School               | page 28 |
| <b>6. Common Themes and Top Tips</b>          | page 30 |
| <b>7. Implementation</b>                      | page 44 |
| <b>8. Appendices and references</b>           | page 48 |

# 1. INTRODUCTION

**In 2018-19, a group of nine mainstream nursery and primary schools came together to explore ways to improve the wellbeing and learning for pupils with autism. They wanted to:**

- design evidence-informed changes to their practice
- trial the changes
- measure the impact
- share the finding within and beyond their own contexts

“When one thinks of research, university academic researchers comes to mind, however, this research was carried out by teachers actively working with the pupils who were the focus of the study. In essence, this project has shifted the perception of what research is and who can be responsible for gathering and synthesising the data to find solutions and answers. In this lesson, we have learnt that we do not have to rely solely on theory based research carried out at university (although thoroughly researched educational theory is both useful and quality assured) and that research carried out in schools based on real life situations is just as important in trying to find solutions to overcoming barriers to learning.”

**Sarah Seleznyov**

London South Teaching School Alliance

**Amelia Roberts**

UCL Centre for Inclusive Education

# 2. RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE: ABOUT THIS SERIES

The London South Teaching School Alliance and Charles Dickens Research School help schools to use evidence to inform their decision-making and teaching practice. They support schools to both engage with research and to design and evaluate their own innovations to address issues relevant to them.

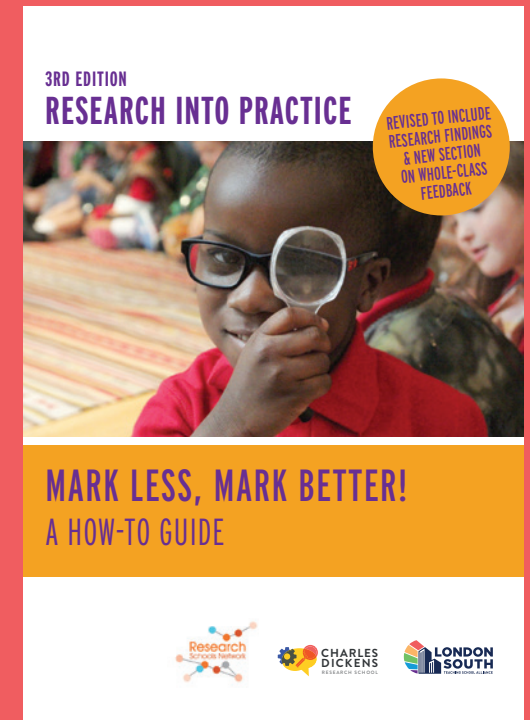
This booklet is part of the Research into Practice series, which outlines practitioner-led research projects so that teachers can apply the practical strategies in their own contexts.

Other titles in the series include:

Mark Less, Mark Better! A How-To Guide (2017, 3rd edition published Jan 2020).

All the World's a Stage: practical drama activities, May 2020.

Jemima Rhys-Evans, Series Editor



## 3. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

In 2017, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism published a report on how the English education system works for children and young people with autism. It identified some key challenges:

- Six in ten young people and seven in ten of their parents say that the main thing that would make school better for them is having a teacher who understands autism
- 42% of parents say their child was refused an assessment of their special educational needs the first time it was requested
- 40% of parents say that their child's school place does not fully meet their needs
- 70% of parents say that support was not put in place quickly enough for their child
- Nearly 70% waited more than six months for support and 50% waited more than a year
- Fewer than 5 in 10 teachers say that they are confident about supporting a child on the autism spectrum
- Fewer than half of children and young people on the autism spectrum say they are happy at school
- Seven in ten say that their peers do not understand them and five in ten say that their teachers do not know how to support them

"I think there is a real variability across schools in terms of provision for children with complex needs and autism and its apparent across all types of school, across schools of different Ofsted rating.... There is a training gap and a knowledge gap across teachers who don't seem to receive any or any ongoing CPD through things like ITT around autism practice and provision." (Autism and education in England, 2017)

This evidence was corroborated locally by the anecdotal experiences of specialist teachers in schools with special needs units, who engage in outreach work with local schools. Mainstream Special Needs Coordinators and classteachers themselves described a perfect storm of increasing diagnoses of autism, thanks to greater public awareness, coupled with reduced funding for specialised support from local authority experts.

*"We knew that we would not be able to make EHCP applications for all of the children so needed to think differently about how we supported them through SEND support within the classroom environment."*

## 4. THE RESEARCH PROJECT

**The Autism: Researching Practice project built on Making Autism Research Accessible to Teachers, a pilot project led by UCL Institute of Education in [2018]. It used the structure of Research Learning Communities (Brown, 2017) to inform collaborative practice.**

Pairs of senior leaders and teachers in nine London primary schools and early years settings were supported to develop their understanding of the needs of pupils with autism in their schools and to design interventions to change practice and improve pupil learning. Participants were shown how to work their way through a research cycle, which explored what worked for their pupils, families and teachers, in their own contexts.

*"The reason why the course was particularly interesting is because it's not looking at 'here is a pre-packaged intervention' for autism and go and implement it, it was looking at getting teachers and senior leaders to reflect on what change could they make to the provision for children with autism in their school and I think kind of put a lot more of the onus onto them and that had a lot more of a meaningful impact than 'come and learn about a specific approach'."*

Each school nominated a teacher and leader to work as a duo and attend sessions led by Sarah Seleznyov, Alliance Director, Dr Amelia Roberts, UCL Centre for Inclusive Education, and three SENDCos from local schools with specialist Autistic Spectrum Disorder pupil units.

Participants began by exploring a literature review from the UCL Cognitive Neuroscience team, which summarised the most important recent research on autism, a field in constant development.

*"I learnt that research around autism changes a lot quicker than we might think and that ...[we must] ensure that the most up to date knowledge is shared to ensure that we are providing effective strategies for dealing with autism."* (School Leader)

Participants were then supported to design their own tools to gather baseline data on a set of focus pupils and their teachers. These included questionnaires, interviews and behaviour trackers to monitor wellbeing, engagement and academic performance. In the second session, teachers analysed their baseline data and used this, alongside their learning from the literature review, to generate their own research questions.

Analysing this data against what they had found in the literature review helped them work collaboratively to design their own research questions.

Once the research question had been agreed, teachers designed a change to practice that they would test in their own schools, with the aim of making a difference not just for the focus pupils but for all pupils with autism in the school. This would be measured at the end of the project using the same tools as used to gather the baseline data.

Before the intervention design was finalised, teachers had the opportunity to observe practice in mainstream schools with specialist autism units. In addition, once the projects were up and running, schools received coaching visits from one of three SENDCOs from these schools. The SENDCOs acted as critical friends to the project teachers and the visits served to build confidence and deepen understanding of the focus pupils' needs.

In addition to the data gathered pre- and post-intervention, the research project gathered a range of data to assess impact:

- **A pre- and post-programme audit: to assess professional experience in relation to both research skills and working with autistic pupils.**
- **Case studies: participating schools were asked to write up and evidence the outcomes of their projects.**
- **Presentations: each school made a presentation to other participating schools at a final workshop session in July 2019.**

- **Interviews: with teachers, school leaders/ SENDCOs, and programme leads.**
- **Evaluation forms. Participants were asked to respond to a short series of questions at the end of the programme.**

In developing and refining their research questions, five key themes emerged around which the nine participating schools were facing challenges:

- **social skills and speech development**
- **sensory needs**
- **behaviour and emotional self-regulation**
- **independent learning**
- **teacher knowledge and understanding.**

The majority of schools chose to focus on a small sample of pupils, with three focusing on just one child, and four more focusing on fewer than six. Two schools focused on the classroom and school environment and took into account a full year group and the whole school respectively.

Common strategies across the interventions included the use of visual prompts, verbal prompts, relationship building (with parents, staff and pupils), a focus on wellbeing, self-regulation, independence and sensory needs, and building staff understanding of ASD pupils.

## IMPACT ON PUPILS

By the end of the year, all schools reported that they had been able to observe some quite significant impact on focus pupils' learning behaviours. This was particularly true in the areas of social skills and speech development, independent learning, and behaviour and emotional self-regulation.

*“Thank you so much, he is so much calmer and happier coming in. He used to be scared but now he’s not scared. He’s quicker in the morning now, it’s much easier for me.” (Parent)*

*“I feel as though I have a better understanding of [the pupil] and his needs. I now understand his capabilities, likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. He is now able to spend time with me 1:1 whereas this was a struggle at the start of the year and his LSA needed to be present at all times. [the pupil] is now comfortable to spend one on one time with me and engage in activities.” (Teacher)*

Staff reflected that the impact on academic performance was more difficult to observe. This had been less of a priority with participant schools believing that improvements in learning behaviours must precede improvements in academic outcomes.

Several felt that pupils who were at risk of exclusion, being removed from the school by their parents or needing a big investment of SEND resources were now coping better and were happier in their classrooms.

*“Children involved in this group were originally considered for EHC plans, this is now less likely if tailored SEND support continues to be implemented and the children are able to transfer these skills naturally into the classroom environment.”*

Participants were able to identify a range of ways in which the project had had a wider school impact, particularly in raising awareness and understanding about the needs of pupils with a diagnosis of autism. They were also able to identify a range of ways in which the project had impacted on their own personal learning with several citing that they had learnt new strategies for working with pupils with autism. A further common conclusion was the importance of focusing on these pupils as individuals.

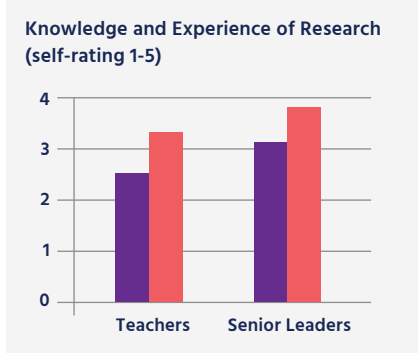
*“We never really recognised just how unhappy our target child might have been at school... We feel we have found a very powerful way to approach the problem posed in our question. We hadn’t expected to find something that would have such a deep impact.”*

## IMPACT ON TEACHERS

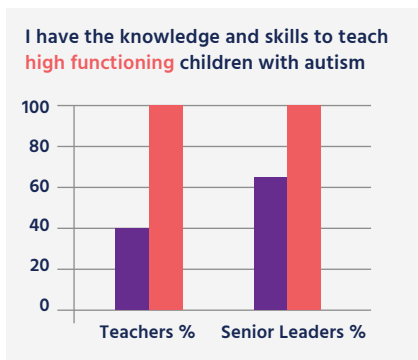
### Knowledge and experience of research

Teachers said that their involvement in ARP had developed their professional practice 'enormously'. They had enjoyed the opportunity to talk to other schools involved in the programme and share **ideas and experiences**. This had led them to new strategies and ideas they had been unaware of.

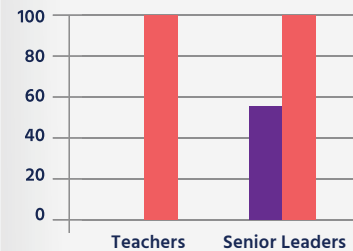
*“Loved being part of a learning community beyond the school. It was always hard to find the time for us to link up to drive it forward, but overall hugely worthwhile. We have increased our knowledge and understanding of our individual children, fostered closer links with families and developed our practice significantly.”*



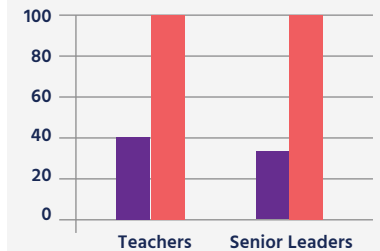
When asked about their experience of working with autistic pupils, an analysis of the baseline-impact audits showed an overall improvement in both teachers' and senior leaders' perceptions of their knowledge and skills:



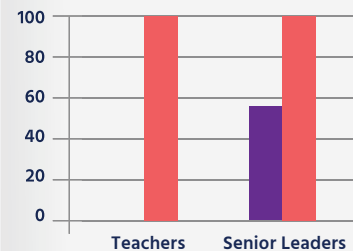
I have the knowledge and skills to teach **low functioning** children with autism



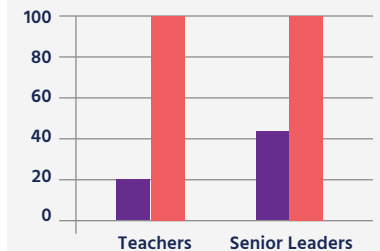
I know how to help pupils with autism to **regulate their emotions**



I know how to help pupils with autism to develop their **social skills**



I know how to help pupils with autism develop **relationships with other people**



■ Before the project ■ After the project

*“I have learnt new strategies to help me work with the focus pupil in the classroom. I have put into practice different ideas and the staff meeting training I received has helped me to draw on perceptions of autism and helped me to be more effective when working with the focus pupil.”*  
(Teacher)

## CASE STUDY

## 5. CASE STUDIES

### How will the delivery of weekly TA focused sessions impact upon the social communication and turn taking skills of our Reception pupils with ASD? How will the targeted skills generalise to the classroom context?

Alfred Salter Primary School's Reception class intake included six children with traits or diagnosis of ASD, none of whom had EHCPs and all six were below typical.

- Small group intervention delivered 2-3 times a week for 30-40 minutes by a Teaching Assistant, with a focus on social communication and turn-taking.
- Extension of focus to transfer of skills back into the classroom, with an emphasis on:
  - Attention and listening
  - Non-verbal social interactions
  - Social communication
  - Engagement in learning

#### OBSERVED IMPACT:

- After one term, two children had made significant progress and were able to leave the group
- Improved turn-taking
- Improved learning behaviours
- Improved social behaviours

Chart 1: Number of pupils against attention and listening (Reynell's) score

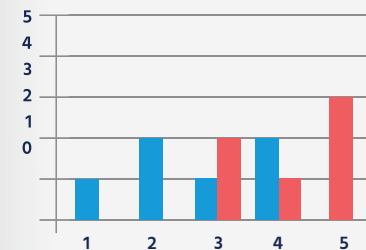
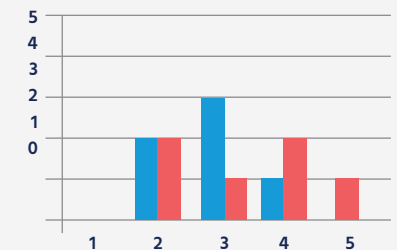


Chart 2: Number of pupils against engagement in learning (Leuven) score



■ January ■ July

*“Children involved in this group were originally considered for EHC plans, this is now less likely if tailored SEND support continues to be implemented and the children are able to transfer these skills naturally into the classroom environment.”*

## CASE STUDY

## How can developing our two-year old environments to become more ASD friendly support children to make further progress?

Ann Bernadt and Nell Gwynn Nursery

Schools chose to focus on ensuring that their environments supported children's sensory needs. The made the following changes:

- Removal of some resources and re-organisation of the rooms to make more space available for free exploration
- A more neutral environment to avoid sensory overload
- Replacement of plastic resources with natural, textured resources to support differing sensory needs (for example, hessian for displays, stone animal friends for tactile play)
- Replacement of fixed/closed play resources with those enabling open-ended, exploratory play
- Ear defenders for children who found noise levels overwhelming

### OBSERVED IMPACTS:

- increased appeal to children of the classroom through indoor access to sensory experiences
- increase in children's creative and imaginative play
- Greater awareness in children of their own sensory needs
- Greater understanding in adults of the implications of environmental light and sound for children with ASD.
- Greater support for children with diagnosed or suspected ASD through the new sensory experiences in the garden



*“We feel that reducing the plastics helped children with ASD as it gave them the opportunity to engage in open ended opportunities to express themselves. It has also helped to increase the number of sensory experiences that children can access independently and/or with support from adults.”*



**CASE STUDY**

## How can we improve the well-being of ASD children outside of the classroom provision?

Camelot Primary School chose to focus on routines for transitions and less structured times of the day as their area of focus, so that the structure and predictability within the classroom environment was maintained for the whole school day.

| Strategy/Adjustment                   | How were they implemented?   |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Use and engagement in play activities | Support staff training - thinking about language use and being proactive and fun to engage children in activities.   |
| Camelot walking code                  | Visuals created on widget and place around the school for pupils to access during transitions e.g. corridors and stair cases. Whole staff training on consistent language and agreed transition expectations of pupils. Senior Leader observed and supported staff every lunch time. |
| Zones of regulation                   | Working with Speech and Language Therapist focusing initially on SEND pupils with ASD and language/communication needs - now in the process of being embedded throughout the school through staff training.  |
| Zoning the playground                 | Support staff directed to set up activities in consistent zones around the playground. Equipment and play resources made readily accessible.   |
| Calm play area                        | During lunch time play opportunities offered for drawing, small world construction in a smaller, calmer space.   |
| Staggered transition support          | Pupils finish play a year group at a time. Individual pupils given a sand-timer to assist them in taking out 5 minutes before they re-enter the classroom for additional calm-down time.   |



1. Stop



2. Line up



3. Be quiet



4. Follow my teacher



5. Sit on the carpet

### OBSERVED IMPACTS:

- Pupils are identifying their emotions and communicating them to adults using language and visuals on the playground and visual lanyards to support this.
- Pupils are seeking mutual regulation from staff or are more equipped to self-regulate when needed e.g. coming into the calm play area, taking time out of the game.
- Pupils are interacting more positively with each other and engaging in activities with their peers and staff on duty.
- Pupils transitioning with increasing independence using the visual support.
- Reduced 'red' behaviours logged.
- More pupils 'checking in' in the 'Green Zone-Calm and Ready to learn' after lunch time.

*“I have really noticed the difference in the way child X comes into class from play time in a much calmer and settled way.” (Class Teacher)*

## CASE STUDY

## How can we enable children with autism to develop expressive language?

Charles Dickens Primary School chose to focus on developing the language skills of one child with autism to enable them to communicate with peers more effectively and to improve their social integration. Following an observation of ALS (Assisted Language Stimulation) at Redriff Primary School, an intervention was designed and implemented:

- Weekly, increasing to daily 15 minute small-group sessions including the focus child and non-autistic children.
- Groups used a specially designed board with images to help the focus child to communicate and begin to support them with their verbal sentence structure.
- Groups were designed around child's interests and physical ability.

### OBSERVED IMPACT:

- The data shows a 'huge uptrend' in the number of independent, verbal and physical communication attempts of the focus child with other children through use of ALS board.
- The focus child is significantly happier in school as a result of opportunities for social interactions.
- Increased engagement with adult-led activities generally; less defiance.
- Other children interacting more with target child; they are more likely to be confident to be around target child when in the playground etc.
- The pupil is secure in almost all the areas of the Autism Education Trust Progression framework now, green or amber on a RAG-rating.



*“We feel we have found a very powerful way to approach the problem posed in our question. We hadn't expected to find something that would have such a deep impact and thought that he would find it more difficult to access and learn the routines and structures. We never really recognised just how unhappy our target child might have been at school.”*

## CASE STUDY

## How can we reduce the number of emotional outbursts?

Prendergast Primary School chose to focus on emotional regulation for an autistic child in Year 3 whose emotional outbursts were becoming more extreme and were impacting on both his and other children's wellbeing. An audit and specialist assessment of needs revealed particular difficulties at transitions from play and lunch into class. The following interventions were put into place:

- A short activity to carry out away from the main class, giving time to self-regulate.
- Social stories to teach self-regulation, that it is okay to lose and not win all of the time, about fairness.
- Visual supports (5-point scale, visual timetable) to clarify routines.
- Sensory circuits to reduce sensory overload and get physical.
- Occupational therapy support focusing on fine motor control.
- 'Drawing and Talking' sessions to enable supported reflection on an emotional and physical reaction to situations.

### OBSERVED IMPACTS

- Improvements in the focus pupil's ability to talk about an outburst when he is in a calm state and can identify the behaviour. He still finds it a challenge to identify the trigger.
- Lego therapy has been an effective therapy in supporting the focus pupil's empathetic skills. He has learnt to support other children in the sessions instead of getting frustrated with them for not following instructions.
- Improvements in handwriting have resulted in less frustration within an English lesson, thus removing a potential trigger for outbursts.
- Behaviour following social stories sessions has improved and there have been far fewer emotional outbursts on the whole.



*“In reality we cannot reduce the focus pupil's emotional outbursts, but we can support the focus pupil in dealing with self-regulation and working towards de-escalating from point 5 to point 1 more quickly than he has been in the past... It is not always clear what triggers his outbursts but the focus pupil is getting better at talking through those feelings felt during the outburst with hindsight.”*

## CASE STUDY

## How does a choice board and a 'Now and Next' system engage and empower the focus pupil to structure her own free-flow and how does this impact her willingness and tolerance with non-chosen activities?

Redriff Primary School chose to focus on a girl with autism in the Nursery provision. During non-negotiable times of the day such as carpet time or lunchtime she was unwilling to participate or even remain in the same area, limiting her integration with the class.

- Introduce carpet time in small amounts and to remove the focus pupil before she became distressed so that she would not think negatively about non-negotiable activities.
- Put in place consistent routines for carpet times to support the focus pupil to participate in at least the first part of the carpet session.
- Use of a 'Now and Next' pouch as a visual explanation of the day, with the non-negotiable times emphasised, for example, carpet time and lunch time.
- 1:1 support with a consistent adult as well as additional support from her teacher.
- Weekly sensory activities with a small group and daily time in the sensory room, in order to meet her needs in a quieter environment.

### OBSERVED IMPACTS:

- Increased willingness to participate actively, and with lessening support, in carpet sessions, especially at the beginning of the sessions.
- Improvements in the focus child's ability to sign as she sings along and to respond to the signing by the teachers and other children.
- The other children know what to say to her to help with her behaviour.
- Improved relationships with adults - she is always very excited to see them in the mornings, especially on a Monday.



*“ [Observing and getting to know her] then led me to focusing solely on the Now and Next symbol and picture system and make sure that she understood the parts of the day where, to some extent, she had to handover choice to the teachers. Working then on her willingness to do that, as well as making the carpet times as accessible and motivating for her as possible by using lots of tactile, real objects, so that she got excited by the idea of carpet time has helped her to be more tolerant of the lack of free choice in these moments.”*

## CASE STUDY

## What impact will making classrooms ‘autism friendly’ have on the relationships between staff and children with a diagnosis of autism?

**Robinsfield Infant School and George Eliot Primary School** had 13 children with a diagnosis of autism across the two schools. Their project focused on developing relationships between adults and autistic children in Year 1, drawing on expertise from Early Years to support with transition.

- Protected time established to give teacher of identified children had 2 x 30-minute sessions blocked out to spend observing a focus child.
- Co-planning of provision for the identified children by teachers, support staff and EYFS leads.
- Increased-focus on child-led and sensory provision based on teacher observations of children.

### OBSERVED IMPACTS:

- More inclusive practice: case study children were able to spend more time in the whole class environment and participate on whole class learning for longer because. Their needs were better met by sensory experiences were built into class planning for all children e.g. dough disco.
- More child-led learning experiences available in the classroom.
- Less dependence on 1:1 support: case study children were less distressed when their 1:1 left the classroom and were more likely to approach the teacher to get their needs met.
- Improved teacher/pupil relationships due to protected time for observation and play with the child.



*“I feel as though I have a better understanding of [the pupil] and his needs. I now understand his capabilities, likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. He is now able to spend time with me 1:1 where as this was a struggle at the start of the year and his LSA needed to be present at all times. [the pupil] is now comfortable to spend one on one time with me and engage in activities.”*

## CASE STUDY

## To what extent can Lego Therapy help children with autism develop transferable social and language skills?

Southwark Park Primary School focused on two autistic children in Year 3:

- Child A is a high attaining child with social communication difficulties
- Child B is a lower attaining child with difficulties with speech and language

Lego therapy was selected as an appropriate intervention for both children though owing to their differing needs, they were in different triads for the sessions.

- Child A was given a one-day model, comprising of one 20 min session with two neurotypical peers. One was someone child A was comfortable and another child was selected for being calm and tolerant.
- Child B was given a two-day model, with a pre-teach session with his class teacher followed by a Lego Therapy session with two peers, chosen from his friendship group. They also had some issues (with attention and impulse control) so we were hoping they would also benefit from the session.

### OBSERVED IMPACT:

Child A:

- Since the start of the Lego therapy sessions, child A has talked to his parents about children he's played with and his "friends" for the first time ever.
- A review of the AET framework targets shows child A is either developing or is secure in all nine of the targeted skills. Importantly, child A is more aware of his own emotions and now has strategies for calming down. He said in June that he should "try to not let my emotions get the best of me". When asked if he uses the things he learns in Lego Therapy in other areas of his life he replied "Yes, I try to."
- In class, child A is quicker to recognise his own anger and describe coping strategies. He is also more willing to work with the children who do Lego Therapy with him, who have given child A compliments on the resilience he has displayed in Lego sessions.
- Child A is more comfortable accepting correction and will now edit his work.
- When child A's behaviour outbursts were tracked at the end of the summer, there was a notable change from the baseline tracking.

Child B:

- Difficult circumstances out of school for Child B resulted in poor attendance and consequent challenging behaviours during the period of the project. It is therefore not possible to make strong links between child B's learning behaviours and the Lego Therapy sessions.
- However, in sessions, child B's ability to listen to the other children developed, and he seemed to understand that they needed to work together to achieve the goal. At the start of sessions, child B would not wait for instructions when he was the builder, but this improved over time. Child B also started to ask questions and, crucially he also listened to the response. He was able to take turns within the structured environment of Lego Therapy.
- In his most recent review by the Speech and Language Therapist, she found child B "has made significant progress in the amount that he says to others" and he is "able to narrate an experience he has had." She also found that child B has "made progress in his use of language and vocabulary" and "sees himself as a learner."



*“He’s regulating his emotions at home much more [...] If things do go wrong, he can reflect on them afterwards and it means we can pick him up on things as we know he’s not going to lose it – so much more positive than before.” (Parent of Child A)*

CASE STUDY

# How do we get children with ASD to work independently in class?

Surrey Square Primary School focused on three children in Year 1 and on finding the balance between providing them with the support they needed whilst also fostering independence. Following visits to **Bessemer Grange** and **Rye Oak Primary Schools** and with the support of **Redriff Primary School, Surrey Square** used a range of approaches:

- Use of consistent visuals throughout the school for Now and Next boards and timetables
- Implementation of TEACCH daily for two of the children
- Balance of teacher-led groups and out-of-class interventions
- Support to improve punctuality and attendance
- Weekly meetings with parents and carers

## OBSERVED IMPACT

### Child A

- Improvements in following instructions.
- Some improvements in independence and self-regulation: completes TEACCH activities with reassurance.
- Improved communication, confidence and relationships with other children.

### Child B

- Improved independence: at the beginning of the year, child B would not complete any maths without continuous adult support, now he will complete activities after being demonstrated once.
- Improved progress in writing and maths, supported by adult scaffolding of tasks and careful positioning on carpet.

### Child C

- Large improvements in focus and on being on task, especially when Child C has some choice over the activity.
- Initial successes with TEACCH were not sustained.



| TEACCH values   |
|---|
| Teaching - sharing autism knowledge and increasing the skill level of professionals and practitioners                     |
| Expanding - increasing own knowledge to provide high-quality services to people on the autism spectrum and their families |
| Appreciating - appreciating the strengths and uniqueness of autistic culture  |
| Collaborating and Cooperating with colleagues, other professionals, people on the autism spectrum and their families      |
| Holistic - adopting a holistic approach, looking at the person, their family and community                                |

| TEACCH priorities   |
|---|
| <b>Some of the TEACCH Autism Program priorities are:</b>  |
| Focusing on the person, their skills, interests and needs.  |
| Understanding the 'culture of autism' and identifying differences based on individualised assessments.  |
| Using visual structures to organise the environment and tasks when teaching skills.   |
| Being broad-based, ie support people at work, teach skills but also ensure that people are supported during leisure and/or social activities.               |
| Being flexible and teaching flexibility.  |
| The TEACCH principles and techniques may always need to be in place for someone, but they may look very different at different stages of the person's life. |

## 6. COMMON THEMES AND TOP TIPS

Despite the variety of approaches taken by schools, several common themes emerged, allowing practitioners to reflect on their top tips for supporting children with autism. There are inevitably many overlaps between these categories, but they can be broadly grouped into:

1. Collaborative working
  - a) Working with specialist services
  - b) Working with families
2. The enabling environment
3. Know your pupils: every child an individual
4. Clear communication
  - a) Make it visual
  - b) Choose your words carefully
  - c) Signs and gestures
5. Structure, predictability and routines
6. Emotional learning

### 1a) Collaborative working: working with specialist services

*“The close partnership we have with our external Speech and Language therapist has been significant in guiding and supporting us in the quality of the intervention we have designed and implemented. This is a relationship that has greatly benefited us as a school, with the significant language and communication needs we have. The depth of understanding and knowledge of an expert in this area is something we regularly draw upon and is a relationship I would recommend for any school with children exhibiting these needs.”*

It can be helpful to know that there are different professionals with specialist knowledge that can be of benefit to you or to the pupils with autism in your class. Often your school’s SENDCo will be the gateway to these services, and they would be able to tell you which services are involved with any child in your class and refer a child to an external professional.

### Educational Psychologists

Educational Psychologists (EPs) can assess pupils’ needs or diagnose them with learning difficulties. They are highly qualified professionals who often have expert knowledge of child development and who understand how differences in this development may impact on a child’s access to education. They will usually complete a range of standardised or dynamic assessments or observations to build up an accurate picture of a child’s strengths and needs and suggest appropriate support or next steps. For pupils with autism, they may be able to point you towards research-informed approaches or assessment tools that you can use.

### Speech and Language Therapists

Speech and Language Therapists (SALT or SLT) work with pupils with difficulty with their speech, use or understanding of language or, more broadly, communication. Often pupils with autism have associated language or communication needs, so it is common for a SALT to be involved in their support. SALTs may assess through standardised assessments and observations, design interventions or suggest changes to enhance a pupil’s access to their learning environment. SALTs advise on strategies to support pupils’ comprehension of language and of their ability to use expressive language.

### Occupational Therapists

Occupational Therapists (OT) specialise in helping pupils access activities that are important to them when there is a barrier such as illness, age, ability or disability. For pupils with autism, this can often come in the form of sensory differences. For example, how can a child access a noisy lunch hall when they are hypersensitive to sound? OTs can help to shed light on the complex world of sensory differences and provide a range of practical and meaningful adjustments or interventions that help pupils access school life.

### Autism Outreach Services

Many local authorities have specialist autism services, often made up of specialist teachers or teaching assistants. As ex-class teachers, they will usually understand the realities of a classroom in the way that other services may not. If your local authority does not have an autism support team, look to your local special schools or mainstream schools with autism resource bases. Autism outreach services frequently offer really practical advice that can support a child in a school. They can help to set up interventions, or support teaching and lesson planning.



### Top tips

1. Be specific about what you want from them: eg 'I need help to enable a pupil to work independently.' If you are not sure what you want, be specific about that, eg 'I have tried x, y, z, and now I need some more ideas.'
2. Be open: speak to your SENCO and arrange a time to talk to the professional or attend the meeting with them. Get to know the person and ask them for advice or follow up training that you can do. Can you ask to shadow them?
3. Be confident: if you do not understand something in a report, ask! With SEN, ASC, LD, SALT, EP, OT, TEACCH, there are so many acronyms and ideas that are not often explained. You need to ensure that you understand what the advice means, so if you are ever a little bit unsure, ask and keep on asking until you are clear. At the end of the day, you need to teach it.
4. Be realistic: often lots of ideas in reports are lovely but impractical. Work with the external professional, be optimistic, but realistic about what you can achieve.
5. Be cautious: remember you are a trained, qualified, experienced, hardworking teacher, you have the expertise in teaching and your class. Many other services have expert knowledge in their field but have never even worked in a classroom. If it doesn't sound like a good fit for your class, be professional and challenge them to help make it fit. External services would always prefer to troubleshoot an intervention at the start than to find out it has not been happening for months.

See Appendix II for further details of useful organisations and resources

### 1b) Collaborative working: working with families



*"I have learnt that communication between home and school is vital in getting a clear overview of a child with autism because how children perform at school can greatly differ compared to performance at home and vice versa" (Leader).*

If a child already has a diagnosis of autism or they have been referred for assessment, effective communication with parents/carers is of the utmost importance in maintaining a positive relationship and ensuring a child's progress. Enabling parents and carers to share their knowledge and engage in positive discussion helps to build confidence and trust that their contribution is valued and acknowledged.

Parental involvement can be broken down into three levels, consultation, participation and co-production. Consultation is the lowest level of engagement possible: I, the teacher, tell you the parent/carer, something and ask you some prepared questions. The next, participation, involves parents/carers contributing their ideas and discussing them. The highest level, co-production, is where a support plan is co-created by the setting and the family.

### Top tips

1. Different environments produce different reactions. A pupil can show challenging behaviour at home and be the most studious pupil at school. Work out with the parent what is different about the environments and try to share strategies together.
2. Build the relationship before there is an issue. If from day one you speak with the parent/carer and make them aware of all of the good things that are happening, this makes talking about problems that are challenging far more straightforward.

3. Conflict isn't always bad. The parent/carer may disagree with you or the school, and it is yours and your SENDCo's job to find a way to work together on a shared plan. Some of the most meaningful parent/carer relationships have grown out of conflict. Usually, most parents and schools really want the same things: for the pupil to excel socially, academically, and lead a happy and independent life. Once you have worked out what your shared objectives are, it is much easier to work together.
4. For some parents the word 'autism' is steeped in stigma. Be proud of autism and talk about how autism is not something that should be stigmatised. Speak about it openly and often. Inviting parents/carers to support groups can make a big difference.
5. The pupil in your class is someone's perfect child, who they love more than anything in the world. If a pupil is finding school challenging, often parents/carers will need to blame someone, and that someone is often the class teacher. Be aware when you are speaking to a parent/carer that your pupil is their child and not a problem to be solved.

## 2) Create an enabling environment

Many pupils with autism struggle with sensory processing and this can cause them to become over-stimulated quite easily. Over-stimulation happens where there is too much sensory information for the brain to process and can affect any and all of the senses. This can have a profound effect on pupil behaviour.

*“For almost any other special need, the classroom only becomes disabling when a demand to perform a given task is made. For the child with autism, disability begins at the door.” Hanbury (2007)*

### Considerations for classroom practice

#### Sight:

Is your environment too busy? Sometimes less is more. Using carefully selected visuals and resources can quickly eliminate the pupils need to scan the environment. Keeping areas clear and displays minimal but purposeful can help pupils focus more effectively and reduce the number of items the brain needs to process. Avoid too many bright background colours as the messages could be lost in the process. Ann Bernadt and Nell Gwynn Nurseries (see page 14) found that introducing more neutral colours had a positive effect on children with autism.

#### Noise:

Is the pupil hearing the correct information? Background and environmental noises can interfere with a pupil’s ability to concentrate and process key information. The use of visuals to support key messages can reinforce and sometimes replace verbal communication; the seating of the pupil should also be considered.

#### Touch:

Is the pupil uncomfortable? Sometimes pupils can display discomfort to textures or physical touch. Ann Bernadt and Nell Gwynn Nurseries (see page 14) replaced much of their plastic with natural resources (hessian, stone, cork, wood) to give children a greater range of sensory experiences.

### Coping with sensory discomfort

Using social stories for understanding and explicit teaching of emotional vocabulary can help pupils to express when they are feeling discomfort. These were used successfully by Prendergast Primary School (see page 20) to support an autistic child to articulate his emotions following outbursts.



### Top tips :

1. Consistent use of visuals in the learning environment (see page 20).
2. Make the environment as predictable as possible to minimise the cognitive load.
3. Be selective about the materials on display to ensure the correct messages are being understood.
4. Have a range of sensory activities in trays available for the pupil to develop positive sensory experiences in the areas they find challenging.
5. Ensure the pupil is seated where they can focus on the speaker.
6. Allow additional time for processing.

*“I learned not to overlook the needs of academically able autistic children. It would be easy to overlook child B as academically he is succeeding. His verbal skills make you think he should understand your explanations or other people’s opinions but this is obviously not the case.”*

### 3) Know your pupils: every child an individual

There is no one-size-fits-all description of a pupil with autism and we must bear this in mind when considering what might support their learning and wellbeing.

For support strategies to work, they must be relevant to the specific child and meaningful enough for them to want to do it. When these things align then there is a greater chance of success. Some interventions have failed because not enough careful consideration was given to what the autistic person wanted, or needed from the intervention. Common explanations for this include:

“I wanted them to work independently.

I wanted them to play with more children.

I wanted them to be quiet at carpet times.”

Pupils with autism often have specific, in-depth interests, as diverse as trains, World War II, or silly putty. It is vital to utilise these when working out the ‘hook’ or incentive for the child to learn a new strategy. Conversations with parents and other staff, as well as careful observations of the child’s behaviours and preferences are all useful ways of identifying an individual child’s ‘hook’

Useful questions to consider include:

“When do they look most happy?”

“If they had a free choice, what would they be doing?”

“What do they most often talk about?”.

One of the reasons for the success of the George Eliot Robinsfield Federation project (see page 24) was the protected time given over the detailed observations of the focus children’s preferences, interactions and behaviours. This was also true of the Charles Dickens project (see page 18), where adaptations were made to accommodate the focus pupil’s love of buses.

Once the individual child’s interests are clear, interventions can be tailored to maximise engagement. For example, a maths intervention can involve making numbers out of silly putty, or looking at dates and statistics from World War II. This level of personalisation can be particularly important to the success of interventions with autistic children.

#### My Tasks

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|--|--------------------------|
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

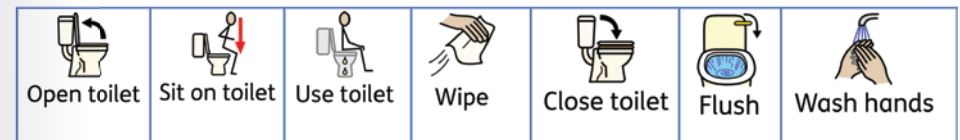
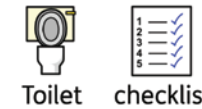
When I complete all my tasks I can:

### 4) Communication and language

While some pupils can understand most communication in most circumstances; others struggle with simple instructions. As with all strategies, knowing the child is the most crucial thing, there is no one-size-fits-all. But here are some that may help.

#### 4a) Make it visual

Using pictures, photos, symbols, real objects, or a quick doodle helps to turn the abstract spoken language into more concrete visual communication. A picture of a car gives far more clues about what it is than the spoken word alone. You can use this strategy to support written as well as spoken language. Software such as InPrint 3 produces small symbols for most frequent words as you type. Alternatively, the Makaton Charity has some freely available symbols.



In addition to supporting comprehension, visuals help pupils to organise themselves and internalise routines. Camelot Primary School (see page 16) used these to excellent effect to reinforce the Camelot Walking Code and this in turn improved transitions for children with autism at the end of play and lunch times.



1. Stop



2. Line up



3. Be quiet



4. Follow my teacher



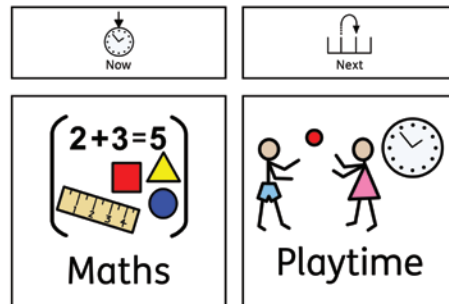
5. Sit on the carpet

Visuals can help pupils to know what is happening in that moment and further in the day and therefore reduce anxiety or confusion which might otherwise act as triggers to less desirable behaviours.

**Basic symbols** allow pupils to express and understand needs in a timely manner such as 'toilet' or 'hands down'.

**Choice boards** encourage pupils to choose from a selected set of activities helping to broaden choices or disrupt repetitive behaviours.

**Now and Next boards** can help children to focus on what they need to do and what is coming next. Now and next boards work particularly well when the pupils take ownership of them and choose the symbols for each activity. These can be extended to **now**, **next** and **then** when children are ready. Redriff (see page 22) and Surrey Square Primary Schools (see page 28) both used these in their research projects and subsequently embedded them into whole school practice.



**Visual timetables** are important for pupils to have an overview of the day ahead. At the start of the day, run through each event that is happening, particularly if there are any changes to the normal routine. Focusing particularly on the transitions can make them smoother and less anxiety-provoking. A visual timetable can be used to assist all pupils.

**Visual timetables** and **Now and Next boards** can be used together to break the day down into smaller chunks.

**Top tips:**

- Whatever visual you choose they need to be consistent in style and used by all even beyond the classroom for example Communicate: In Print.
- Do not overload. be selective and choose the visuals that will have a high impact for the pupil.
- Label the classroom so it is clear and familiar.
- Use a class visual timetable with slightly larger symbols and model the process Make it the responsibility of two pupils in the class to make a visual timetable for the day.
- Encourage everyone to use the visuals consistently.
- Choose your three key words for your teaching input and make these as visual, concrete, and real as possible. This will help all pupils, and in particular, those with a communication need.

**Possible pitfalls**

Carefully choose the words that you would like to make visual: too many and the message can be lost, too few, and the meaning may not come across. For example, 'Well there is kind of a toy car just over there on the shelf near the story book'. The highlighted words are the key words that you may choose to make visual to ensure you are understood.

**4b) Make yourself understood: Choose your words with care**

**Less is more** - Often, reducing the number of words you use helps to make your message better understood. When speaking to a child with a communication need, it is essential to consider if your statement contains superfluous or unnecessary words. You should not only and always use simple language, but when a child is upset, or you need to give an instruction, make sure it is explained in clear language. For some pupils this is one word, for others it is many more! Also, a good tip is to wait between each statement; this allows pupils time to process what you have said. It is tough to do this, so count to five or ten in your head before saying the next set of words.

**Pitfalls** - If you always limit your language, this may limit a child's exposure to the richness and depth of explanations, which could limit their learning. Precision is key: be clear about what you are trying to achieve and modulate your language choice appropriately.

**Motivate to communicate** – Building expressive language can, on occasion, be challenging. For some autistic pupils, the desire to communicate with those around them may be less than that of their neurotypical peers. For these pupils, making the process of communication more inherently motivating may be necessary. This was evident for Child A in Southwark Park’s project (see page 26) for whom the structured roles within Lego Therapy motivated him to communicate with his peers. If there is a child who loves a particular toy, place the toy out of reach, so the child needs to communicate with you to get what they want. Or if the child is building a train track, remove most of the parts they need from the box, so they need to request each object. Strategies like these, when not overused, allow pupils to find a purpose in communicating with adults and peers. Charles Dickens’ (see page 18) approach adapted the ALS board to harness the focus child’s love of buses and encourage expressive language.

Many interventions use a similar idea; for example, **Pivotal Response Treatment** uses naturalistic motivators to encourage more frequent interactions, and **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)** is often taught using preferred toys or snacks. Any strategy that places communication as the bridge between an exciting or motivating action or activity should work, so long as the tips listed above are used for scaffolding communication.

## 5) Structure, predictability and routines

The world and in particular schools are noisy, busy and unpredictable places. For some pupils with autism, this can at times be overwhelming. Many methods of teaching pupils with autism use the principle of making the unpredictable world more predictable. The frequently used Teaching, Expanding, Appreciating, Collaborating, Cooperating, Holistic (TEACCH) approach uses visual structure to sequence a child’s environment and was used by Surrey Square Primary School (see page 28) in their project. When pupils are upset, unregulated, or struggling with a task, the most common reason that we come across is that the work or environment lacks structure.

Below are listed some ways to build in structure into your everyday teaching to sit alongside normal class routines such as seating plans, lining up orders, consistent routines for handing out resources which maximise learning time and a calm environment.



### Making routine part of what you do

For some pupils with autism providing them with a specific task can be helpful during less structured times. For example, when there is a rush as pupils are coming in from playtime, giving a child the responsibility to hand out the books or sort out the book corner can make it feel more structured.

Using a predictable sequence to lessons can make it easier for pupils to concentrate. You can achieve this by writing up the sections of the lesson on the board. 1. Spellings 2. Reading the story 3. Adding to a sentence. Or using a structure that repeats every day: Sing a song, count the pupils, maths activity.

### Making work have a definite start and finish

Often, activities that we provide for pupils do not have a clear beginning and end. Ways that we can make an unstructured task more structured are:

- Use a timer to show how long it will last
- Use fill in the blanks rather than an empty page
- Write 1,2,3,4 in the margin to show where each section of a writing task can go
- Draw a double line in the page and say write until you reach there
- Specify how many sentences you want the child to complete
- Choose a task with a natural finish e.g. putting all the pencils back into the pot

### 6) Emotional learning

Learning whilst managing feelings of stress or heightened emotions can be very challenging for all pupils, in particular those with autism. For some pupils with autism, learning about how they and others feel may be more difficult.

### Think about specific interventions

There are numerous interventions designed to teach pupils to understand their emotions and the emotions of others, some of these focus on emotional literacy, while others focus on developing emotional awareness. Alfred Salter Primary School's project (see page 21) placed the emphasis on developing these skills and implemented this successfully through small group interventions. A good starting point is to look at the evidence base for the intervention in places such as <http://www.researchautism.net/> or similar search engines.

### Remain calm

The most crucial point to remember when working with a child who is upset is to remain calm. Take a deep breath and analyse the situation and regulate your feelings. When you are calm you are far more likely to help the pupils to regulate themselves, and to use an appropriate tone and volume for the situation.



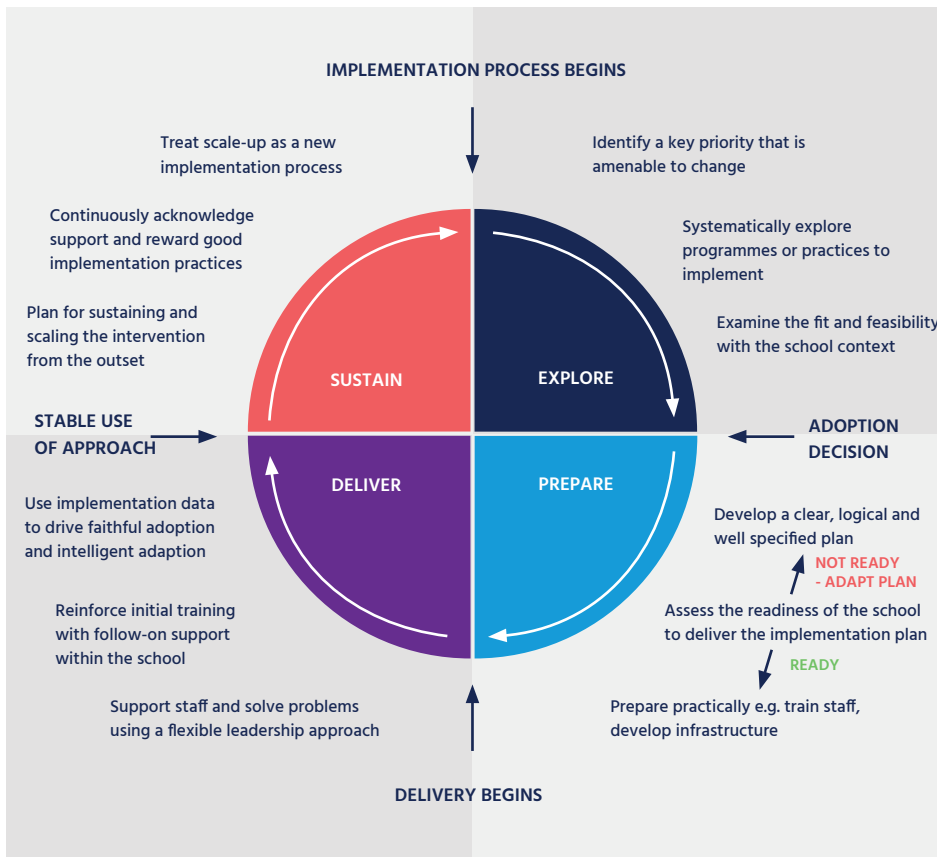
### Remember to use visuals

When people are distressed, their ability to use and interpret the language can decrease. Emotions and feeling are abstract concepts and linking this with a pictorial or visual reference can make them more concrete. Interventions and approaches such as Zones of Regulation can teach pupils to understand their feeling and what to do when they feel them.

# 7. IMPLEMENTATION

## Implementation and Leadership of change

The EEF guidance report identifies four key stages for successful implementation: Explore, Prepare, Deliver and Sustain



### Explore

Clarity of vision is an integral part of making a project, intervention, or change succeed. During the Autism Research Project, participants spent a long time identifying gaps in their provision for identified pupils, and working out why they wanted a change to happen. They then projected into the future and thought about the ideal result, or what success would look like. This helped them to secure what they were trying to achieve, check that it was feasible, and start to work out the steps needed to achieve their goals.

These questions below may help you establish precisely what you would like to accomplish:

- In 3, 6, or 12 months, what will be different? What will teachers and pupils see/hear/feel?
- What do I hope my intervention will have done to improve the lives of the focus pupils I have identified and the lives of their families?
- How will the project have affected practice at whole school level and who will be engaged with it?

Despite your best effort to choose a realistic and achievable goal, you sometimes realise fairly quickly that your initial aims were impractical. If this happens, never be afraid to go back, look at your goals and adjust them so that they are more attainable.

### Prepare

*“Our project involves pupils on a whole school level and, therefore, a project on this scale takes careful planning and time as well as whole school ‘buy-in’ from all staff members.”*

Embedding new forms of practice in school requires staff buy-in which takes careful planning and time. Teaching children with autism can present new challenges that may lead us to question how we teach and this can cause us to feel a range of emotions. For example, teachers may feel a conflict between their expectations of pupil behaviour and their developing understanding of how the pupil with autism may view the situation. Such conflicts between beliefs and new learning can initially bring about a range of emotional responses, such as shock, denial or frustration. It is important that we anticipate possible insecurities and give reassurance and opportunities for concerns, views and feelings to be discussed. This will enable staff to feel safe and comfortable to begin to experiment, become positive decision makers in the process and to integrate new skills into their practice.

## Deliver

Implementing change will be most effective when working with people across the school who are most supportive of new ideas and will need to make the fewest or least significant changes to their practice. Once these team members are on board, they will work with you, helping set the standard of engagement and delivery and encourage others to follow the changing tide.

Kotter's theory of change (Kotter and Cohen, 2012) describes how focusing on a small victory within a wider project can help to enthuse your team and enable you to demonstrate that your intervention or project may be on the right track. For lasting change to occur, everyone must believe in it, all stakeholders must see the value in the change and that their contribution is significant and recognised. Celebrating small successes early is important, the intervention has not had time to have a fully visible effect.

Some tips for celebrating small successes:

- **Success can be anything. Staff confidence or parent engagement may not be the specific focus of the intervention, but these can still be celebrated as a quick win.**
- **Inform all relevant staff about the success.**
- **Promote the success to parents and enable them to see you are on the right track.**

- **Find success in a challenge and even failure. For example, your intervention may be trying to reduce challenging behaviour, and though it may not yet have shown an impact, you may well be getting to know the child better or eliminating strategies that do not work.**

## Sustain

The hardest part of the implementation of a change is what happens once the initial buzz has died down. For change to last in a school and to build a legacy of effective provision, a great deal of thought and planning must occur. Once you have decided what to do, how you are going to do it delivered the intervention, you need to work out how to make it stick and the EEF guidance report suggests:

- **Planning for sustaining and scaling an innovation from the outset.**
- **Treating scale-up as a new implementation process.**
- **Continually acknowledging, supporting, and rewarding good implementation practices.**

It is important to continually reflect on your intervention or change and understand the steps needed to truly embed it in school policy and practice.



## Practical ideas for sustaining your intervention:

Give staff ownership of developing resources for pupils - make sure staff know how to recreate the resources in case they break or get lost.

- **Quality assure the intervention once per half term and offer to team-teach it with the person delivering it**
- **Check in with staff regularly to troubleshoot any issues that arise**
- **Delegate responsibility so it isn't just you checking in on the intervention**
- **Ask other staff to observe best practice this can allow you to replicate the intervention more quickly**
- **Film the intervention and share it in a staff meeting or briefing**

*“In order to set up an effective intervention, you may need allocated time to set things up properly.”*

## Recognise your limits

Recognise that supporting pupils with autism in mainstream classrooms can be challenging and emotionally draining for both leaders, teachers and support staff. If, despite your best efforts, you are not achieving the wellbeing and learning you wanted for these pupils, don't be afraid to seek help from outside the school. If you feel you are not achieving the success you planned for and want for your pupils, ask for support from senior leaders, SENCos, Educational Psychologists, CAMHS, Speech and Language Therapists or outreach teachers from local schools with special units for pupils with autism. Sometimes it is not productive to battle on alone.



## 8. APPENDICES AND REFERENCES

Autism and education in England 2017 A report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism on how the education system in England works for children and young people on the autism spectrum <https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/campaign/appga/highlights.aspx>

Brown, C. (2017). Research learning communities: How the RLC approach enables teachers to use research to improve their practice and the benefits for students that occur as a result. *Research for All*, 1(2), pp.387-405.

EEF. (2018) Putting Evidence to Work - A School's Guide to Implementation. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/a-schools-guide-to-implementation/>

Kotter, J.P. and Cohen, D.S., 2012. *The heart of change: Real-life stories of how people change their organizations*. Harvard Business Press.

### Appendix I: ARP literature review

Appendix II: useful resources, websites and organisations

<http://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/classroom.aspx>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/visual-supports.aspx>

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Visual%20Supports%20Tool%20Kit.pdf>

InPrint3 <https://www.widgit.com/products/inprint/index.htm>

The Makaton Charity <https://www.makaton.org/>

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) <https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com/pecs/>

Pivotal Response Treatment <https://www.autismspeaks.org/pivotal-response-treatment-prt-0>

Teaching, Expanding, Appreciating, Collaborating, Cooperating, Holistic (TEACCH) <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/teacch.aspx>

Zones of Regulation <https://www.zonesofregulation.com/index.html>

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