



National
Autistic
Society



Education report

2023

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Glossary



About autism

Autism is a lifelong disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. There are approximately over 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK. Without the right support or understanding, autistic people can miss out on education, struggle to find work and become extremely isolated.

Key terms

Masking - Masking involves an autistic person making changes to their behaviour to disguise autistic traits and seem more like their non-autistic peers.

Meltdowns - A meltdown happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be verbal, physical, or both. Meltdowns in children are often mistaken for temper tantrums.

Repetitive behaviour and stimming - Stimming is repetitive or rhythmic behaviours that autistic people use to calm, or in stressful situations.

Sensory overload - Autistic people may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain.

Shutdowns - A shutdown is an autistic person going quiet or 'switching off'. They may withdraw from others or be unable to communicate. This is also a response to being overwhelmed.

Executive summary



There are over 180,000 autistic pupils in England, 73% of whom are in mainstream schools. But our research reveals that autistic children and young people are being failed by a woeful lack of appropriate school places and teachers are not being equipped to meet autistic students' needs. Our research suggests only 26% of autistic pupils feel happy at school. Three in four parents or carers (74%) said their child's school place did not fully meet their needs, and more than one in four parents (26%) waited over three years to receive support for their child.¹

Autism is the most common type of special educational need (SEN) for children with education, health and care (EHC) plans: 103,429 pupils with an EHC plan are identified as having a primary need of autism.² Our research shows that while 87% of teachers surveyed feel confident or very confident supporting autistic pupils in the classroom, findings from our 2021 report show that seven in ten autistic children and young people said school would be better if more teachers understood autism and 54% of autistic students said that having teachers who don't understand them is the worst thing about school.^{3 4}

This gap between the positive attitudes shown by teachers' confidence and autistic children's experiences needs to be bridged. Training is key to this, with our research finding only 39% of teachers surveyed had received more than half a day's autism training and

for secondary school teachers alone this figure is just 14%.⁵ We continue to hear about the worrying practice of informal exclusions, where children are sent home and asked not to come in. While these are illegal and not officially recorded, our 2021 parent survey found that one in five parents had experienced their child being informally excluded in the last two years.⁶



Beyond school, government figures suggest only 29% of autistic people are in any form of employment, compared to around 80% of adults in the general UK population.⁷

This report highlights the common barriers and issues that autistic young people and children face in mainstream schools and highlights the experiences our charity has had establishing good practice, including at our Cullum Centres.

These are specialist centres within mainstream schools that provide a more suitable environment for autistic students and are staffed by specially trained teachers and support staff, which can transform the experience of autistic children and young people.

There are some immediate actions teachers, schools and local authorities can take to address key issues, but it is clear that broader, systemic reform is needed. To make this happen, the Government must urgently address this growing problem of a lack of appropriate school places by launching an **autism school places taskforce**, to address the needs of autistic pupils and make sure there are the right school places to meet demand. Working with autistic young people, families, charities, and local and national decision makers, the taskforce should:

- **find out what is stopping local authorities from being able to provide autistic students with suitable school places right now**
- **find out where the biggest gaps are, both geographically and in terms of support**
- **set out clear solutions for local and national governments**
- **oversee these solutions being implemented.**

The Government stated in its SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) Improvement Plan that it is determined to improve mainstream and specialist education.

This has to mean having enough of the right kind of school places for autistic children in every area. But currently, many mainstream schools aren't making basic adjustments to suit the needs of autistic pupils, despite their legal duty to do so.

It's a matter of both the physical environment and the quality of support. If students can't use quiet spaces that can help with sensory overload, don't have adjustments in exams and don't get the help they need with transitions, autistic children will continue to miss out. The taskforce needs to identify what in the SEND system is making this happen and how to fix it.

Alongside this taskforce, we are calling for the training for all school staff, to further build teachers' confidence and to support them to listen to autistic pupils to understand and act on their needs. Councils also need to work with employers and schools to support students transitioning into employment. These all need the Government to lead the way and to give the SEND system the funding and support it needs to end the current unfairness.

With this, we believe England's mainstream schools could give autistic children the support they need throughout their school years, the feeling they are understood by their teachers and peers and maximise their potential. This is how we create a society that works for autistic people.

Key findings

Recommendations

- Urgently commission a school places taskforce, to make sure all autistic children are placed in a school which supports their needs.
- Create more provision like Cullum Centres across England, to increase the level of support available to autistic pupils.
- Collaborate with the Autism Education Trust (AET) to deliver mandatory autism training to all school staff.
- Co-produce strategies at local and national level with autistic people and their families.
- A full list of recommendations can be found at the end of the report.



Needs: Schools are not being adjusted to suit the needs of autistic pupils. Sensory overload can cause autistic young people to have significant issues at school, leading to stress, anxiety and poor attendance. Schools have a duty under the *Equality Act 2010* to make adjustments, but we have heard they are not fulfilling this responsibility.



Teachers: Teachers' understanding of autism is critical to autistic pupils feeling supported in the classroom. While teacher confidence in supporting the autistic children in their classroom was high in our research for this report, in our 2021 survey, seven in ten autistic pupils said their teachers didn't understand enough about autism. Teachers feeling confident is important, but our findings suggest there is still a gap between this and autistic children's experiences.⁸ Only 39% of teachers we surveyed have received more than half a day's autism training. There is an urgent need for more effective training.⁹



Students: Autistic pupils told us that they don't feel their peers understand enough about autism. In our survey in 2021, just 8% of respondents said they think their peers understand enough about autism. In this report, we heard that autistic pupils are hiding their diagnosis from their classmates.



Exams: We heard from students that exam processes can be challenging and are not suitably adapted to fit their needs. Autistic pupils don't feel that schools are using Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) guidelines to their full capability to provide the necessary adaptations they need in class. They also feel that they are not supported by schools with stress and anxiety.



Bullying: We heard from autistic pupils that bullying remains a key issue in schools. They told us that they don't think teachers and staff in schools are supportive enough.



Transitions: Transitions are a key problem with mainstream education. Autistic pupils are not being adequately supported during key transitions, such as between schools, into further education and into employment.

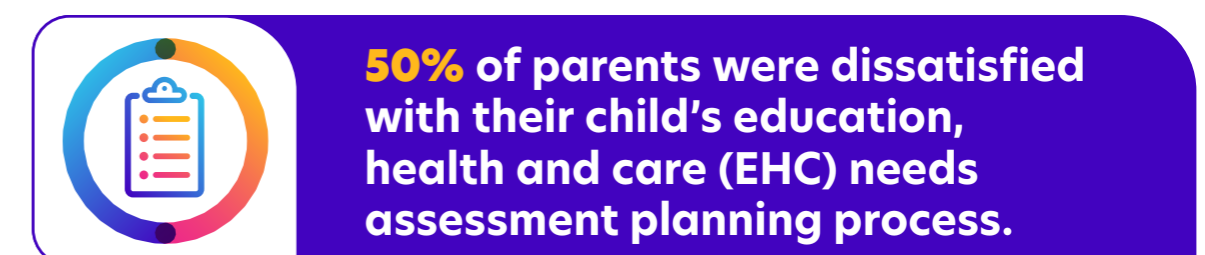
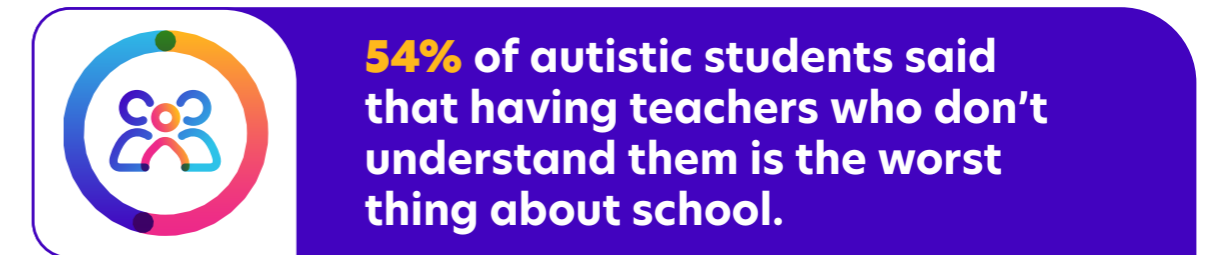
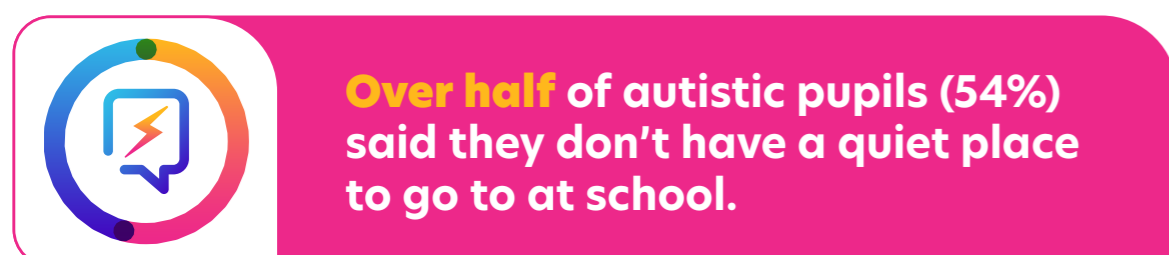
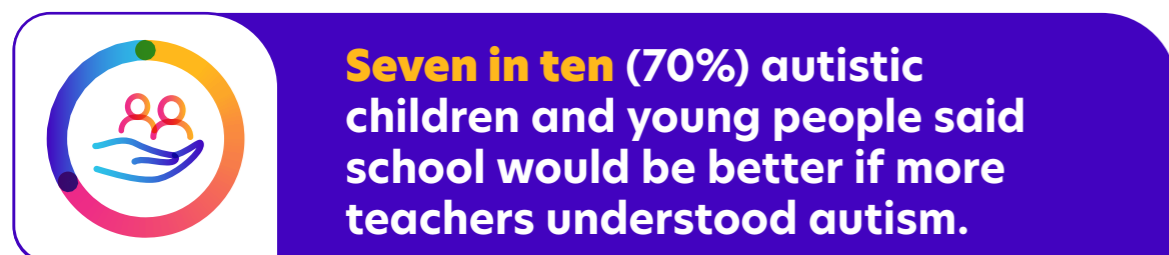


Cullum Centres: From our conversations with autistic pupils, families and teachers at Cullum Centres, we were able to understand the immense value that these Centres provide in supporting autistic pupils. They were able to provide alternative ways of working which mitigated or removed the concerns that autistic pupils face in other mainstream schools.

Key findings from the 2021 report¹⁰



Research we conducted in 2021 showed the extent of how schools are failing autistic children and young people, as well as their parents.



Introduction



The latest data suggests there are 182,493 autistic pupils in schools in England. 73% of these students are educated in a mainstream school. Autism is the most common type of special educational need (SEN) for children with education, health and care (EHC) plans: 103,429 pupils with an EHC plan are identified as having a primary need of autism.¹¹

School is currently particularly challenging for autistic children. The classroom should be an environment that feels safe and inspirational, where students are understood and supported by guidance, encouragement and reassurance. However, that is not the experience for many autistic students, where often simple adjustments aren't being made to support their learning.

With such a large proportion of autistic students being educated in mainstream schools, it is crucial that mainstream schools meet the support needs of autistic children and young people. Parents and children tell us that schools are not offering enough support. Through our Education Rights Helpline, we hear how difficult it is for parents to find appropriate school places for their children. In our 2021 *School report*, 74% of parents told us that their children's school didn't meet their needs.¹²

Schools have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments to the school environment and to their policies, in line with the *Equality Act 2010*.

Regardless of legal duty, however, schools have a responsibility to create an environment that allows all of its pupils to succeed.

This report details the key issues for autistic students in mainstream schools, as well as the different kinds of barriers they face. These include sensory difficulties with the physical environment of the school, the limited understanding of autism amongst teachers and students, and other specific topics, such as school transitions. These topics emerged from our conversations, interviews and workshops with autistic children and young people and the National Autistic Society's Young Ambassadors. We also propose solutions and adaptations.

The report is underpinned by a case study of a Cullum Centre, demonstrating an alternative vision for mainstream schools and an example of good practice. Cullum Centres are run in partnership with the National Autistic Society and are specialised units within mainstream schools which bridge the gap between mainstream education and alternative provision. They recognise that autistic students in mainstream school have support needs that don't require alternative provision. Chapter seven provides details of Cullum Centres and insights on students' experiences of them.



Many practices and adjustments made in Cullum Centres demonstrate how mainstream schools can be adapted to suit the needs of autistic pupils, as well as the benefits of specialised units like Cullum Centres.

We know that teachers' understanding of autism has a big impact on students. In our 2021 survey, we found that seven in ten pupils felt school would be better if their teachers understood more about autism. However, when we surveyed teachers for this report, we found that 87% felt confident supporting autistic pupils. This could demonstrate that teachers are not aware of the gaps in their knowledge, particularly as only

39% of teachers we surveyed had received more than half a day's autism training.¹³ It is vital that teachers receive training so they can effectively support autistic pupils and understand when needs are not being met.

The recommendations in this report represent necessary changes to the way schools are designed. It is important that schools, local and national governments recognise the need to adapt schools to suit the needs of autistic people. These changes would have a significant impact on the experience of autistic children and young people.

Chapter one:

Understanding amongst teachers



Introduction

With over 180,000 autistic students in mainstream schools, teachers and school staff need to understand autism and how best to ensure their students can succeed.¹⁴ A lack of appropriate levels of training amongst teachers can lead to students not feeling supported in class or feeling that their needs aren't being met. This can have an adverse impact on attendance and attainment.

Our survey shows that 87% of teachers feel confident supporting autistic pupils, however, this is in sharp contrast to around 70% of autistic young people who said teachers don't understand enough about autism and 54% who said that having teachers who don't understand them is the worst thing about school.¹⁵ There is clearly a disconnect between teachers' confidence in supporting pupils and how well supported those pupils feel.

The reason for the disconnect is likely due to most teachers not having appropriate levels of autism training. Autism being a spectrum condition means that how every child presents can vary greatly. Many autistic young people will mask and may appear comfortable in school at the time but may then experience burnout and express their discomfort of school when back home when they don't feel they need to mask.

A lack of understanding of behaviour means autistic students are currently being unfairly punished for what is seen as 'disruptive behaviour'.

This is often a result of the environment around them and a sign the student is becoming overwhelmed or stressed. Teachers need support and effective training to help them identify the signs of a student becoming overwhelmed and how reasonable adjustments can be made to the classroom environment to help autistic students.

Issues Training

Our survey for this report found that only 14% of secondary school teachers have had more than half a day of autism training and that senior leaders are more likely to have undertaken training than classroom teachers. All teachers and school staff need training to understand autism and the specific support needs of the children in their school. Without this whole school understanding, autistic students simply won't get the support they need, and this is likely to negatively impact their potential and attendance.

We recommend that all school staff receive mandatory autism training delivered by the Autism Education Trust (AET). Through the AET's Professional Development Programme, they have been able to train over 350,000 professionals working with autistic children and young people.

It works to improve the education of autistic children and young people in line with their 'Eight Principles' to enable more supportive and understanding environments for autistic people. Read more about these principles on the AET [website](#).¹⁶

“She did a ‘brilliant’ job of masking everything she found hard. From the school’s perspective, she was a very polite child who followed all the rules, who did as she was told, who was keen... she didn’t stick her head above the parapet in any way, so when I was saying she’s coming home absolutely overwhelmed and utterly distraught, they just couldn’t see it.”

Parent of an autistic child

However, the AET would like to reach more teaching and school staff, and we believe the Government should support the AET to enable them to spread this training further across the UK by making training mandatory. We'd also recommend that teachers, school staff and local authorities engage with AET training modules to develop their workforce.

To fully understand all autistic children, all teachers in schools need substantive training co-produced by autistic people. It needs to cover in detail how autistic young people can present themselves, the variety of issues they may face, how they can be made to feel comfortable in the classroom and how sex, gender, race and socio-economic background can also effect autistic children's experience. AET's training modules can provide this.

The Autism Education Trust (AET) is a not-for-profit partnership between the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism. It was established and supported by the Department for Education in 2007. The AET works in partnership with schools and local authorities across the UK to develop skills and share knowledge and understanding of autism. Through the delivery of training programmes, they are committed to improving the skills, knowledge and experience of school staff working with autistic pupils. The AET has worked hard to demonstrate the impact of improved

understanding of autism on exclusions. By improving understanding of autism, teachers are able to separate behaviours relating to autism from disruptive behaviour. By understanding the cause of the behaviour, teachers can adjust the school environment to stop autistic pupils becoming overwhelmed. It can also lead to teachers recognising when a student is overwhelmed and being able to intervene with the correct support.

The AET has been trialling the 'Mainstream Plus' approach in three local councils across the UK. This is a strategy developed by the Institute of Public Care (IPC) in their Commissioning Model for Ordinary Lives (2017). The approach is defined as one that “recognises the need for specialist services, early intervention and therapeutic intervention but it emphasises the need for support aimed at system leaders and the workforce that results in culture change.”¹⁷

The Mainstream Plus model understands the importance of teachers understanding autism and the impact that can have on children's school life. It recommends that school staff engage in training with the AET. This would include training sessions as well as resources and support for staff and leaders. The AET plans to create local partnerships to “create a mainstream workforce who are skilled and confident, and local mainstream settings that are resilient to support

“Either they may have inklings but wouldn’t know how to say it, or they just don’t know what they’re looking for, and they don’t see it. And then they dismiss parents, and there’s nothing worse.”

Parent of an autistic child

and educate autistic children and young people.” The approach also recommends using early intervention which understands the specific support needs of the child. This can stop issues escalating.

Applying this approach in South Lincolnshire saw an 80% decline in permanent exclusions of autistic students between 2015 and 2019.¹⁸ This is an incredible reduction and shows how important changing the school environment can be. A school system which understands autistic children is the best method of reducing exclusions. Reducing exclusions is beneficial to the child, who is able to continue accessing education, but also to the school and local council, who will need to devote less resource to disciplinary measures.

Behaviour

Mainstream school settings that lack an understanding of autism often treat ‘disruptive’ behaviour by autistic students in the same way they’d treat it from non-autistic students. However, this behaviour is often an indicator that an autistic child’s need for support at school is not being met and that the child is overwhelmed. It can also be a sign that a child is struggling to express themselves, struggling with the rules of the classroom or being bullied.

When an autistic child is being disruptive, a teacher must be trained to recognise what is happening and adapt their approach. An inclusive classroom is one which recognises the

different needs of autistic students. Misunderstandings of behaviour can lead to autistic students being excluded. Government figures show that the most common reason for autistic children being formally excluded is ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’. The most recent figures from the Department for Education show autistic children are more than twice as likely to be excluded from secondary school as pupils with no special educational needs.¹⁹ Exclusions can be really damaging and lead to an interruption in education and being cut off from friends. Exclusions can also have a longer-term impact on pupils’ attendance, as they can cause some anxiety and apprehension about returning to education.

Informal exclusions

Autistic students are disproportionately overrepresented in data relating to formal exclusions. However, even more concerning is the number of stories of informal exclusions, where children are sent home and asked not to come in. These are illegal and not officially recorded. However, in a 2021 parent survey, one in five parents told us their child had been informally excluded in the last two years.²⁰

It is important that teachers and school staff understand that informal exclusions are not only illegal but are also detrimental to a child’s education. We recommend that the Government takes steps to end all informal exclusions.

Recommendations

Recommendations of immediate actions schools can adopt:

- Identify certain staff members to achieve higher qualifications of autism training.
- End any informal exclusions.



Who?

Schools

Local government

National government

What?

Take a whole school approach and work with the AET to train all teachers in autism.

Work across all schools in their area to make sure that all staff receive autism training.

Fund the AET to deliver training for all education staff and governors in all schools so that they are fully able to support autistic pupils and students.

Tackle the unacceptable practice of informal exclusions, setting out plans to identify where this is happening and taking action to instil better understanding and support in schools.

Set a clear commitment that all work on behaviour in the Department for Education reflects the support needs of autistic children and other children with SEND.

Set clear targets for reducing the number of exclusions of autistic children.

Chapter two:

Sensory overload



Issues

What is sensory overload?

Autistic people may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain. This can have a massive impact on autistic children and young people in school, where many aspects of the environment can be overwhelming.

Sensory overload is an experience where an autistic person becomes overwhelmed by the sensory information around them.

Too much information can cause stress, anxiety and sometimes even physical pain. This can result in withdrawal, distressed behaviour or meltdowns.

Sensory overload can make school very difficult for autistic children and young people. An environment that is not adapted to their needs can be incredibly distressing, leading to them becoming overwhelmed or not wanting to attend school. To create an inclusive school, changes must be made to make the environment less distressing for autistic students.

To learn more about autism and the terms that we use to talk about autistic people, you can visit our website, where we have detailed explanations.²¹

Reasonable adjustments

Firstly, schools have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments to the educational environment and policies. This duty is defined in the *Equality Act 2010* as “to take such steps as it is reasonable to take to avoid the substantial disadvantage to a disabled person caused by a provision, criterion or practice applied by or on behalf of a school.”²²

Schools must also consider the important ruling on school exclusions by the Upper Tribunal in 2018, which ruled that disabled children, including autistic children, should not be excluded for behaviour related to their disability if schools have not made reasonable adjustments to support the child and meet their needs.²³ Reasonable adjustments could include allowing autistic children more time between lessons or allowing fidget toys. Our website lists many of the common reasonable adjustments that schools make.²⁴

Secondly, if autistic children and young people are to thrive in schools, a more proactive approach, rather than just meeting legal requirements, is needed.

Recognising that each autistic child will have different support needs and will require different adjustments from schools will make a big difference. We advise staff to have conversations with autistic children and parents to understand what support needs they have.

“You will see a child that probably looks like they're taking everything in, but is actually in such a state of terror, it's not possible to learn really.”

Parent of an autistic child

This report includes a number of recommendations for creating a more supportive environment, but it must be read with an understanding that the best way to understand the support needs of autistic students is to listen to them.

Classrooms - physical environment

Our Young Ambassadors are a group of 25 autistic people aged 16-24 who work with our Campaigns team to improve the lives of autistic people. They told us how they had experienced several issues with the physical environment in classrooms. Many of these may seem minor but can make the school a demanding environment for autistic pupils and impact both their achievement and attendance.

Bright lighting can be big issue for some autistic students and make it very difficult for them to concentrate. Schools and teachers should ensure that lights in classrooms and hallways are set to a reasonable level, especially if they are aware there will be autistic students in their lesson. Lower level lighting is not likely to present any difficulties for students without SEND but would be incredibly beneficial to autistic students. In circumstances where schools are unable to adjust lighting levels, teachers should consider the support needs of autistic pupils when creating seating plans.

There are likely to be places in the classroom which are more or less overwhelming for students. If teachers engage with their autistic students to understand both their support needs and preferences, they could make a big difference.

Concentrating can be difficult for some. Autistic students may find it difficult to sit still for the duration of a lesson and can find it difficult to cope with distractions and sensitivities. When autistic people are overwhelmed, they will often engage in stimming or self-stimulating behaviour.

“The main problem with me seeking support is that when I do get overwhelmed or have an anxiety attack in class I have a lot of social anxiety, so it's very hard for me to stand up and go up to the teacher in front of the class and ask to stand outside or go somewhere else, so I almost never do it.”

Autistic student

“It frustrates me when students are not attending school because those reasonable adjustments haven’t been made.”

Teacher at a Cullum Centre school

Stimming can be useful for autistic people to keep control of their emotions in the classroom. Our Young Ambassadors told us that using fidget toys helped with concentration. These are little toys with buttons, wheels, switches etc attached to them. Whilst these are incredibly useful for students, a lot of schools don’t allow students to use them. These can be a useful aid to learning and we encourage schools to allow children to use these in lessons.

School uniforms can be physically irritating to autistic students. This can be extremely overwhelming, leading students to be unable to focus due to sensory overload. Schools should consider more relaxed uniform policies, which allow autistic students to make the adjustments they need.

Sounds can be particularly difficult for autistic children to cope with in schools, as many autistic people are over-sensitive to sounds. Many old schools in the UK have very large and echoey rooms, which can make it hard for autistic students to concentrate or can cause them to become overwhelmed. A cheap and creative solution to this is placing panelling on the walls.

School canteens and hallways can be really noisy environments. Adaptations for autistic pupils can include allowing students to leave classrooms earlier, so that they can get to their next class free from anxiety.

It is also important that they also have somewhere to eat that is not overwhelming such as an alternative canteen, or quiet area for autistic people to eat their lunch.

Quiet spaces and exit passes - removing students from the environment

Each autistic child is different and has different support needs. Some autistic students will be able to go through school with no or few adjustments needed. However, there will always be a risk of autistic pupils becoming overwhelmed in the form of burnout or meltdowns, whether it is due to sensory overload, social difficulties or any other stressful situation. It is crucial for schools to have ways for autistic pupils to remove themselves from the difficult environment or situation.

If this is not possible, the child can become overwhelmed and reach an unbearable level of stress.

“I just think the impact on the mental well-being for some kids... [I] don’t think they quite understand the trauma experienced by sitting in a classroom of that size.”

Parent of an autistic child

“In terms of the school uniform, he went from wearing a polo shirt and shorts to having to wear trousers and shirts with ties. Ties are a very difficult thing because of the restriction, and the school won’t accept him wearing anything but the school uniform...”

Parent of an autistic child

This can leave autistic children feeling unsafe, and possibly not wanting to go to school at all.

Quiet rooms can be very helpful for some autistic pupils. This is a space that is relaxing and comfortable where autistic students and other students with SEND can go to relax and de-stress. Whilst many schools, usually those with good SEND provision, have these facilities available, they are not common. In our 2021 survey, 54% of students said that they do not have a quiet place to go to at school. Schools need to review if any quiet space can be made available.

The Cullum Centres we visited as part of the research for this report, all had quiet areas within the centre that allowed autistic children a place to feel supported and safe. These were used by students who wanted to leave a classroom when they felt overwhelmed. However, the Centre was designed to be a place that is adapted to suit the needs of autistic children at all times, so it also provided a supportive environment for children during lunch and break times.

Other schools also provide autistic students and other students with SEND with ‘exit passes’.²⁵ These passes allow pupils to leave the classroom if they ever get overwhelmed or stressed. It is a well-intended policy and can be useful for students. To use the exit pass however, the student must make themselves known to the teacher, or otherwise have some form of social interaction.

This can be difficult for autistic children, especially in instances where they are overwhelmed.

In our workshop with our Young Ambassadors group, one participant recommended an approach that their school used.

This involved having a specific page in their planner to turn to if they want to signal that they are feeling overwhelmed and would need to leave the classroom. The group agreed this was a much better alternative. We recommend adopting a similar approach or a similarly less intrusive version.

“A caretaker would come and do a fire alarm test in the morning... that triggered something for her and she would get quite anxious and want to leave, go out into the playground rather than be inside the school.”

Parent of an autistic child

Recommendations

Recommendations of immediate actions schools can adopt:



- Allow autistic pupils to use fidget toys in classrooms to reduce stress and anxiety.
- Provide autistic students with exit passes to leave classrooms if they become overwhelmed. We recommend that schools allow students to use their planners to indicate that they want to leave, to mitigate social pressure.
- Identify a quiet space or area that autistic pupils can use if they are stressed or need to leave a classroom or environment.
- Allow autistic students to make adjustments to their uniform to reduce sensory discomfort.
- Allow autistic pupils to leave class a few minutes early to avoid noisy and crowded hallways.
- Make adjustments to classroom lighting and seating plans to reduce sensory overload.

Who?

Schools should

What?

Follow the recommendations in the AET's *Good Practice Guide* and adapt the learning environment to suit the needs of autistic pupils.

Take all measures to avoid echoey rooms, such as fitting echo-reducing panels in old classrooms.

Local government should

Actively engage with autistic children and parents to understand support needs. Build practices based on what autistic children say that they need.

National government should

Introduce national guidance on how to adapt school environments to support the needs of autistic students.

Provide funding for adaptations to schools, such as furniture, lighting and quiet rooms.

Utilise the schools placement taskforce to create funding for local authorities for schools to be adapted to suit autistic students' support needs.

Chapter three:

Exams



Exams and tests are an essential part of the UK education system. These can be difficult for all students, but they can be particularly challenging for autistic students, who may have experiences such as burnout or meltdowns. Adaptations to suit the needs of autistic pupils can make a big difference.

One of the most common issues our Young Ambassadors group raised was how challenging they found the exam environment and the lack of adaptations. They spoke of the sensory difficulties they experienced during exams, as well as the anxieties and pressures they faced.

Adjustments autistic pupils might need for exams include providing laptops, giving them extra time and ensuring the environment is suitable. This means finding a room for the exam which does not cause sensory overload and making sure that the staff and invigilators are trained to have a good understanding of autism.

Schools have a responsibility to make access arrangements for students with SEND. These arrangements are designed and regulated by the Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ).²⁶ These cover a variety of tactics such as rest breaks, scribes and private rooms. However, we often hear complaints through our Education Rights Helpline that schools are not making the adaptations that children need. Schools need to speak with each student to understand their specific support needs, and then ensure they receive that support.

“The clicking of the pens, the coughing, the sneezing.”

Autistic student discussing the sensory problems of taking an exam

The stress and anxiety of exams is not just limited to the act of taking the exam itself. Preparing for exams can cause a lot of anxiety for autistic students. Providing classes and workshops, to help students understand the exam process from start to finish and how to take exams, would help. Exams often require students to navigate 'exam jargon' and understand certain rules on answering questions which autistic students can find difficult.

Many autistic pupils will also require support after exams as leaving an exam, not knowing how they performed, can lead to anxiety. The AET recommends holding sessions or one-to-one conversations with students after exams to have a debrief to talk about how the exam went.

Schools should continue to provide support up to results day, which can also be stressful for autistic students. Schools should explain the process of results day, including how, where and when pupils will receive their results. They should consider the room that students receive their results in and, if appropriate, provide an alternative space which suits the needs of autistic pupils. They should also be prepared to provide support across a wide range of outcomes.

Recommendations

Recommendations of immediate actions schools can adopt:



- Make full use of JCQ guidelines to support autistic pupils with exams.
- Provide support to autistic pupils before and after exams, understanding their specific support needs and helping them deal with stress and anxiety.
- Provide support around results day, including alternative spaces for receiving results.

Who?

Schools should

What?

Provide exam invigilators with training on autism and SEND.

Local government should

Work with all schools in the local area to ensure that they are using JCQ exam guidance to its full potential.

National government should

Consider introducing more supportive exam guidance.

Ofsted must make sure that exam guidance is being followed and include this in their inspections.

Chapter four:



Understanding amongst peers

Introduction

In our 2021 survey, just 8% of autistic students felt that their fellow pupils understood enough about autism. This figure is illuminating and demonstrates a significant problem at the centre of the education experience for autistic students. Interactions with peers and classmates are a central part of day-to-day life at school. It is important autistic students feel understood by those around them, or it can lead to autistic students feeling like they need to hide their diagnosis. In many cases, it can also lead to autistic children being bullied, which is often very traumatic. Schools have a responsibility to prevent bullying and build awareness of autism.

“I would think, if we actually got educated on what autism and other neurodivergence are like. I think people would actually know what it was or what it was like to see the world differently (...) They’d know how to not just look out for someone but also how to support someone.”

Autistic student

Issues

Schools not developing social skills

Autistic pupils can find it difficult to integrate into the social aspect of school. Social interactions are a key aspect of school life: in the classroom, in the playground, in the hallways and in the changing rooms. Each of these situations has different social obligations and rules, and it can be difficult for autistic students to navigate these situations. In our 2021 survey, 51% of students told us that they would like to receive help in school to understand how to get on with friends and classmates.

with opportunities to build social skills, such as clubs and societies that are welcoming. These situations would be beneficial to autistic people, as they would provide the opportunity for them to engage with the social aspects of school life that might otherwise be inaccessible. It is important that in creating these opportunities, schools are conscious of adapting existing clubs or creating new ones which are adapted to suit the needs of autistic pupils.

In conversations with autistic students, they have told us that they would find it useful if the school provided them

In the Cullum Centres we visited as part of this research, the staff had created numerous clubs and societies which helped autistic children feel part of the school environment. These clubs ranged from cooking classes to outdoor adventuring.

“No one knows about autism and they think it’s a joke.”

Autistic student

A key principle of these clubs within Cullum Centres was that they were never exclusive to autistic children. From our conversations with autistic children within Cullum Centres, we learnt that they valued these courses and felt they improved their relationship with other students in the school.

Masking

Due to the social pressures of school, some autistic children often hide their autism from peers. This is known as masking and is a common practice for autistic pupils.

Masking is a process where people will hide parts of themselves or their personality from people around them. It is a common, unconscious strategy that all human beings develop. However, for autistic people, this strategy can be much more harmful to their own wellbeing and health. Autistic people can feel intense pressure to hide their true personalities so that they can fit into the neurotypical world.²⁷

Masking can have a really damaging impact on mental health. Studies over the past few years have shown how autistic people who mask more show more signs of anxiety and depression, and it may even be linked to an increase in suicidal behaviours.²⁸

Masking is very common for autistic students, particularly those who are in mainstream school settings.²⁹ These students will often attempt to blend in with their peers when they

are at school and are often able to hide their feelings of anxiety and stress throughout the day. However, when they get home and they feel comfortable, these students can have mood swings, experience burnout and sometimes meltdowns because they have worked hard all day hiding their anxieties.

Masking is a habit, and one which can be developed in younger life. It is crucial that school provides an opportunity for autistic children and young people to be themselves and not feel any pressure to mask. Helping children to feel comfortable with their autism at school will have benefits to their life long beyond their time in the classroom.

Schools should work with autistic pupils to recognise when they are feeling anxious and stressed throughout the day, even when they are masking. This can be done by using methods such as The Incredible 5-point Scale to provide autistic children with methods of communicating their level of stress. Allowing autistic pupils breaks during the day will also help with sensory overload and help autistic children manage their stress throughout the school day.

Building understanding of autism amongst peers

SEN teachers have told us how sometimes autistic children can disassociate with SEN facilities and staff.

“His friends have struggled sometimes with adapting to how he reacts to things.”

Parent of an autistic child

This is often due to a fear of being judged by their peers for being autistic due to the stigma that exists amongst other pupils in the school. It is important that schools build understanding of autism across the whole of mainstream schools. This would lead to autistic pupils feeling more confident accessing the support that they need.

Research from Dr Hannah Belcher, researcher and author of *Taking off the mask*, shows that when non-autistic people know someone is autistic, they seem to judge them less harshly.³⁰

However, she recognises that any strategy to encourage autistic people to reveal their diagnosis must come hand in hand with a strategy to improve awareness of autism amongst non-autistic people.

Schools have the perfect opportunity to improve this awareness. Improving awareness of autism in young people will not only improve the experience of autistic children but will also help lay the groundwork for a more accepting society.

Recommendations

Who?

Schools should

What?

Include autism awareness training in school communications such as assemblies and personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education classes.

Lead social skills development classes with autistic pupils.

Local government should

Work with all schools in the local area to develop effective ‘understanding autism’ sessions for pupils.

National government should

Include autism awareness in the national curriculum. Setting a national standard for autism understanding.



Chapter five:

Bullying



Introduction

Autistic pupils face an increased risk of being bullied, due to the different ways in which they communicate and interact with their peers.³¹ Bullying can be difficult as autistic children may struggle to understand whether someone is being friendly or not due to challenges reading facial expressions and body language. Some of their peers may also pick on them due to behaviour such as playing on their own, or other behaviours deemed as 'odd'.

Schools have a responsibility, as well as a legal duty, to prevent bullying and safeguard all children. It is vital that schools take steps to reduce bullying in schools. Autistic pupils already face so many barriers to attending school, therefore schools must work to prevent any additional anxiety from bullying.

“The impact during the times of bullying has been really hard... it’s utterly draining for her and it’s almost as draining, isn’t it, for a parent... she says to me, “Why do you keep sending me somewhere where you know I’m going to have a horrible time all day?”

Parent of an autistic child

Issues

Context

When we spoke to autistic students in mainstream schools, they told us they experience a lot of issues with other students treating autism as a joke. This is different to bullying but can be equally as difficult for autistic students and perpetuates a misunderstanding of autism.

One student told us how people in his year would never tease him for being autistic. However, they’d make jokes with their friends where autism was the punchline. This is a common theme in conversations with young people: many children and young people are calling their friends autistic as a joke. This can be really upsetting for autistic peers, especially in instances where the autistic child hasn’t divulged their diagnosis.

Rules

Schools need to take a tough approach to bullying, with strong guidance on what to do if bullying takes place. They should make sure that school rules about bullying are very specific. There should be no misunderstanding amongst all pupils in the school about what is considered bullying. Schools should reiterate these rules and guidance whenever they can through classes and assemblies. Schools should also consult students in the school about bullying and base their guidance on the experiences of their students.

“You know the banter that goes on that doesn’t quite tip into bullying, but where if you can’t think of something to say back then people will take advantage of that. She cannot keep up with that and she takes things very, very personally and she gets stuck with what to say. If people are unkind, she really feels it.”

Parent of an autistic child

Identify risk times and places

Bullying is more likely to take place at unstructured times, such as lunch and break times. It also tends to be more focused around specific places, which are commonly under-supervised. This can include the playground, the lunchroom, corridors, toilets and on the bus to school. Schools should identify these risk times and places, so that they can make informed anti-bullying policies. To reduce bullying, schools need to ensure adequate staff supervision during these periods and areas where possible.

Quiet areas and clubs

It can also be beneficial for autistic pupils to have the option to avoid these risk areas. Many autistic pupils can find the social interaction of lunchtimes challenging.³² Autistic pupils can benefit from having access to a dedicated quiet area or perhaps access to the library during break times. This allows them to avoid the overwhelming environments and may reduce the risk of bullying.

Some schools have also had success with organising lunch clubs for autistic and mainstream pupils. These can be structured activities during break times, allowing students to take part in an activity that they want to do. Students will benefit from the supervision as well as the activity.

Cyberbullying

Schools must ensure that they have agreed definitions and guidance of what constitutes cyberbullying, and that this guidance is an important part of their anti-bullying guidance. Children and parents need to be made aware of pupils’ responsibilities when using the internet and what the consequences are for misuse. Schools providing classes and assemblies to teach students about the dangers and risks of the internet would help.

Supporting bullied pupils

Schools need to take all measures to reduce bullying. Unfortunately, however, there will always be a risk of bullying. It is therefore important that schools understand how to support autistic pupils who are experiencing bullying.

Anxiety can decrease a person’s ability to communicate, so autistic pupils may struggle to tell teachers or parents about the bullying. It is also vital to understand different levels of support needs. Some autistic pupils may be non-speaking or unable to communicate their experience to a teacher. Teachers must understand this and allow autistic pupils different ways to communicate. Some students may find it helpful to discuss bullying by drawing, writing or creating cartoons.

“She was on the receiving end of some really horrible bullying (...) She’d come home to me and say, ‘Mummy, why would you? Why does someone talk about a birthday party in front of someone that they know isn’t invited?’ She literally couldn’t understand why people would do these sorts of things... it was very difficult for her... And she lost those friends. So her experience also is not to trust people.”

Parent of an autistic child

Autistic pupils who have been bullied may need to be taught and practise set strategies and plans of action when they are dealing with bullying. They may need help with recognising when they are being bullied and what to do in that situation. The school should also provide the student with a clear set of steps to help them to deal with the bullying, including who they need to speak to, when they need to do it and what they need to communicate. This will help autistic pupils to feel confident in communicating their experiences.

Bullying behaviour by autistic pupils

In some cases, autistic pupils may themselves exhibit bullying behaviour. This may be a result of the child struggling with understanding social rules and their peers. Autistic pupils may be following a learned behaviour that they have witnessed their peers doing or have used themselves before and received the desired response. They could just be mimicking incidents or behaviour that they have seen previously.

Autistic pupils may also not have the social skills to understand the social interaction appropriately, so may have difficulty reading their peers. This can lead to them not understanding whether another person is still enjoying the interaction.

Schools must recognise how autistic students can come to be perceived as bullying. It is vital that this behaviour is dealt with in a way which understands the individual’s support needs. Autistic pupils should be taught appropriate social skills and ways to engage with others. They could also benefit from being taught strategies for calming down when they are upset. They may also need clear, specific guidelines on what are appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing their feelings.

“[Autism is] not generally treated as a positive thing. It’s sometimes used as an insult.”

Parent of an autistic child

Recommendations

Recommendations of immediate actions schools can adopt:

- Identify risk times and places in school, and ensure that they are supervised.
- Provide quiet areas for autistic pupils.
- Adopt lunch clubs, so that autistic students have somewhere to go during break times.



Who?

Schools should

What?

Produce strong guidance and rules on bullying which are specific and easily understandable for autistic students, and promote this guidance as frequently as possible.

Consult autistic students when producing rules and anti-bullying guidelines.

Teach students about the risks and dangers of the internet including cyberbullying.

Make sure that all autistic students understand and are comfortable with the process for reporting bullying. They should be enabled to report anonymously to prevent further targeting. This must be supportive, and it can be useful for each student to have a designated person that they trust and can confide in.

Local government should

Work with all schools in the local area to make sure that they all have efficient anti-bullying practices.

National government should

Introduce co-produced national guidance on bullying.

Chapter six:

Transitions



Introduction

Transition between schools and stages of life can be difficult for autistic people without support. Schools need to recognise this difficulty and make adequate arrangements to reduce anxiety. An autism-friendly school would also provide an opportunity for pupils to develop skills for life that would prepare them for adulthood.

Issues

Transitions to secondary education

Parents often tell us via our Education Rights Helpline that the transition from Year 6 to Year 7, or from primary to secondary education, is an incredibly difficult time for their autistic children. It represents a complete overhaul of their education routines, as well as a daunting new environment and difficult social situations. It is crucial that autistic pupils are supported in this transition.

Our Education Rights Helpline tells us a lack of support in this transition is one of the biggest issues facing parents. If parents are unable to explain to their child what their new school will be like, it can cause a great deal of anxiety for their child. It can be difficult for parents also, as they will not want to send their child to a school where they are unsure about the level of support available. This is why we are calling for a new school places taskforce to make sure every locality is able to deliver appropriate school places for autistic children.

Many secondary schools already provide support to students with the transition to secondary education. One way this is done is via visits. Autistic pupils – including those who do not yet have an official diagnosis – in the final year of their primary education are invited to visit the secondary school. They are able to get a tour and see the new environment. They are also able to meet some of their new teachers, so they have an opportunity to see what their support network would be like.

Some schools also arrange meetings with the primary teachers, so that they can discuss the specific support needs of the pupil. When we speak to parents, they tell us that these measures have been incredibly useful and helped their children get settled into secondary school. We would like to see action by the Government and councils to make sure these measures are taken by all schools.

It is also useful for students to be given an assigned member of staff, who they will meet before they transition to secondary school. This staff member would then be someone that they know they can go and speak to during the transition and once they start their new school. Building this relationship with autistic pupils would help to reduce their anxiety with transitions. In the Cullum Centres we visited, the staff told us that they made it a priority to build relationships with incoming students before they joined. Parents told us that this made the transition easier for their child.

“We know from years gone by where the support hasn’t been in place that the transition has been disastrous in some cases.”

Cullum Centre teacher

Transitions to further education

Parents and young people often tell us, via our Education Rights Helpline, that there is a significant lack of support for the transition to further education. This leads to difficulties for autistic people in progressing on to further study, even when they are incredibly motivated to do so.

Our Education Rights Helpline has recently seen a big increase in calls relating to college and university education. The issues raised show there is a lack of support for autistic students in these environments. We hear of cases where children have been excluded from college and education, and parents feel this is a result of their child’s needs not being understood.

We would encourage colleges and universities to engage with the AET on training in autism that would help with transitions. Furthermore, we would like to see secondary schools work with the local authority, colleges and universities to develop transition processes. These processes should be similar to those proposed for transitions between primary and secondary education. Schools should arrange visits and facilitate students meeting teachers and SEN staff in advance of joining the university.

To support autistic pupils with applications to further education, schools must recognise that all children are different and require different options. For some autistic people, university might be difficult, or they might be uncomfortable taking

that path. Therefore, schools should avoid focusing all of their attention on universities. There are many other routes for children post-16 such as apprenticeships and internships. Schools must make sure autistic pupils are informed and supported in their decisions.

Transitions into employment

2021 Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows that only 29% of autistic people are in employment, compared to around 80% of adults of the general UK population.³³ This drastic difference demonstrates the urgent need for action.

Whilst not all autistic people can work, we know that most autistic people want to. There are a variety of measures that need to be taken, beyond the school environment, to fully address this disparity. However, we believe that school is the perfect setting to provide autistic young people with support for future employment.

Schools must provide careers advice which is adapted to the needs of autistic students. This advice must be built on an understanding that further education does not suit all children’s needs, and that some children would prefer to begin working after school. Students we spoke to have also told us that they would find it really useful to arrange work experience placements with autism-friendly employers. This would allow the students to find comfortable ways of exploring the world of work.

“Primary to secondary, I think the main problem we face is that we are not given enough information on the students that come across... so we have to go through from scratch to figure out the student’s needs.”

Mainstream school teacher

Support in employment

Making autistic students aware of schemes such as apprenticeships and internships that support autistic people to access work would also help. For example, the charity Ambitious about Autism has developed a supported internship programme to help autistic young people learn new skills, build confidence and increase social networks.³⁴

The National Autistic Society runs an Autism at Work programme to increase the number of autistic people in sustainable paid employment by making employers aware of autistic talent and the benefits of a truly neurodiverse workforce. This involves working with employers to attract, recruit and retain autistic employees. The programme advertises accessible roles to autistic jobseekers via the National Autistic Society’s networks and supports them through the recruitment process. Coaching is also offered to successful candidates and managers. We encourage schools to help autistic pupils who want to seek employment to engage with the Autism at Work programme.

In August 2022, the Government announced a new Supported Employment initiative to help autistic adults into work.³⁵ This included £7.6 million in funding for 22 local authorities in England and two in Wales. Supported Employment schemes aim to use a ‘place, train, maintain’ approach to employment, rather than focusing on pre-employment training.

The Government should report on the success of this scheme and consider expanding funding to more councils if successful. We’d also urge local councils to work together with schools in the area to see how they could use the supported employment to support their students.

Skills for future life

It is important that schools play a role in preparing students for future life, rather than focusing on academic attainment alone. In our *School report* in 2021, autistic young people told us that they wanted schools to equip them with the tools for adult life and to help them to build life skills. Almost half of the students (48%) told us that they would like help planning for adult life, but only 11% felt they had enough support in building life skills, and 76% said that they want to have more support in this area.³⁶

Classes focusing on daily life skills can be provided for autistic students, other SEND students, or for all students in the school. They can provide children with vital skills that would improve their lives in future and help them with the transition to adulthood. Skills could include teaching children how to cook and choose their food, and cleaning and housework lessons to help students organise and tidy their homes. These classes could also consider teaching about topics such as taxes and paying bills. We recommend that local councils work with schools in their area to build these skills for daily life classes, so that they can be delivered outside of the school day.

Recommendations

Recommendations of immediate actions schools can adopt:

- Assign specific staff members to autistic pupils to support them and build a relationship as they transition to a new place of education.



Who?

Schools should

What?

Develop strategies to improve transitions from primary to secondary education, using tactics such as tours and meetings with future staff.

Build relationships with local colleges and further education providers, to improve transitions.

Provide careers support and advice to autistic students which is relevant to their needs and wishes. Committing to researching schemes which support autistic young people into employment.

Seek work experience with autism trained/aware companies, as well as highlight schemes that are available.

Through classes and workshops, provide autistic students with social and future life skills offered by SEN staff, or making autistic children aware of opportunities outside of school.

Local government should

Work with all primary and secondary schools in the area to improve transitions.

Work with schools and employers in the local area to build structures which support autistic people into employment.

National government should

Set guidelines on an effective transition protocol for students transitioning from primary to secondary education.

Continue developing work experience and internships for autistic students. Expand the funding and reach of the Supported Employment Scheme. Make sure these schemes are available to people with and without an education, health and care (EHC) plan.

Chapter seven:

Case study - Cullum Centres



What is a Cullum Centre?

Cullum Centres are largely funded by the Cullum Family Trust and the National Autistic Society. They are specialist centres in five mainstream schools in Surrey, Sussex and Kent: Hinchley Wood School in Esher, Rodborough in Godalming, Salesian School in Chertsey, Canterbury Academy and Hove Park School in Brighton. The first Centres were established in 2016.

Cullum Centres aim to support autistic students who do not need the type of support available in a specialist school or in alternative provision but do need specific help to support them in mainstream schools. Cullum Centre students are autistic young people who have good academic potential but find it difficult to learn in busy school environments. Attending a Cullum Centre enables them to stay in a mainstream school near to home and achieve their full potential.

Cullum Centre students spend the majority of their time in the main school, with a smaller proportion of their time spent in the Centre. The Centres are a physical space within the school, filled with staff who are genuinely knowledgeable and well-trained in autism and SEND. These staff provide specialised support that is tailored for each autistic pupil and support students to learn in small groups.

The Centres are a calm setting for students to retreat to if they become overwhelmed, with physical benefits such as quiet spaces and areas for students to take lessons outside of the classroom.

Every Cullum Centre follows the National Autistic Society's methodology for an autism-specific education. The charity supports through the design and the construction of the Centre, and by helping the school to work with the local authority to identify gaps in staff development and training. Intensive support is offered in the first five years including termly reviews by a specialist autism education consultant, help in partnering with the host local authority and the Heads of each Centre are given resources to develop best practice.

Recent evaluations of the Cullum Centres by Goldsmiths, University of London, have shown that there is no difference in overall wellbeing or sense of belonging amongst autistic and non-autistic pupils at Cullum Centres.^{37 38} This demonstrates the value these Centres have in improving the experience of autistic pupils.

Research

We spoke to autistic students, parents and teachers at mainstream schools, both with and without Cullum Centres, to find out their different experiences. This report also utilises research from Goldsmiths, University of London.

Their research team administered surveys and conducted focus groups with 104 autistic young people aged 11-14 and held 38 interviews with parents, teachers, and autistic pupils from Cullum Centre schools as well as other mainstream schools. Findings will be published at the end of the research project in 2024.

At the end of the focus groups, students were asked: "In an ideal world, what would you change about school to make it a better place?" Of the 59 responses, five key themes emerged: the school environment, reducing sensory overload, schoolwork and assessment, and improving peer relationships. As discussed earlier, these themes informed the topics we wanted to explore in this report.

This report has thus far discussed some of the key concerns about problems that autistic pupils have with mainstream schools. It has demonstrated the variety of ways in which pupils' support needs are not being met. What follows in this chapter is a discussion of how Cullum Centres have been used to adapt the school environment to meet the support needs of autistic pupils. This case study could be used as both an example and a roadmap for mainstream schools. The lessons learnt from Cullum Centres can inform schools on methods to mitigate some of the challenges that this report has discussed so far.



How does a Cullum Centre help with the issues we've identified?

Recommendations



Reducing sensory overload

Leaving classrooms when becoming overwhelmed

We identified the difficulties that can lead to children becoming overwhelmed at school and suggested children should be allowed to leave the classroom if they feel uncomfortable. This is one step, but at Cullum Centre schools they are able to go further. Firstly, teachers and support staff are trained in autism and SEND, understanding the pupils and what will help them in certain scenarios. Secondly, the Centre provides a variety of spaces designed for students to de-stress, such as quiet rooms. The Cullum Centre we visited also had outdoor facilities to help students be active as a way to calm down. In one example, a teacher told us she would often play basketball with one child and this really helped him when he felt overwhelmed in lessons.

“I feel like it's much quieter than the rest of the school and everyone here I recognise, so it feels a lot more relaxed and familiar to me.”

Autistic student at a Cullum Centre school

Transitions and home life

Transitions

Transitions are difficult for autistic pupils. Cullum Centres do as much as they can to mitigate the anxiety these transitions can create. Primary school children are invited to the school to meet the staff and have a tour of the school and the Cullum Centre. This has been really valuable to school students and parents, who know what support they'll have in place before they come to the school.

Some parents were also offered online meetings with school staff, to talk about any concerns or questions they had. These conversations allowed parents to communicate with their child about what their new school would be like.

The Cullum Centre teachers told us that the process was easier for Cullum Centre students than for autistic students in mainstream schools. This is because students applying to schools with a Cullum Centre have often had EHC plans for a long time, so their needs are well understood. The Cullum Centre teachers also told us, however, that there was work to be done on post-16 transitions. They are frustrated with the low level of support that colleges offer and don't feel that colleges provide pupils or parents with enough information in advance to ease transitions. They are continuing to build their relationships with colleges to improve transitions to further education.

“Our quiet room is one of the most important spaces. (...) When students do have a meltdown or a bit of a wobbly day or they just need some time out, it's so effective, and it's perfect - it's just a really nice quiet space with lots of sensory toys in there and they can use it how they wish.”

Cullum Centre teacher

One Cullum Centre we visited was also really committed to improving transitions into work. All students in the Centre have a careers interview with the careers adviser. This allows them to better understand their options and have the opportunity to explore what they'd like to do after school. The Centre also gives students support around applications and interviews, building their skills for adult life.

Skills for life

A successful education is not simply one which provides good academic results. Children and young people have told us that they want school to provide them with the skills and experience to help them in future life. The Cullum Centre we visited recognised this. Alongside the work they've done to help build social skills, they've also empowered students to build important skills for adult life. One such way they've achieved this is through cooking classes, where they teach children how to make new foods. They also use these sessions to encourage children to try new types of food. The Centre recognises the important need for autistic children and young people to feel supported and comfortable so that they can step outside their comfort zone.

Attendance

Autistic students are disproportionately less likely to attend school. This is often a result of the school environment not being adapted to their support

needs. Cullum Centres address some of these issues. One parent told us that her children's school avoidance had reduced since joining the Cullum Centre, and it is no longer a challenge to get her children into lessons and school.

By providing an environment that supports autistic children, it is much more likely that children will feel comfortable attending school. Average attendance rates were higher for students in Cullum Centres than for all students with SEND in mainstream and specialist schools between 2021-2022.

Attendance is a key issue for schools and government. We recognise that schools would like to improve attendance. However, schools must consider the barriers to attendance that autistic pupils face. Any policies to improve attendance should take lessons from Cullum Centres and improve the environment for support. This would help to improve attendance across school, but crucially, it would also make school a better place for autistic students.

“I do come here when I'm overwhelmed, as well as when I need to let some things off my chest. I find it helps.”

Autistic student at a Cullum Centre school

“With the Cullum Centres there’s a lot of sharing of knowledge, and I think that all of us would say that we’ve only made it this far by working as a team and sharing experiences and problem solving.”

Head of a Cullum Centre

Understanding amongst teachers

Training

One of the key issues that we addressed earlier (Chapter one) was a lack of understanding of autism and autism training amongst teachers. Improving the level of training is one of the key methods to make mainstream schools a more welcoming environment for autistic children.

All Cullum Centre staff have received specialist training on autism and SEND, and most are pursuing further qualifications, such as pursuing their NASENCO award to become SENCos. This commitment to training is admirable and really makes a difference in the child’s education. However, as one teacher told us, their role has to go beyond training. The Cullum Centre teachers have strong relationships with the students, understanding their specific support needs. This is vital to improving the children’s school experience.

A key success of the Cullum Centre we visited has been in building understanding of autism beyond the Cullum Centre staff. All school staff have received training on autism. This has long been a key policy aim of the National Autistic Society. By providing all school staff with training on autism, it means that pupils can feel supported wherever they are in the school. It also means the mainstream school is a more welcoming environment for autistic students who are not part of the Cullum Centre.

Part of the process to improve understanding across the mainstream school has included knowledge sharing between Cullum Centre staff and other school staff. This involves sharing information and tips with teachers throughout the school and discussing situations and events with teachers to understand what could have gone better, as well as what to do in the future. Building this relationship with all teachers in the school is vital and has had a significant impact on how supported autistic children are across the school.

Understanding – improving peer relationships

Cullum Centres lead assemblies and awareness sessions for non-SEN staff

The Cullum Centres we visited all had a strong commitment to building an understanding of autism amongst all students at the school. They have accomplished this through a variety of methods, including adding a neurodiversity session onto the Year 7 induction programme for all new students, holding assemblies on autism each year on World Autism Awareness Day, and including lessons on autism as part of the PSHE curriculum. All of these tactics are able to help the mainstream school be a more welcoming social environment for autistic students.

“I don’t really get along with most people in the mainstream [school]. I just like to be friends with the few people in the Cullum Centre.”

Autistic student at a Cullum Centre school

Bullying and perceptions of the Cullum Centre

Researcher Anna Cook from Goldsmiths, University of London, conducted a study in 2021 on the impact of exposure to autism on attitudes towards bullying and autism. This research was done by comparing attitudes towards autism amongst a cohort of students in a mainstream school and a cohort of students from a school with a Cullum Centre. Her research showed that pupils who had more contact with autistic pupils had more positive attitudes towards them. The research also showed that all students in the Cullum Centre school had more positive attitudes with regard to bullying in general. Cook concluded that an increase in contact with autistic people leads to more positive attitudes amongst students, demonstrating that the benefits of an inclusive school setting can stretch beyond the needs of autistic young people.

Unfortunately, the Cullum Centres do have some issues with bullying. Some students in the schools have mocked the Cullum Centre students and the Centre. One teacher spoke of how the PE fields look onto the outside area of the Cullum Centre, and they have had some students teasing Cullum Centre students using the facility. The staff were firm when we spoke to them: bullying is unacceptable. They work with the school to get bullying stopped as quickly as they can. The awareness sessions they hold with mainstream students are also designed to stop this bullying.

Bullying can be really damaging to autistic students and is a disappointing reality in every school. It is unfortunately not possible to remove all bullying from a school environment. However, the students we spoke to at the Cullum Centres did not have many experiences of bullying themselves, and they said that they generally feel accepted in the school. In the instances when they have had issues, they felt like they were dealt with sensitively and quickly.

Social skills – building friendships

In mainstream schools, autistic pupils interact with students without SEND. This can cause anxiety for autistic students, but it can also be an opportunity to build social skills that they will need in everyday life. In our 2021 survey, autistic children and young people told us they wanted to see more opportunities for them to develop social skills, including specific social skills classes.

One of the Cullum Centres we visited put great importance on building the social skills of the students. They ran clubs with autistic students, designed to help them build their social skills. These clubs also helped children build friendships and relationships. These clubs were not just held exclusively for autistic students, but for all students across the school. Children told us that these clubs were really beneficial and really helped them build relationships.

Summary of recommendations



Cullum Centre model

Provision in Cullum Centres in mainstream schools has the potential to be truly transformative for the educational experiences of some autistic children and young people. Many autistic children across England are in mainstream schools which don't currently meet their needs. This lack of support can lead to poor attendance and attainment, and can be damaging to the mental health of the autistic pupils.

Cullum Centres provide the resources and training to manage and mitigate the key concerns and issues that autistic people have at school. The report contains many examples of good practice which mainstream schools could learn and adapt from Cullum Centres to improve how they support autistic pupils.

We recommend that the UK Government recognises the value of Cullum Centres within mainstream schools and increases funding to improve the mix of provision in local areas, including more Centres or similar facilities. Creating more Centres like this in mainstream schools will enable more children across England to feel supported by their school, allowing them to succeed and give parents the confidence that they are sending their children to an institution that will support their needs.

Set up an autism school places taskforce

Autistic students and their families are telling us that they aren't getting the right support at school. The Government needs to address this widespread lack of suitable provision and set up an autism school places taskforce that is either independently chaired with support from officials or led by officials with an independently chaired oversight group.

This taskforce needs to bring together experts, charities, policy makers, school staff, autistic people and families to make sure that in every area families are able to find an appropriate school that fits the needs of their autistic child, whether it is a SEN school or in mainstream education. The taskforce would look into the baseline need across local areas, identify what difficulties parents face in finding an appropriate school for their children and offer solutions.

Every area should have a variety of schools that cater to the needs of autistic children, whether they are mainstream or alternative provision establishments. This should be the ultimate aim the taskforce will be looking to achieve.

Mandatory autism training for all school staff

The understanding of teachers is critical to the experience of autistic pupils at school. Our research has shown how 87% of teachers feel confident supporting autistic pupils. Yet, seven in ten autistic pupils feel that teachers do not understand enough about autism. This is not the fault of teachers, but a result of a lack of training. Inadequate training is available for teachers, who are then left to believe they have adequate understanding. Only 39% of teachers had received more than half a days' worth of autism training, for secondary school teachers alone this figure is just 14%.

This is not good enough; it is not possible to have a full understanding of the support needs of all autistic children in just one half-day of training. Teachers' understanding of autism is one of the most important indicators of whether an autistic child will feel supported, and each theme of this report has mentioned the understanding of teachers in some way. It is therefore crucial that work is done to improve the level of understanding and training amongst school staff.

Implementing legislation that requires all school staff to be trained in autism would have a transformative impact on the experiences of autistic children and young people, allowing them to feel supported and safe in the school environment. It would give teachers more confidence that they are supporting their students. We therefore strongly recommend that the Government introduces this legislation.

The AET works in schools to deliver autism training. They have already trained over 350,000 people across England and Wales. This training is already supported and funded by the UK Government in partnership with the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism. It is delivered by a network of trainers, who deliver modules created by the AET. We'd like the Government to increase funding to the AET, to allow them to build a bigger network of trainers able to deliver mandatory autism training for all school staff.

Co-production and education

To create a truly supportive environment for autistic pupils, it is necessary for schools and local authorities to work together and share best practice so that all schools in an area are able to support autistic pupils. It is not good enough to have just a small number of schools within a local authority that are able to adequately support autistic students, as this puts a lot more pressure on families to decide where best to send their child to school. Knowledge and expertise should be shared between all schools in an area to make sure that all schools improve their autism knowledge and training to an appropriate level. School leadership must also take responsibility for ensuring whole school training and opportunities for staff collaboration and sharing of knowledge.

Recommendations of immediate actions

Understanding amongst teachers

Schools should

Identify certain staff members to achieve higher qualifications of autism training.

End any informal exclusions.

School environment

Schools should

Allow autistic pupils to use fidget toys in classrooms to reduce stress and anxiety.

Provide autistic students with exit passes to leave classrooms if they become overwhelmed. We recommend that schools allow students to use their planners to indicate they want to leave, to mitigate social pressure.

Identify a quiet space or area that autistic pupils can use if they are stressed or need to leave a classroom or environment.

Allow autistic students to make adjustments to their uniform to reduce sensory discomfort.

Allow autistic pupils to leave class a few minutes early to avoid noisy and crowded hallways.

Make adjustments to classroom lighting and seating plans to reduce sensory overload.



Exams

Schools should

Make full use of JCQ guidelines to support autistic pupils with exams.

Provide support to autistic pupils before and after exams, understanding their specific support needs, and helping them deal with stress and anxiety.

Provide support around results day, including alternative spaces for receiving results.

Bullying

Schools should

Identify risk times and places in school, and ensure that they are supervised.

Provide quiet areas for autistic pupils.

Adopt lunch clubs, so that autistic students have somewhere to go during break times.

Transitions

Schools should

Assign specific staff members to autistic pupils to support them and build a relationship as they transition to a new place of education.

Recommendations

Understanding amongst teachers

Schools should

Take a whole school approach and work with the AET to train all teachers in autism.

Ensure all behaviour policies are designed with an accurate understanding of autism.

Local government should

Work across all schools in their area to make sure that all staff receive autism training.

National government should

Fund the AET to deliver training for all education staff and governors in all schools so that they are fully able to support autistic pupils and students.

Tackle the unacceptable practice of informal exclusions, setting out plans to identify where this is happening and taking action to instil better understanding and support in schools.

Set a clear commitment that all work on behaviour in the Department for Education reflects the support needs of autistic children and other children with SEND.

Set clear targets for reducing the number of exclusions of autistic children.

Reducing sensory overload

Schools should

Follow the recommendations in the AET's *Good Practice Guide* and adapt the learning environment to suit the needs of autistic pupils.

Take all measures to avoid echoey rooms, such as fitting echo-reducing panels in old classrooms.

Local government should

Actively engage with autistic children and parents to understand support needs. Build practices based on what autistic children say that they need.

National government should

Introduce national guidance on how to adapt school environments to support the needs of autistic students.

Provide funding for adaptations to schools, such as furniture, lighting and quiet rooms.

Utilise the schools placement taskforce to create funding for local authorities for schools to be adapted to suit autistic students' support needs.

Exams

Schools should

Provide exam invigilators with training on autism and SEND.

Local government should

Work with all schools in the local area to ensure that they are using JCQ exam guidance to its full potential.

National government should

Consider introducing more supportive exam guidance

Ofsted must make sure that exam guidance is being followed and include this in their inspections.

Understanding amongst peers

Schools should

Include autism awareness training in school communications such as assemblies and personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education classes.

Lead social skills development classes with autistic pupils.

Local government should

Work with all schools in the local area to develop effective 'understanding autism' sessions for pupils.

National government should

Include autism awareness in the national curriculum. Setting a national standard for autism understanding.

Bullying

Schools should

Produce strong guidance and rules on bullying which are specific and easily understandable for autistic students, and promote this guidance as frequently as possible.

Consult autistic students when producing rules and anti-bullying guidelines.

Teach students about the risks and dangers of the internet, including cyberbullying.

Make sure that all autistic students understand and are comfortable with the process for reporting bullying. They should be enabled to report anonymously to prevent further targeting. This must be supportive, and it can be useful for each student to have a designated person that they trust and can confide in.

Local government should

Work with all schools in the local area to make sure that they all have efficient anti-bullying practices.

National government should

Introduce co-produced national guidance on bullying.

Transitions

Schools should

Develop strategies to improve transitions from primary to secondary education, using tactics such as tours and meetings with future staff.

Build relationships with local colleges and further education, to improve transitions.

Provide careers support and advice to autistic students which is relevant to their needs and wishes. Committing to researching schemes which support autistic young people into employment.

Seek work experience with autism trained/aware companies, as well as highlight schemes that are available.

Through classes and workshops offered by SEN staff, provide autistic students with social and future life skills, or make autistic children aware of opportunities to develop these skills outside of school.

Local government should

Work with all primary and secondary schools and academies in the area to improve transitions.

Work with schools and employers in the local area to build structures which support autistic people into employment.

National government should

Set guidelines on an effective transition protocol for students transitioning from primary to secondary education.

Continue developing work experience and internships for autistic students. Expand the funding and reach of the Supported Employment Scheme. Make sure these schemes are available to people with and without an education, health and care (EHC) plan.

Endnotes



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