



# The Federation of Sacred Heart and St Mary's RC Primary Schools, Battersea

## **AUTISM GUIDANCE POLICY**

MARCH 2022

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this policy is to define autism and outline the practices that are expected for all pupils with aspects of autistic to ensure that the best practice is consistent throughout the schools.

## **This Policy includes:**

- Definition and description of autism.
- Recognising autism.
- Assessment and diagnosis of autism.
- Strategies to assist children with autism.
- Hilary House.
- National and local guidance.
- Policy aims and principles.

## **Autism**

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how a person experiences the world around them; communicates with others, and relates to other people.

Many people with autism are able to live fully independent lives but others may require varying degrees of support to help them in managing their day to day lives. People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can have autism, although it appears to be more widely diagnosed amongst men. It is a lifelong condition; children with autism grow up to become adults with autism.

## **Being Autistic**

Autism is a spectrum condition and affects people in different ways. Like all people, autistic people have their own strengths and weaknesses.

## **Below is a list of difficulties challenges autistic people may share, including the two key difficulties required for a diagnosis:**

- Social communication and social interaction
- Repetitive and restrictive behaviour
- Over or under-sensitivity to light, sound, taste or touch
- Highly focused interests or hobbies
- Extreme Anxiety
- Meltdowns or Shutdowns

## **How to Recognise Autism**

Some children will arrive at school with a diagnosis of autism in place. However, other children will not begin to show features of the condition until later in their developmental journey. Sometimes, the academic, social, emotional and sensory demands of school and life outside the home can be a prompt for symptoms of the condition to appear.

**The following features should alert teachers and others to the possibility of autism and trigger discussion with parents and the possible implementation of the local referral pathway:**

○ **Social Communication**

Autistic people have difficulties with interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice. Some autistic people are unable to speak or have limited speech while other autistic people have very good language skills but struggle to understand sarcasm or tone of voice.

○ **Other Challenges include:**

- Taking things literally and not understanding abstract concepts.
- Needing extra time to process information or answer questions.
- Repeating what others say to them (this is called echolalia).

○ **Social Interaction**

Autistic people often have difficulty 'reading' other people - recognising or understanding others' feelings and intentions - and expressing their own emotions. This can make it very hard to navigate the social world.

○ **Autistic People may:**

- Appear to be insensitive.
- Seek out time alone when overloaded by other people.
- Not seek comfort from other people.
- Appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate.
- Find it hard to form friendships.

○ **Repetitive and Restrictive Behaviour**

With its unwritten rules, the world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people. This is why they often prefer to have routines so that they know what is going to happen. They may want to travel the same way to and from school or work, wear the same clothes or eat exactly the same food for breakfast.

Autistic people may also repeat movements such as hand flapping, rocking or the repetitive use of an object such as twirling a pen or opening and closing a door. Autistic people often engage in these behaviours to help calm themselves when they are stressed or anxious, but many autistic people do it because they find it enjoyable.

Change to routine can also be very distressing for autistic people and make them very anxious. It could be having to adjust to big events like Christmas or changing schools, facing uncertainty at work, or something simpler like a bus detour that can trigger their anxiety.

○ **Over or under-sensitivity to light, sound, taste or touch**

Autistic people may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. For example, they may find certain background sounds like music in a restaurant, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain. Many autistic people prefer not to hug due to discomfort, which can be misinterpreted as being cold and aloof.

Many autistic people avoid everyday situations because of their sensitivity issues. Schools, workplaces and shopping centres can be particularly overwhelming and cause sensory overload. There are many simple adjustments that can be made to make environments more autism-friendly.

- **Highly Focused Interests or Hobbies**

Many autistic people have intense and highly focused interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong. Autistic people can become experts in their special interests and often like to share their knowledge. A stereotypical example is trains but that is one of many. Greta Thunberg's intense interest, for example, is protecting the environment.

Like all people, autistic people gain huge amounts of pleasure from pursuing their interests and see them as fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness.

Being highly focused helps many autistic people do well academically and in the workplace but they can also become so engrossed in particular topics or activities that they neglect other aspects of their lives.

- **Extreme Anxiety**

Anxiety is a real difficulty for many autistic children and adults, particularly in social situations or when facing change. It can affect a person psychologically and physically and impact quality of life for autistic people and their families.

It is very important that autistic people learn to recognise their triggers and find coping mechanisms to help reduce their anxiety. However, many autistic people have difficulty recognising and regulating their emotions.

- **Meltdowns and Shutdowns**

When everything becomes too much for an autistic person, they can go into meltdown or shutdown. These are very intense and exhausting experiences.

A meltdown happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be verbal (e.g. shouting, screaming, crying) or physical (e.g. kicking, lashing out, biting) or both. Meltdowns in children are often mistaken for temper tantrums and parents and their autistic children often experience hurtful comments and judgmental stares from less understanding members of the public.

A shutdown appears less intense to the outside world but can be equally debilitating. Shutdowns are also a response to being overwhelmed, but may appear more passive - e.g. an autistic person going quiet or 'switching off'. One autistic person described having a shutdown as: 'just as frustrating as a meltdown, because of not being able to figure out how to react how I want to, or not being able to react at all; there isn't any 'figuring out' because the mind feels like it is past a state of being able to interpret.'

## **Assessment**

A formal diagnosis of autism is usually undertaken by a range of health care professionals through a multi-disciplinary assessment or MDA. Pediatric doctors and nurses, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and others, alongside parents will undertake a range of observations and assessments to ascertain if a child will meet the criteria for a formal diagnosis. Some children with autism may have an increased likelihood of also having one or more additional co-morbidities; conditions such as such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or attention deficit disorder, with or without hyperactivity. Many people with autism will experience anxiety and depression, especially as they grow older and have increasing awareness of the World around them and its demands.

In schools, professionals should be aware that there will be children they encounter who will display aspects of autism who will not have a formal diagnosis. Teachers and support staff should be trained to recognise them and make appropriate adjustments to the environment, communication, teaching activities and social organisation to provide effective inclusion for students who experience these issues.

## **Strategies**

Through the different phases of their education children will need a variety of strategies and interventions to bring about successful learning. This might include a range of groupings including mainstream classrooms, small groups and/or one-to-one work.

School policies should include reference to behaviour management, risk assessment and reasonable adjustments that will be made in order to ensure the ongoing education of children with ASD.

Staff supporting and working with a child with an autism will be trained as part of The School's regular professional development programme to be able to recognise autism and employ strategies that will provide successful integration for children with autism.

### **Staff may employ the following Strategies:**

- Create co-operative learning opportunities with peers.
- Focus on shared interests as a means of encouraging participation.
- Allow the child to develop as much independence as possible.
- Keep facial expressions, language and gestures simple and clear.
- Give a clear indication of the amount of work required, teach what 'finished' means and what to do next.
- Provide accurate, prior information about change/expectations.
- Use timers and first/next/then visual charts to support expectations.
- Provide additional visuals to support understanding of the task.
- Differentiate tasks depending on the child's understanding, ability and prior attainment, e.g. using a laptop or iPad to support writing tasks.

The above list is not exhaustive and will be altered, amended and added to through staff INSET and CPD.

## **Hilary House**

Hilary House is a specialist base attached to Sacred Heart R.C. Primary School that provides for the needs of 18 children. These children receive specialist support and a differentiated, individualised curriculum within the base as well as being able to enjoy opportunities to experience mainstream education and wider social integration with their peers in the wider school community.

Admissions to Hilary House are managed by Wandsworth Special Needs Assessment Service in consultation with The School. Children who are placed in Hilary House will have a formal diagnosis of autism and an Education Health and Care Plan.

We use a wide range of strategies and systems within Hilary House to ensure children have the best opportunities for development.

### **These include:**

- Routines, systems and structures that maintain a reassuring consistency to the school day.
- A high staff to pupil ratio.
- Approaches to teaching following TEACCH and SCERTS models.

## **TEACCH**

We use TEACCH principles to provide structure across all areas of the school. TEACCH also emphasises the importance of identifying underlying strengths and needs related to autism. It is therefore based on understanding the learning characteristics of individuals with autism and the use of visual supports to promote meaning and independence where appropriate.

### **TEACCH Values include:**

- **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.

### **Some of the TEACCH Autism Program Priorities are:**

- 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.

### **SCERTS**

The core domains of the SCERTS model focus on Social Communication, which has as its stated aim as 'helping a child to be an increasingly competent, confident and active participant in social activities' and Emotional Regulation, which focuses on 'supporting a child's ability to regulate emotional arousal'. (Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent & Rydell, 2006). If a child has a weak capacity to self-regulate their physical arousal and emotional state they are less likely to be able to attend to and access social interactions and learning opportunities. The SCERTS model places equal weight on the role of Transactional Support in terms of the interpersonal support a social partner can give and the range of environmental supports such as visual and sensory strategies to support learning and emotional regulation.

### **The Core Domains are:**

- **Social Communication**  
Goals to help the child be a competent, confident and active participant in a social world. To achieve this a child needs to develop competencies in two key areas - Joint Attention and Symbol Use.
- **Emotional Regulation**  
The capacity to self-monitor levels of physical arousal and emotional states in terms of Self-Regulation and Mutual Regulation.
- **Transactional Support**  
This includes the adjustments made to the environment to foster positive learning outcomes.

○ **Interpersonal Support and Learning Support (environmental support):**

- A highly differentiated curriculum.
- The use of a sensory room.
- A wide use of visual strategies to access the curriculum.
- Regular SALT and OT support for small groups and individual children.
- Opportunities for developing social skills and cooperative play skills.
- Support strategies to manage anxiety, maintain emotional and sensory regulation.
- Opportunities for consistent, effective communication with parents and carers of children within Hilary House.

All pupils who attend the base have opportunities to access the mainstream school according to individual needs, ability and attainment.

**National and Local Guidance**

**Our Policy follows the Recommendations and Guidance of the following Reports:**

- **The national strategy for autistic children, young people and adults: 2021 to 2026 Updated 22 July 2021.**
- [Special Educational needs and Disability \(SEND\) Code of Practice \(2015\)](#)
- [Equality Act 2010 \(section 6\).](#)
- **Wandsworth Strategy for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities aged 0 – 25 2020 – 2024 (2020).**
- **Wandsworth Autism Advisory Service, Good Practice in Early Years and Primary Schools (2020)**
- **Wandsworth Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy 2019.**

**Aims and Principles of our Policy:**

- All staff working with children identified with autism should have training to help them understand the nature of the condition and its implications for the delivery of appropriate support. This will include understanding the environment and ethos amongst staff required to nurture children with autism.
- Sacred Heart School and St Mary's School acknowledge the diversity and complexity of autism, the value of early intervention and the varying needs of children at different points of their lives.
- The children in Hilary House have the same opportunities and access to education and support that are extended to all pupils within the school.
- Sacred Heart School and St Mary's School will take account of what strategies are working well in Wandsworth schools and any specific approaches and interventions which we provide training on should have a proven track record of success.
- Parents/carers have an essential role in the development of good practice that will assist children with autism.
- Families, schools and wider communities have an ongoing need for greater understanding and knowledge of autism.