

Autism Bases in Special Schools

For Children with
Special Educational Needs



Placement Procedures

There are admission criteria for entry to special schools and to Autism Bases. Each pupil will be placed according to individual need. The placement procedures are consistent with those for other pupils in special schools or units in Hertfordshire.

All pupils attending the Autism Base will be full members of the school and should have access to the usual range of educational and social opportunities available to all pupils in the school.

Staffing

All Bases have 8 places. There is a staff ratio of 1:2 in each. The staff structure is: a Base Manager (the senior teacher), a class teacher, a Nursery Nurse and a Learning Support Assistant plus mid-day assistance. All Bases have part-time clerical support.

Curriculum

In devising the curriculum, account has been taken of recent research literature in the educational needs of children with autistic spectrum disorders.

All children will have access to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum, including the National Curriculum appropriately modified and differentiated for each child. Priority is given to language development, social interaction and the explicit teaching of appropriate social behaviour and life skills. Staff promote an atmosphere of trust and high expectations, from their detailed knowledge of each child in their care, gained through assessment and careful observation.

- Each day there is at least one period of sustained physical activity - there is clear evidence that this can reduce anxiety in children with autism and thereby reduce behaviour difficulties.
- There is training in imitation and observational skills and opportunities are given to practice these skills in real life contexts. Use may be made of video to help children reflect on what they do.
- There is a clear structure to minimise stress and promote learning.
- Children receive direct one-to-one teaching each day.
- Children are taught the necessary skills to enable them to integrate with their peers in the main part of the school.
- Children are given opportunities for learning to learn.
- Children are given opportunities for independent and group learning experiences.
- Children's strengths are promoted to maximise their learning potential and their difficulties addressed.

Pupils will have an individualised educational programme, in line with their Statement of Special Educational Needs, which will detail:

- the short term learning objectives for the pupil
- the steps towards integration into the school
- ...including a planned programme of integration indicating the level of support to be provided by the staff of the Autism Base

The programme will be reviewed at least termly, with a full review of the Statement taking place annually.

Structure

In all the Bases there are clearly defined areas for play, for individual or small group teaching, and for independent work.

- Each day is structured with a combination of familiar routines and particular key activities. This provides a focus for the day and distinguishes it from other days of the week.
- There is a visual timetable for all the children.
 - Photographs, line drawings, or symbols and words for each session are displayed in sequence.
 - Children are encouraged to check the timetable to find out about the next activity. Pictures are also used to prepare children for a change to the established routine to reassure and allay anxiety.
 - In this way, children are given an understanding of what they are going to do and what is expected of them.
- Work is presented in a format which enables children to understand:
 - the tasks they are expected to do
 - when the tasks will be completed
 - what they will be doing next.

Individual Work Sessions

- New skills are taught to children working one-to-one with an adult. Tasks are broken down into individual, sequential steps.
- Opportunities are provided for consolidating and developing newly acquired skills within a small, established group setting.
- When teaching new skills the adult may sit either opposite or beside children. To improve eye contact and motivation staff may sit across the corner of a table.

- Children are given one task at a time and all materials are provided so that they can focus on the key skills being developed. All other items are removed to minimise distractions.
- Where children are resistant to adult direction, have a short attention and concentration span for teacher-directed activities or are easily overwhelmed by a large quantity of materials, special teaching techniques may be used, such as physical prompting and backwards chaining. For example, the adult may employ physical prompting or backward chaining where the child will be required to work “backwards” to place the last piece of a puzzle, then the last two and so on.

Self-help and life skills

The children are helped towards achieving maximum independence with dressing, undressing, toileting, hand-washing, feeding skills and table manners. They are taught how to make requests and how to reject politely.

Physical

Children with autistic spectrum disorders often have co-ordination difficulties and need extra practice to acquire both fine and gross motor skills required for such tasks as using a pencil or scissors, pedalling a tricycle and ball skills. All children have regular physical activities aimed at helping them to develop a sense of self and body awareness.

Motivation

Children with autistic spectrum disorders have impaired social understanding, communication and imagination. This can result in a lack of motivation to perform tasks other than those closely associated with a narrow repertoire of severely restricted interests. For these children, tasks should be meaningful and incorporate personal interests as far as possible.

For some children novel tasks may need to be presented with extra enthusiasm:

- to increase arousal levels
- to promote participation and motivation.

Any positive effort towards completing the task is rewarded with praise:

- to underline what the child has achieved
- to make the learning situation a positive experience that the child will want to repeat.

Tangible rewards, such as stickers, are used for those children who are motivated by them. The aim is that eventually the child will choose to perform the task independently.

Practising Skills

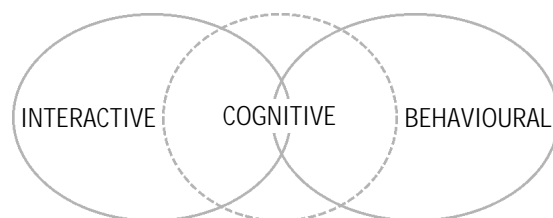
When consolidating skills, children either sit in 'distraction free' work bays or at the centre table.

When assisting children to perform teacher-directed tasks independently an adult may stand behind them to encourage them.

Teaching Approaches

Educational approaches for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders can largely be grouped under three headings - Interactive, Cognitive, and Behavioural.

All Hertfordshire Autism Bases use a synthesis of these approaches with the emphasis on any one aspect being subject to the changing needs of the individual child. It can be depicted thus:



Cognitive

Children with autistic spectrum disorders need to be taught that the environment has meaning.

In teaching children with autistic spectrum disorders we aim to:

- develop in children with autistic spectrum disorders an awareness of their own role as problem solvers. This skill will need to be taught.
- involve the children in explicitly planning, monitoring and reflecting on their own activities.
- introduce choice into as many situations as possible in ways that are meaningful to the children and which offer structured alternatives to begin with.
- use opportunities to get the children to become fully engaged with a task to enable them to learn from the experience so they are encouraged to evaluate what they are doing in terms of how it feels (pleasant/unpleasant, easy/difficult etc) and in terms of the goal.

- teach new skills or new tasks usually in one-to-one situations with an adult through careful visual structuring or through computer assisted learning.
- teach children how to learn in a group, using tasks or activities that are already familiar to the children with autism so that they are free to cope with the social learning involved.
- teach in varied settings with varied materials in order to help children be as adaptable as possible.
- teach skills in their natural setting to aid generalisation.
- teach routines with an increasing degree of flexibility incorporated in order to give the pupils a strategy for understanding and predicting the order of events.
- use a visual presentation of information in which the materials and physical structure visually lead the pupils towards understanding and success.
- teach strategies of working top to bottom, left to right.
- teach the concept of when an activity is finished.

The curriculum focuses on the process rather than the product of learning. Initially this involves children in looking at their work at the end of a session, or watching a video of an activity in order to recall it. Children are involved in the planning of their activities through organising part of their day themselves from a constrained visual choice.

Interactive

Social interaction

Staff use interactive approaches throughout the day in order to encourage both social interaction and social communication.

Staff use every opportunity to help the children to relate to other people:

- children are taught to approach and address the person by name before engaging in conversation.
- children are taught not to touch others or to stand too close.
- children are encouraged to look at the person addressed from time to time and to wait their turn in the conversation.

To facilitate social interaction with a peer, adults involve the children in such activities as:

- turn-taking games as a pair
- chasing games
- sending and receiving a ball
- pushing another child in the trolley
- pulling another child along in the bike trailer.

Play skills

Children with autistic spectrum disorders often have a severely restricted range of interest; therefore:

- they are provided with opportunities to explore novel materials.
- they are actively taught appropriate play.
- they are encouraged, during group role-play and individual sessions, to model functional play using equipment available in the Base.
- they are also given space to develop their own ideas beyond those provided by the adult and symbolic play is introduced where appropriate.

Where children are unable to organise themselves during undirected time, staff will suggest suitable activities for them based upon their particular interests so that they may be motivated to do them.

Communication

Difficulty in language and communication is one of the most fundamental aspects of the “triad of impairments” experienced by children with autism. It affects their social, intellectual and behavioural development. The development of communication is therefore a major priority and crosses all subject areas.

Approaches used to develop effective communication:

- A ‘total communication environment’ using speech, signing, gestures, symbols, photographs, and objects of reference, according to individual needs, is used to provide clarity and reinforce whatever communication a pupil already uses.
- To create opportunities for developing communicative skills, children are encouraged to make a choice between two items or activities.
- Favourite items are sometimes kept deliberately out of reach to encourage children to make requests and to learn appropriate language, signs, gestures such as pointing, or use of pictures to convey needs.
- Routinely children are encouraged to make choices at times when they are highly motivated, for example, at drink and biscuit time.
- To gain a child’s attention the adult may say their name and then allow the child time to cue in to the adult’s voice and to realise they are required to listen.
- Initially instructions are simple, concise and consistently use the same language to enable the child to associate each instruction with a particular routine or activity. Once the child has made this association the language can be varied slightly or the instruction can be given out of the normal context to generalise learning.

- Gesture, sign or photographs may support instructions. Sometimes names are used in place of pronouns which, in order to avoid confusion, are introduced gradually.
 - Action songs and rhymes invite participation. When children have become familiar with the actions of the song, gaps may be left for them to anticipate and supply the next action or word before continuing with the song. This technique may be used to improve eye contact.
 - Where children are passive and reluctant to communicate needs they may be required to choose between, for example, two photographs or objects relevant to particular tasks. Having 'chosen' children will be expected to carry out the activity in order to foster a connection between the photograph or object and the activity in their minds.
- * Where a child is exceedingly passive, the adult will copy his or her sounds and actions in order to interact with the child and to develop a turn-taking play sequence.

Behavioural

Positive behaviour management

Some children with autism may have learned a variety of unusual or abnormal behaviours that have arisen as a result of their condition and additional learning difficulties.

In order for children to develop more appropriate behaviours they are helped towards a better understanding of the world they live in and how they operate within it. This is achieved by:

- a familiar structure with established routines, the use of pictorial timetables and other visual cues.
- social stories, which explain visually a situation to a child and which may be written using symbols, photographs and words.
- Each story is written specifically for an individual child at the appropriate level. The stories are then read with the child.

In order for children to gain maximum benefit from learning opportunities it is essential that:

- they feel secure, comfortable and happy
- they understand what is expected of them
- they have a positive relationship with staff
- they have an effective and acceptable method of communicating their needs and desires.

In addition it is important that:

- appropriate behaviour is rewarded and success is acknowledged
- staff are able to communicate efficiently with them
- there is a calm, quiet, consistent approach to management of behaviour.

Staff do not simply react to problem behaviour, but rather analyse the causes and triggers for the behaviour in order that they may be controlled or eliminated.

- Staff use the ABC method of analysis (Antecedents, resulting Behaviour and the Consequences for both the child and others).
- Individual Behaviour Programmes are drawn up and regularly reviewed.

The main aims of behaviour management are:

- to manage the child safely and to minimise the disruption to others
- to reduce the likelihood of problem behaviour occurring
- to maintain and develop a positive relationship with the child
- to maximise learning opportunities
- to give the child the control of their own behaviour.

Rigidity and obsessional behaviours

It may not be possible or desirable to eliminate obsessional behaviours and routines. It is necessary to restrict the amount of time that children can indulge in their obsession:

- where the behaviour is interfering with children's ability to learn
- is socially unacceptable
- is injurious to others

Relatively harmless obsessions may be used as a reward

- to motivate children to perform tasks which they personally find less attractive.

Where children are reluctant to change activities they may nevertheless be required to do so.

- Children are reassured by a consistency in approach and eventually come to accept changes more readily.
 - Children are normally prepared for the end of one activity and beginning of the next using both verbal and visual cues to avoid surprise and confusion.
 - Children may be shown how much time they have left at an activity by the use of digital timers. This technique can be used both for activities which children want to continue and for those they are resisting.
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Integration

Hertfordshire's philosophy on educating children on the autistic spectrum:

- supports their integration within their peer groups
- holds the belief that children with autistic spectrum disorders benefit socially from being within a group where more advanced social skills are modelled.

Each school has different approaches according to the children concerned. The integration will be a gradual process with the aim of total inclusion in the main part of the school or into a mainstream school if this would be in the best interest of the child.

Some children initially work entirely within the Base environment with integration gradually introduced when appropriate.

This integration could be functional:

- into small groups dealing with a curricular subject or social
- for instance, at playtime.

Other children begin by joining their age-appropriate class in the main part of the school, with Base staff supporting in class or withdrawing children for parts of the day to work on particular areas of need.

Children are accompanied by staff from the Base who are familiar to the children with autism until it is agreed by all staff concerned that they can remain in the integrated situation successfully. Sessions are carefully planned with the class teacher involved and parents are kept fully informed.

Other integration projects may involve visits from children and staff from the main part of the school into the Base. This is a valuable situation for all the children as they meet different adults in different environments within a controlled situation. It is often called reverse integration.

Working with Parents

It is recognised that parents have vital information about their own children, which they need to share. In order to develop consistent communication, Base staff endeavour to develop good home/school links. Parents may also find it beneficial to be provided with symbol timetables to help their children understand what will happen each day. These sorts of timetables may also be used to facilitate the pupils' understanding of activities outside school or in the school holidays.

Effective home/school liaison is an integral part of the provision for children with autistic spectrum disorder. It may involve:

- parents participating in their child's individual programme - with direct involvement through written home programmes.
- parents and staff working together to develop programmes to enable consistency between approaches at home and school.
- regular informal two way communications - through home/school books, phone calls, surgeries, videos, - enabling parents to keep school aware of any changes at home and vice-versa.
- support groups and workshops for parents to meet with other parents of children with autism. This can lead to the parents being able to give much valuable advice to each other.
- annual review meetings to discuss the report, and to review and set new targets for the coming year.

- schools developing resources for parents to borrow such as books, videos and leaflets.
- home visits.

Staff Training

Teachers in the autism Bases are expected to follow the Distance Learning Course in Autism from the University of Birmingham which leads to a qualification in the education of pupils with autism. The one-year course leads to the Advanced Certificate in Education or the Post-Graduate Certificate. Some teachers opt to take the course at degree level, which takes two or more years.

All staff in the school, teaching and support staff, receive awareness training in the needs of children with autism and attend a regular support group to keep up to date with approaches. Staff are made aware of the various recognised approaches in order to help improve their teaching methods. These approaches include:

- Applied Behavioural Analysis (e.g. Lovaas)
- Daily Life Therapy (Higashi)
- Interactive Play (e.g. Options)
- Intensive Interaction
- Musical Interaction
- Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
- Social skills training (e.g. Social Stories)
- Visually Supported Learning (e.g. TEACCH)

Other training opportunities are made available, ranging from one-day courses to longer courses which can be accredited.

Hertfordshire LEA runs a 10-session course, accredited through the University of Birmingham, which all staff are invited to attend.

Support Services

The role of a Speech and Language Therapist in the Autism Base

The Speech and Language Therapist in the Autism Base works closely with the Base staff as part of the educational process. S/he is involved in the on-going assessment of each child's speech and language development and can advise staff and parents on the use of signs, pictures or symbols to aid communication.

The therapist works with children individually or in groups:

- to extend the children's awareness and understanding of the world around them.
- to encourage interaction with adults and children.

The emphasis of the therapist's work is on the development of language and communication; not only on speech.

Other Support Services

Advice and support is available:

- from the Advisory Teacher for autistic spectrum disorders
- from the Specialist Educational Psychologist
- from the educational psychologist attached to the school.

Advice is sought from occupational and physiotherapists, and other Health Service personnel, as and when required.

Close liaison is maintained with Social Services on an individual case basis.

Effectiveness

An agreed set of standards has been developed against which the quality of the provision can be judged. These relate to the overall quality of the Autism Bases and to the effective education of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders. The extent to which the aims of the provision, as set out on pages 2 and 6, have been met will be monitored on a regular basis.

Indicators of effectiveness:

- Pupil achievement of individual targets as set out in their IEP.
- The progress of pupils in developing cognitive skills.
- The progress of pupils in developing social and communication skills.
- The success of individual behaviour plans in increasing pupils' appropriate behaviour.
- The degrees of integration pupils achieve into the mainstream of the school or into an ordinary school according to individual needs and circumstances.
- The extent to which pupils successfully join the activities of the whole school such as assembly, school performances, and other whole school activities.
- The specialist knowledge of individual members of staff about autism and the consistent application by all staff of this specialist knowledge.
- Staff who have undertaken training in autism and the number who have gained extra qualifications in autism.
- Positive feedback from parents.
- A decrease in the number of pupils with autism placed in out-county provision.

Special Schools in Hertfordshire LEA with Autism Bases:

North Area	MLD	Woolgrove
	SLD	Greenside
South Area	MLD	Valley
	MLD	Colnbrook
East Area	MLD	Middleton
	SLD	Amwell View
West Area	MLD	The Collett
	SLD	Woodfield
	MLD	St Luke's

SLD Greenside

Who to contact

For further details about this factsheet please contact:

Senior Advisory Teacher, SEN (Autism)

Specialist Advisory Service

The Woodside Centre

The Commons

Welwyn Garden City

Herts AL7 4EN

Tel: 01707 320697