

SEN and disability in the early years

Case studies

Attention Hillingdon: building early years capacity to meet the needs of children with ASD

Build confidence, knowledge and skills to support young children with autism

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Presentation available <http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/2015/04/special-educational-needs-and-disability-events-march-2015/>

Context

The Early Years inclusion team (EYIT) and a range of other services supporting practitioners in early years settings, wanted to find a sustainable, evidence-based approach to enabling more children with ASD and social communication difficulties to be more effectively included in their mainstream settings. The question they raised was, *How could we better equip setting-based practitioners to meet the needs of young children with a diagnosis of ASD or with social communication difficulties?*

This led to researching an approach, *Attention Autism*, based upon the work of Gina Davies, an experienced speech and language therapy consultant. The team decided to introduce and embed an approach to social communication therapy based on the *Attention Autism* model. The approach focuses on developing attention, communication and independence skills which many young children with ASD struggle with as part of the impact of their impairment. The model involves parents and offers a sustainable approach that setting practitioners could implement.

Children are invited to participate on the basis that they have a diagnosis of autism, have other social communication difficulties or just that they would benefit from support with their attention and listening skills. Parental consent is sought; and parents are involved through weekly *tips* on how to support at home and in pre- and post-project meetings. Initial training was delivered to the EYIT team alongside local authority Educational Psychologists, Speech Therapists, Advanced Skills Teachers and the Autism team. This ensured a multi-agency approach from the start and thereafter enabled the approach to become embedded in health and education pathways and in practice in the local authority.

Developing and embedding the approach into setting based practise

The approach could best be described as giving participants *an irresistible invitation to look and therefore to learn*. It does this by designing activities that are highly visual, dynamic, fun and enticing. A range of stimulating activities is designed with the developmental level and behavioural characteristics of the children in mind. The environment is adapted to be contained and predictable and to avoid overloading the sensory processing abilities of the children. The model enables practitioners to observe and then practice the activities over an 8 week period. The expectation is that practitioners actively engage in these sessions from the start with a view to carrying out the sessions and generalising the approach in day-to-day activities.

Setting practitioners take part in a pre- and post-project training session and then participate in the sessions which are led first by the trainer and then repeated by themselves. In the final week the practitioner designs and runs the session independently.

In some sessions the children are filmed for observational purposes. The trainer will then reflect on those observations looking for *peaks* in attention, which may range from momentary stilling and calming to active listening, turn taking and vocalisation. Observations are then fed back to

staff and parents as well as being used for reports where appropriate. In the final week the practitioner is also filmed so that they can reflect on their own practice.

What happens in the sessions

Each session has stages which build in length and ambition. Initially the group may come together for around 5-10 minutes but by week 8 extend to over 20 minutes during which staff seek positive interactions with the children so that they can build *shared good memories*.

Stage 1: *Bucket time*: a bucket with a lid is filled with *irresistible*, multi-sensory, highly visual toys. The facilitator takes out the toy and models active listening and attention. Children are encouraged to just look and share attention. If they leave the group they are gently but assertively brought back to the group.

Stage 2: *Attention builder*: this activity involves the facilitator carrying out an activity in a structured and systematic way which starts from the preparation.

Stage 3: *Interactive game*: this teaches children to focus, shift and re-focus attention. The facilitator chooses an adult to model an activity to reduce anxiety and demonstrate what will happen.

Stage 4: *Table activity*: the facilitator models an activity and then the children are given a tray containing the same resources, to carry to a table and do themselves. They are given minimal support with the aim of fostering independence.

Impact: A detailed study of the impact on a number of children has been made. A copy of this study is available on request.

Impact on children: Through the filming and observation process within the programme, higher levels of engagement, communication and independence have been recorded. Impact scores that measure these skills more than doubled, on average, over the course of the 8 week programme.

Impact for parents: parents complete a questionnaire following on from the project and their response has been overwhelmingly positive:

- *His eye contact and speech has improved*
- *J has become more confident and wants to participate*
- *N is more aware of the importance of turn taking and has become better at it*

Practitioner and setting impact: Within 5 years, two thirds of early years settings have been trained to deliver *Attention Hillingdon*. The practise in nurseries has been embedded by accreditation visits from the EYIT who continue to work closely alongside practitioners. During these visits a significant impact on practitioner confidence and skill has been noted. Staff deliver the sessions, and use the skills, in their everyday practise. They are more able to include children, to be more assertive, reduce distress and use appropriate differentiated language.

Thanks very much for implementing the attention Hillingdon project in our nursery, we have gained and learnt so much and most importantly the children have benefited greatly.. children have gained confidence, increased attention and used more spontaneous language.. we noticed that after attending the sessions the children were able to focus more during other activities.

Early Years practitioner