



# Autistic Spectrum Disorders in the Early Years


A guide for parents and carers



Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)



**Hampshire**  
County Council



# Meeting the needs of children with autistic spectrum disorders in the early years

## A guide for parents and carers

### Your child and autistic spectrum disorder

This leaflet is for parents/carers who may be concerned that their child has an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). We asked some parents/carers what they would like to know about autistic spectrum disorders and these are the questions they asked.

### What is an autistic spectrum disorder?

An autistic spectrum disorder affects a child's ability to understand communication, social situations and language. Children who are affected will have difficulty understanding the consequences of their own actions as well as those of others. It is as if these children cannot make sense of what is happening around them.

For children with an autistic spectrum disorder the world can be a very puzzling place and many of their different behaviours can be an attempt to cope with their confusion. Often these behaviours can be challenging for all those involved with the child.

Other, more specific, terms are sometimes used when describing autistic spectrum disorders including autism and Asperger's Syndrome.

## Who does it affect?

Estimations of levels of autistic spectrum disorder vary but there has been an apparent increase in the incidence over time and an incidence rate of around 1 in 100 children is now accepted as the best estimate. Boys with an autistic spectrum disorder outnumber girls by about 4:1.

Many children with an autistic spectrum disorder will also have general learning difficulties.

## What can be done?


The difficulties connected with an autistic spectrum disorder are lifelong. It is clear, however, that what parents/carers, teachers and others who work with young children do in the early years has a great impact on the child's future. Early intervention in the areas of social understanding, language and communication are key. When parents/carers and professionals work closely together they almost always produce the best results.

## Where can I go for help?

The uncertainty many families feel can be very painful. It may seem as though there is a bewildering number of people who might be able to help or, alternatively, no-one at all.

You might find it helpful to talk to any of the following people:

- your family doctor
- a health visitor
- nursery, pre-school/childcare setting or school staff
- staff at your local Children's Centre.



They will be able to advise you about who else to talk to and to help clarify your child's needs and what assessments are necessary. This may include talking to a speech and language therapist, a paediatrician or a clinical or educational psychologist. It is important your concerns are listened to and taken seriously.

## What is an assessment?

There are different ways of assessing the needs of children with an autistic spectrum disorder including informal assessments, such as how your child learns and plays, as well as more formal assessments.

Assessments describe the development of your child over a period of time and help to clarify not only his/her needs but also the best ways of helping him/her to learn. The people involved may work for health services, children's services or voluntary bodies. The assessment is most effective when everyone works together with you as parents/carers.

Some children with delayed development in social interaction and communication are referred to the health service for diagnosis. This is usually undertaken, in partnership with parents/carers, by specialist consultants, clinical psychologists or multi-disciplinary teams that may include an educational psychologist and a speech and language therapist.

## What does Hampshire offer?

Hampshire Children's Services Department has developed a wide range of services aimed at enhancing the learning and development of young children with autistic spectrum disorders. Many aim to build on the skills of parents/carers, increasing their skills and understanding in meeting the needs of their child at home.

Hampshire offers :

- The NAS's EarlyBird Programme – a three month programme, developed by the NAS, for parents/carers of pre-school children with an autistic spectrum disorder.

The programme is delivered by licensed trainers who work with parents/carers on how to get the best out of their child.

- The Portage home visiting service – a weekly early education service offered in the home in which parents/carers and the Portage home visitor work together to develop the child's skills.

All Hampshire Portage home visitors attend advanced training in working with children with an autistic spectrum disorder.


- THOMAS Training: The Hampshire Outline for Meeting the needs of the under fives on the Autistic Spectrum. This provides four days of education and training with additional ongoing support for anyone living or working with the under fives on the autistic spectrum. Parents/carers and foundation stage practitioners are encouraged to attend the training together.

- The THOMAS Outreach Programme (TOP) – a service delivered to children with an autistic spectrum disorder in their home and/or their pre-school/childcare setting. This can continue into their first term of school.

TOP offers between 5-15 hours weekly per child in close partnership with parents/carers.

- Outreach support from the Portage Service, some special schools, and children's centres to pre-school/childcare settings and schools.
- Nursery places in mainstream and special school settings and support for children to attend a local pre-school/childcare setting.

Area Inclusion Co-ordinators (InCo) provide advice for pre-school/childcare settings about working with children who have special educational needs.



Parents/carers have shown that they value what Hampshire offers. The following quotes reflect their feelings.

*"I have benefited from EarlyBird and THOMAS. It's been great to learn from other parents."*

*"TOP has been wonderful. We didn't have to fight for anything. It was just there."*

With the permission of parents/carers, health professionals and Area InCos will inform the Children's Services Department about children in pre-school/childcare settings who have special educational needs. An educational psychologist will contact parents/carers to provide support and to advise about the range of educational provision that is available to meet a child's educational needs.

## What is the future for my child?

As a parent/carer you will want to work out what are realistic expectations for your child.

It is helpful to develop a partnership with those working with your child so you can ask questions and solve problems together. Working out long and short term goals can be helpful. When your child enters school there will be a regular cycle of planning and review as part of a partnership between parents/carers, school and other professionals.

Sometimes it is the little questions that are most important – so do share them, even if there are no ready answers!

Many parents/carers want to know that they are not alone and that other people know about autistic spectrum disorders. Many find it helpful to talk to other parents/carers, so contact numbers for the NAS and Hampshire Autistic Society are given at the end of this booklet together with other useful addresses. Some professionals will be able to tell you about support groups in your area.

## Contacts

For further information about Portage, EarlyBird, THOMAS and TOP please contact your local educational psychology service based in the Children's Services Department at:

Fleet Local Office

Birch House, Barley Way,  
Fleet, Hants GU51 2YB

Tel: 01252 814729

Havant Local Office

River Way, Havant PO9 2EL

Tel: 02392 441496

Winchester Local Office

Clarendon House, Romsey Road,  
Monarch Way, Winchester  
SO22 5PW

Tel: 01962 876239

### For SEN publications

#### The SEN Service

Hampshire County Council  
Children's Services Department  
Elizabeth II Court East,  
The Castle, Winchester SO23 8UG

Tel: 0845 603 5620

Website: [www3.hants.gov.uk/sen-parentpublications.htm](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/sen-parentpublications.htm)

Email: [childrens.services@hants.gov.uk](mailto:childrens.services@hants.gov.uk)

### For information and advice on special educational needs

#### Parent Partnership Service

Hampshire County Council  
Children's Services Department  
Elizabeth II Court East,  
The Castle, Winchester SO23 8UG

Tel: 01962 845870

Website: [www3.hants.gov.uk/pps](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/pps)

Email: [enquiries.pps@hants.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries.pps@hants.gov.uk)

## Voluntary Organisations

#### National Autistic Society (NAS)

For information about autism spectrum disorders, services, welfare rights, legislation and support

Helpline: 0845 070 4004

Website: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk) – which has details of local parent/carer support groups.


#### Hampshire Autistic Society

1634 Parkway  
Solent Business Park, Whiteley  
Fareham PO15 7OH

Tel: 01489 880881

Website: [www.has.org.uk](http://www.has.org.uk)

Email: [info@has.org.uk](mailto:info@has.org.uk)



This 2009 revision of the information leaflet was carried out by a team which included representatives from parents/carers, the National Autistic Society (NAS), the local authority and the National Health Service (NHS).

You can download this publication at:

[www3.hants.gov.uk/sen-parentpublications.htm](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/sen-parentpublications.htm)

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