East Sussex Position Statement on supporting the development of social communication in children and young people (May 2025)

Purpose of this document

This position statement came about because of the voice of people in East Sussex with lived experience. It has been co-produced between:

- Education East Sussex
- East Sussex Children's Integrated Therapy and Equipment Service
- East Sussex Parent Carer Forum

With input from East Sussex Community Paediatrics and Aspens.

It aims to ensure a shared understanding of neuro-affirmative approaches for children with social communication differences to inform how best to support them and their families as they negotiate the world around them. We work together to ensure every parent/ carer in East Sussex feels that their voice, their views and their experiences matter. It also allows them to contribute towards developing and improving services to positive impact upon the lives of children and young people with SEND.

Our hope is that this document will empower parents/ carers, children and young people, and schools to:

- Gain a deeper understanding of social communication in all its different forms
- Implement neuro-affirmative approaches that meet a child or young person's individual needs

What is Social Communication?

- Social communication refers to the way people use language and non-verbal cues (like body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice) to interact with others in everyday situations. It involves understanding and sharing information, expressing thoughts and feelings, and interpreting social cues in order to build relationships and navigate social settings
- Teaching social communication often refers to acquiring a set of 'skills' such as making eye contact; knowing when to speak; good looking and listening. However, attitudes to this approach are changing, recognising that they represent a neurotypical perspective and are not reflective of our neuro-diverse communities/ populations

- Autistic children and young people have social communication differences, as do many others, for example children and young people with language disorder, social, emotional and mental health needs or trauma. A neuro-affirmative approach is therefore widely suitable.
- The Double Empathy Theory put forward by Dr Damian Milton suggests that '*when people with very different experiences of the world interact with one another, they will struggle to empathise with each other*' and that this applies between autistic and non-autistic people as well as across many different communication contexts. Further information can be found here: The double empathy problem. Dr Milton describes an empathy divide between autistic and non-autistic people that is uneven because the majority non-autistic way of communicating is seen as typical and 'correct' and the minority autistic way of communicating is seen as atypical and 'incorrect'. Rather than expecting autistic people to communicate in a non-autistic way which can cause problems such as masking, we should be fostering better mutual empathy, understanding differences and shared acceptance.

What might differences in this area look like?

This isn't an exhaustive list, but some autistic children and young people may experience some differences in the following areas:

- **Language differences:**
  - Attention and listening differences
  - Loss of words early in communication development
  - Use of vocalisations/ chunked phrases for self-regulation or enjoyment
  - Use of gestures might be inconsistent, minimally used or not used
  - May prefer to label items, but not yet be able to use language to make requests or converse
- **Social differences:**
  - May prefer not to make eye contact
  - Differences interacting with peers
  - Might prefer to play alone
  - Differences participating in conversation e.g. less likely to engage in 'small talk'
- **Interests, activities, movements & sensory experiences:**
  - Preference for particular movements or stimming e.g. likes to rock/ spin/ tap and finds this regulating
  - Preference for patterns or sequences they enjoy e.g. lining up toys
  - Preference for predictability e.g. enjoys eating the same food, likes to walk the same route to nursery, enjoys routine
  - Enjoys play that involves organisation, matching and mechanics e.g. sorting, matching, lining up, construction
  - May experience dysregulation or meltdowns when routines, places or people are not suitably predictable
  - May have a particular interest which brings joy and can engage in this for long periods

- o Over or under reactivity to sensory input e.g. may find loud noises difficult to cope with or may seek out sensory input with lights
- o May experience sensory aversions or interests e.g. food or not liking certain textures of clothing

Background research and evidence base for change (including lived experience)

While we know that there is excellent inclusive practice within many East Sussex schools, East Sussex Parent Carer Forum report that some children and families continue to experience negative experiences at school.

You can find out more about the lived experience of autistic people here: https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/stories

There is growing evidence on the effectiveness of social skills training interventions for autistic individuals and their impact on masking:

- Social Skills Training generally focuses on teaching autistic people to conform to the social norms and behaviours of non-autistic people, failing to recognise that the perceived difficulty with social interaction for many autistic people is less a matter of not knowing how to communicate, but rather a difference in how social interaction is experienced and processed, Hull et al., (2024) and Kraemer (2021)
- Recent studies show that autistic individuals share information effectively with each other in an equivalent way to non-autistic individuals, (Crompton et al., 2020).
- A focus on non-autistic norms fails to recognise the strengths that autistic individuals may have within social interactions
- Many autistic people want support with social skills and communication but this is not always provided by traditional Social Skills Training (Hull et al., 2024)
- Failure to consider the views and needs of autistic people in the design of Social Skills Training interventions can negatively impact their effectiveness and increase masking, resulting in stress, anxiety and depression. Monahan et al., (2023) and Chapman et al., (2022)
- Social Skills Training intervention for autistic people can be improved by shifting away from traditional, deficit-focused models towards more responsive, holistic and individualized approaches (Dart et al., 2024) and through the provision of social communication support that is personalised and accessible as and when it is needed (Hull et al., 2024).
- For example, a primary-school based study has shown that when autistic children are able to access their very strong interests in school, it is highly advantageous to their communication, both verbal and non-verbal (Wood, 2019).
- Some autistic research participants emphasise the need for non-autistic people to receive training on how to socialise with autistic people (Hull et al., 2024).

Useful Links:
- https://autismawarenesscentre.com/rethinking-social-skills/
- https://beaminghealth.com/article/social-skills-training-everything-you-should-know
- https://hattalks.uk/if-not-social-skills-training-then-what/

- https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/masking

References:
Chapman, L., Rose, K., Hull, L., & Mandy, W. (2022). "I want to fit in… but I don't want to change myself fundamentally": A qualitative exploration of the relationship between masking and mental health for autistic teenagers. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, *99*, 102069.

Crompton CJ, Ropar D, Evans-Williams CV, Flynn EG, Fletcher-Watson S. Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective. Autism. 2020;24(7):1704-1712. doi:10.1177/1362361320919286

Dart, E. H., Radley, K. C., Helbig, K. A., & Salvatore, C. (2023). Reframing Social Skills Practices for Autistic Students: A Responsive Framework for Assessment and Intervention. Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 34(1), 44–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2023.2221671

Hull, L., Rane, S., Lee, S. H. L., & Sedgewick, F. (2024). "Just Ask What Support We Need": Autistic Adults' Feedback on Social Skills Training. *Autism in Adulthood*.

Kraemer, I. Why Social Skills Training Does Not Help Autistic People. Autistic Science Person. Published November 28, 2021. https://autisticscienceperson.com/2021/11/28/why-social-skills-training-does-not-help-autistic-people/

Monahan, J., Freedman, B., Pini, K., & Lloyd, R. (2023). Autistic input in social skills interventions for young adults: A systematic review of the literature. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *10*(1), 1-21.

Wood, R. (2019). Autism, intense interests and support in school: from wasted efforts to shared understandings. *Educational Review, 73*(1), 34–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1566213

Our approach and guiding principles

In East Sussex we value different communication styles and preferences equally. We support a neuro-affirmative approach and recognise that we are on a journey to implement this in East Sussex.

We see pupil voice as central to understanding whether or not any social communication difference is having a significant negative impact on their well-being. This should drive the need for additional support and we should take care to separate our perspective from the child or young person's.

For example, a child may frequently play alone in the playground but we need to understand the child's perspective to work out whether or not this is a problem. Does the child want and need to be alone to enable self-regulation?

We encourage people to reflect on the use of frequently used tools such as rewards and benefits which are likely to imply neurotypical values, e.g. rewards for 'good' listening or 'good' behaviour which could indirectly impact neuro-divergent children's self-esteem.

We accept that there are certain societal expectations in some environments, for example, remaining quiet in a library or school assembly. However, where we can adapt the environment and expectations according to different needs, we should.

We want to support approaches that:

- Build self-awareness, understanding and valuing of people's own communication preferences, such as those which develop interoception and self-regulation
- Develop self-advocacy
- Support general acceptance in the community that different people have different preferences including early and ongoing teaching about understanding and valuing difference
- Avoid unintended consequences, especially masking
- Use strengths-based principles to describe a student's social understanding and communication
- Make reasonable adjustments to better support a pupil with their social understanding and communication differences and build upon their strengths

Some approaches that **support** these principles are:	Some examples of tools that **do not support** these principles are:
- Autism Education Trust https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/ - Learning about neurodiversity at school (LEANS) https://salvesen-research.ed.ac.uk/leans - Social Thinking by Michelle Garcia Winner https://www.socialthinking.com/social-emotional-academic-learning/all-ages - Comic Strip Conversations and Social Stories https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/communication-tools/social-stories-and-comic-strip-coversations - Lego Therapy https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/lego-pilot - Therapeutic Thinking https://therapeuticthinking.co.uk/	- Social skills groups that aim to teach neurotypical social behaviour - Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com/pecs/. Please note that using picture exchange informally as a short-term early stepping stone to intentional communication is not the same as PECS and continues to be a valuable tool - Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)

• Communication passports devised by the young person themselves • Social space – find my tribe https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/what-we-do/services/i-am-an-autistic-young-person/online-youth-network	

Note: We are moving away from using the phrase 'social skills' because it is historically linked to a deficit model, implying that all should aim for a neurotypical social communication style. However, we recognise that it might still be helpful to use this as a search term when seeking information about social communication.

Links to other sources of information

- Autism | East Sussex Local Offer
- Autism | East Sussex
- Home - East Sussex Parents Carers Forum
- ASPENS CHARITIES
- Amaze Sussex: for families with disabled children and young people in Sussex
- National Autistic Society
- Autism - guidance | RCSLT