

COMMITTEE ON THE AUTISM ACT 2009

NOTE OF MEETING WITH AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE AND PARENTS, 12 MAY 2025

The Committee on the Autism Act 2009 held a private meeting, facilitated by Ambitious About Autism, with young autistic people and parents on 12 May to discuss their experiences of education and transitions to adulthood. The parents in the group had autistic children between the ages of six and 14 with experience of both specialist and mainstream education. The young people in the group were currently attending mainstream college or university.

I. Experiences of access to and inclusion in education

A parent spoke about how their autistic child had had both positive and negative experiences in education. When their child was at nursery, the staff told the parent several times that it was best for the child not to attend social activities like tea parties because it would be too overwhelming. This wasn't discussed with the parent beforehand. There were times when the child became overwhelmed and the parent was told that if the 'negative behaviour' continued the child wouldn't be allowed to return. This continued even after the child received an autism diagnosis. The child has had more positive experiences since moving to a smaller school. The school is flexible and accommodating and the child attends for reduced hours because they would struggle with the full day. The child has their own space with favourite toys to calm them down, one-to-one support from a teacher, and a routine so they know where to sit. The other children also seem aware of and accommodating towards their needs.

Another parent said their child's mainstream school did try to be inclusive, but it couldn't provide what they needed. The child did okay during key stage 1, but the demands of the curriculum and the environment in key stage 2 were too much. There were concerns about not being able to support the child to participate in activities like swimming lessons and residential trips. The child's EHC plan didn't come with enough funding to enable the school to meet their needs. During key stage 2, the child moved to a hub in a different school, and they are loving it there. There are more members of staff per child and the staff have a high level of understanding.

Another parent said they had very similar sentiments. They went through the process of trying to get an EHC plan for their child and making sure it is in place. Despite that, they had been met with serious challenges on inclusion and on staff training and understanding of autism. There is so often box-ticking rather than meaningful and consistent support. Their child is now at secondary school and is in detention three times a week. The child is exhausted most of the time because they are masking and they don't want anyone to know they are autistic. At the moment there is not enough staff training or understanding of neurodiversity.

A young person said that when they had struggled with the mainstream class environment at primary school because it was overwhelming, they were taken out of class and given nothing

else to do. There was no effort made to make the class more inclusive. At secondary school they couldn't access the cafeteria for the same reason. They were offered a separate room to eat in but they couldn't eat with their friends there, so they ended up having to eat outside in the cold. The school uniform code was strict and became a major source of stress. PE was also a huge stressor because it was overwhelming and loud. There weren't any alternative quiet activities. The young person hadn't really had any positive experiences with inclusion or efforts made to make adjustments for their needs. Some of the teachers were kind to them.

Another young person said that they had had a similar experience at school. They weren't allowed to go on school trips because the school didn't adapt to meet their needs. They weren't able to participate in many activities. Teachers didn't understand their needs, leading to frustrations on both sides. In sixth form, they had a better experience. There were smaller class sizes and their teachers took an interest in some of their special interests.

Participants discussed how inclusion in education could be improved for autistic children and young people. They said that there is a need to increase acceptance as well as awareness, moving away from a stereotypical understanding of autism and towards an understanding of complexity. Better training to enable staff to support autistic students and more funding to enable schools to create more inclusive environments would help. There should be more sensory-friendly classrooms, staff support and mentoring, and involvement from children and young people in decisions. There should be a transdisciplinary team approach around the child with support from different professionals. At the moment EHC plans don't seem to be implemented fully. There should be more accountability for the delivery of EHC plans.

2. Experiences of identification and support

A young person said that at primary school they were part of a social and emotional learning support programme for anyone with an identified need. They could talk to peers who understood them, using writing, talking and puppets. They could also do activities to help them feel like they had achieved something. At secondary school, they weren't supported. The environment was overwhelming, partly because of noisy building work. The school said they should move elsewhere but not until it was too late to do so. They were allowed to go to the school office if they were overwhelmed. In sixth form, they had a better experience. They had a form tutor who understood their needs in a more in-depth way. Their teaching staff were briefed about them and their needs. They were allowed to miss assembly, allowing them to focus more on the school day.

Another young person said that their primary school hadn't understood their needs. Their parent had to contact the school repeatedly to ask for support. This continued in secondary school. For their GCSE mock exams, they notified the school that they needed a smaller separate room. The school didn't do this and it was left up to their subject teachers to sort it out. The quiet room for SEND students was too small and eventually they were excluded from it. The school eventually opened a separate building, which was more accessible. They had a better experience at college. The college approached them first and asked about their

needs. The college showed the young person round before they started, introduced them to the SEND team and discussed how to meet their needs.

A parent said that they had been surprised that their child's nursery had been very helpful with getting an EHC plan. They had heard horror stories about this but they felt very supported, although they did have to resolve some coordination issues.

Another parent said they had received quite a lot of support from their child's mainstream school. Their child had one-to-one support from a member of staff who was paid to go on extra training courses. The school helped with referrals to speech and language services and getting an EHC plan, but it still became very difficult because there wasn't sufficient funding. For example, their child loves music, but there are very few resources for that. Music provision in primary schools is probably not as good as it should be in general, let alone for children with SEND. They fought for access to a music specialist to be in the child's EHC plan to unlock funding. A lot depends on whether schools and families know what to do to unlock support. Local specialist schools in their area now go around mainstream schools to share best practice. The SEN coordinator was brilliant but was also a class teacher and deputy head. Being an SEN coordinator is a full-time role.

Participants discussed how identification and support in education could be improved for autistic children and young people. They said there should be more funding for adaptations to sensory environments, early identification and staff support. There should be better training for staff with good frameworks and examples of how to help. Being believed is key. School and college SEND teams also need to talk to students and their families about transitions.

3. Experiences of transitions to adulthood

A young person said their school had said multiple times that they would not be able to go to university, despite having the grades they needed. The school even suggested that the young person sit out of university preparation sessions. Now, they are at university. The Disabled Students' Allowance is brilliant: it provides a lot more support and it is a lot easier to get than support at school. They have been able to access equipment, education support and a study skills mentor. University is very tricky in some ways. The structure of university learning is too standard. Being talked at in a lecture doesn't work for them. It's very hard to make adaptations to that, unlike in a school.

Another young person said they had experienced a lack of support with the transition from primary school to secondary school, and they had been told they wouldn't be able to go to secondary school. Now they were at college and they hadn't had any support with leaving and going to university yet.

A parent said their child was in key stage 1, but the parent was already worried about transitions. They just didn't think the world or a job setting was equipped for autistic young people. It terrifies them to think about what their child's future will be like. They know parents worry anyway, but that worry is multiplied by a million for parents of neurodivergent children. They wonder how their child will be able to lead a fulfilling life and contribute to society like everyone else can.

Parents discussed their experiences with children moving from key stage 3 to key stage 4. In their EHC plan for Year 9, they are meant to look at transitions and set outcomes and targets to meet their needs. They felt worried about their children's future. One parent said they were aware of support available from peers, parent trainers and charities, but not of sources of legal, financial and housing support. They thought things had probably been improving over the past decade. They hear more now about adults being helped to live on their own with support provided. Another parent said their child in Year 9 was already anxious about finishing school, getting a job and becoming independent. There doesn't seem to be any structure in schools around this. Nobody has discussed a career pathway with them.

Participants discussed how transitions to adulthood could be improved for autistic children and young people. There should be better guidance for young people, parents, teachers and support staff. There should be more college and university practice days and more job support and guidance. Some universities have an autism week. This is a good idea to help familiarise incoming students with the environment. There needs to be early career development support at school. Children and young people need mentoring and counselling through transitions to provide emotional support. It's about giving children the right support at a critical time. There is a need for a deeper understanding of what autistic people are like and what they need. An autistic person with a high level of educational attainment may still need help with social and emotional needs or executive function.