Autism Focused Support as a Component of Holistically-Informed Practice: Models and Frameworks at Sutherland House School

1. Introduction

This document will introduce an overarching model of support at Sutherland House School. It will then focus on the first element, 'autism focused support', outlining how needs will be identified and addressed at school.

Sutherland House School has recently established a dedicated Behaviour and Support team, consisting of experienced practitioners, committed to person-centred practice. The team has been tasked with developing innovative approaches that will maximise the learning opportunities and life experiences of students. In order to achieve these outcomes a series of new models and frameworks have been developed, based on current guidance, understanding of autism and evidence-based practice.

2. An Overarching Model of Support

This is a new, innovative model at school and has three overlapping components:

1. **A**utism Focused Support (knowledge base)

2. **P**erson-Centred Active Support (value base)

3. **P**ositive Behaviour Support (integrating knowledge and value base into practice)

Figure 1 depicts the APP model of support. The three components are integrated and work dynamically for each student:

Figure 1: The APP Model of Support at
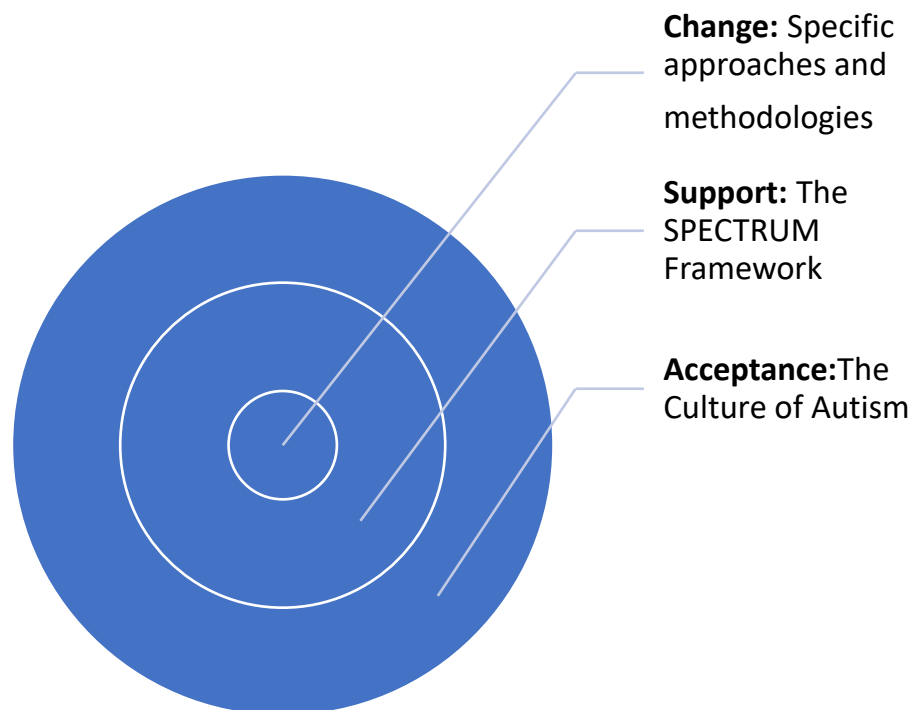
Sutherland House School
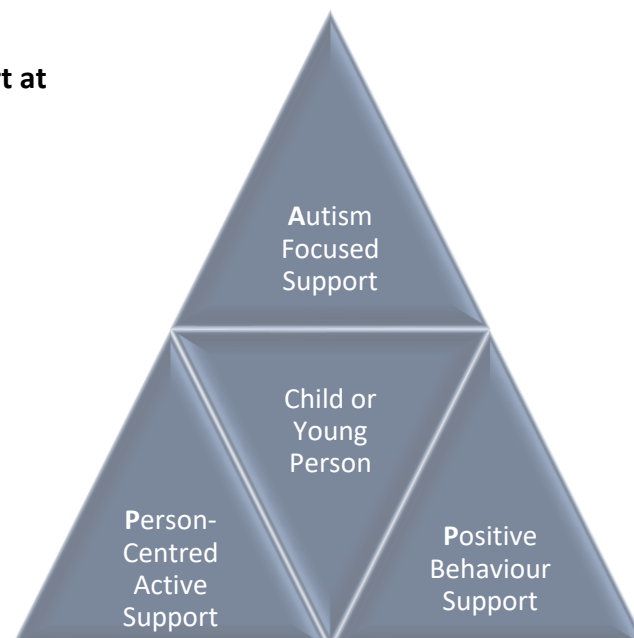
3. Autism Focused Support

There is a wide presentation of autism and educational need at Sutherland House School and this is reflected in the three colour coded pathways. As a school we are committed to supporting all students, at all phases of the autism spectrum. By doing so we not only support behaviour change, we will reduce restrictive practice and enhance quality of life (see NICE Guideline 170 (2013), section 1.4.9).

An ecological sub-model for autism practice has been developed that, in turn, has three central components (see Figure 2). The **ASC model** is based on **A**cceptance, **S**upport and **C**hange.

Figure 2: Model of Autism Practice at Sutherland House School

Change: Specific approaches and methodologies

Support: The SPECTRUM Framework

Acceptance: The Culture of Autism

3.1 Acceptance: The Culture of Autism

Acceptance underpins our value base and our core belief that autism has meaning and value to the individual and society. We refer to and incorporate elements of 'The Culture of Autism' (see Mesibov and Shea, 2005) to achieve this.

The Culture of Autism supports neurodiversity and acknowledges that children on the autism spectrum think, learn and experience the world differently. In order to be genuinely inclusive, we must recognise and accommodate difference. When we consider difference there is always a balance between strengths and difficulties in both presentation and support needs, and the Culture of Autism outlines this balance.

3.2 Support: The SPECTRUM Framework

We believe that children and young people at school will require support to navigate a neurotypical social world. As such we have developed an extensive framework that provides scaffolding, rather than intervention. The **SPECTRUM** framework draws on the Culture of Autism to provide wrap around support for the individual, based on their individual needs. The elements are:

1. **S**ystems
2. **P**ositive engagement
3. **E**nvironment
4. **C**ommunication
5. **T**ransitions
6. **R**elationships
7. **U**nderstanding
8. **M**anaging emotions

1. Systems: Individuals with autism are thought to be systemisers and this derives from the work of Baron Cohen (2009). Systems can be manifested inherently in routines and rituals, narrow interests and attention to detail. Shared systems develop through structure and as such we use communication systems, visual systems, work systems and sensory systems, amongst others. TEACCH is a systems-based methodology that is used extensively at Sutherland House School to give a shared sense of understanding, enhanced visual support and structure to the student's day.

2. Positive engagement: We encourage positive interactions and create opportunities to expand experiences, to generalise learning and increase a sense of predictability. Expectations must be clear and new experiences underpinned with communication to maximise understanding. By definition autism is characterised by a limited range of interests, behaviours and activities. Inherent interests must be used positively and expanded to increase the individual's repertoire of experiences.

3. Environment: Awareness of the impact of the physical, sensory and social environments on the student with autism. A focus on lower arousal environments or low arousal spaces that can be readily accessed to prevent anxiety and autistic meltdown. This is achieved by zoning the physical environment and communicating accessible zones to the individual in a meaningful way.

4. Communication: Is integral to autism practice. Social communication difficulties are central to autism, from the seminal work of Wing and Gould (1979) to current DSM V and ICD 11 diagnostic criteria. It is recognised that individuals with autism are typically visual thinkers, with an acute attention to detail, yet literal and concrete in their processing. Communication systems need to take these factors into account.

5. Transitions: Individuals with autism can find transitions difficult, from macro transitions (moving to a new school) to lower-level transitions (such as taking a different route to school) and a myriad of micro transitions (moving between lessons). This can be explained by difficulties with central coherence or seeing the 'whole picture', accompanied by an attention to detail. For many individuals with autism the ability to use prior knowledge and experience to predict what is coming and project into the future is problematic. Wherever possible transitions should be well planned, rehearsed and with all relevant parties involved to avoid mixed messages and inconsistency of approach.

6. Relationships: In simple terms, the factor that will determine positive outcomes for children and young people with autism is a supportive social network. People matter and relationships matter. At Sutherland House School the first step is often supporting social tolerance. This leads to perhaps the most important aspect of development for any person with autism, understanding self and others.

7. Understanding: It is important to respect and validate the student with autism, without making judgements that will denigrate their autism and uniqueness. Neurodiversity is as valid as any other form of diversity. At Sutherland House School we do not just celebrate autism, we champion it and empower it within our students.

8. Managing emotions: Many individuals with autism, particularly children, experience difficulties in understanding, identifying and expressing both feelings and emotions. This is linked to difficulties in conceptualising empathy and the development of theory of mind.

Emotional connectedness and expression can be compounded by past trauma and attachment. It is imperative that students are given the opportunity to explore a range of emotions in a way that they can connect with.

3.3. Change: Specific Approaches & Methodologies

Change is the most sensitive and considered element of the ASC model as it is not about moulding the child or young person to conform. Change is about personal development and the journey of the student whilst at school. It is centred on growth and fulfilment.

In order to facilitate change we look for 'windows of opportunity' to increase access and engagement, to increase experiences and underpin with communication.

Approaches and methodologies are listed below, but the list is not exhaustive and does not include adapted practices such as Yoga, mindfulness, music, drama and art:

- Psychosocial and psychoeducational strategies (group work and 1:1)
- TEACCH
- Intensive Interaction
- Sensory support, through circuits and sensory story bags
- Visual support
- Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
- Attention Autism
- Social explorer strategies
- Social Stories
- Talking Mats
- Drawing and Talking
- Makaton
- Lego
- Recognition and regulation of emotions