

# Module 7 : Recognised Approaches to Autism

- What is the SPELL Framework?
- An introduction to different recognised approaches to autism
- Preparing for social inclusion
- The person-centred approach

## In this module, you will learn about:

- The SPELL Framework?
- Different recognised approaches to autism
- Preparing for social inclusion
- The person-centred approach
- Meeting individual needs

## 7.1 Introduction

Deciding which approach to autism is used by families, teachers or support professionals is largely dependent on the needs of the autistic individual. Accordingly, while there are several well-recognised and frequently used approaches, exactly how they are used can vary greatly from person to person.

Remember, because autism is part of a spectrum, which includes a wide range of special needs and conditions, what works well for one person may not necessarily be effective for another.

## 7.1 The SPELL Framework

**The National Autistic Society doesn't just recommend one practice or therapy, but it provides information about several methods that are well researched and may be effective. One of these is the SPELL Framework.**

The SPELL Framework is popular for identifying which issues an individual is experiencing and reducing any of their disabling effects. It also provides people on the autism spectrum, their families, teachers and support workers with a cornerstone for communication.

### What is the SPELL Framework?

It stands for Structure, Positive (approaches and expectations), Empathy, Low arousal, and Links. SPELL recognises that each autistic person has individual needs, and stresses the importance of planning and intervention based on these needs.

#### Structure

The importance of structure in the life of an autistic person has been recognised for some time now. It makes the world seem like a safer, more predictable and accessible place for people on the autism spectrum.

Through structure, an autistic person can develop more flexibility, greater independence, and autonomy. They will better understand what others expect and be able to reduce their dependence on other people. Structure plays into the strengths of many autistic people who like a sense of order, sticking to routines, and have a preference for visual organisation.

#### Positive

Through a programme of sensitive but persistent intervention, autistic children and adults can be better engaged and start to discover and develop their potential. Setting positive, high, yet realistic expectations based on careful assessment can open the door for improved engagement and self-realisation.

A positive approach must always consider the needs of the individual and their levels of function and

support. Through positivity and encouragement, self-confidence and self-esteem can be reinforced, and strengths, abilities and interests can be built on. This can help reduce anxiety in autistic people and build tolerance and acceptance of new situations.

## **Empathy**

To utilise empathy, the world must be seen from the standpoint of a person on the autism spectrum. Empathy is, in fact, a key ingredient in working with any autistic person. Imagine the perspective of the person and gather insight into how they experience the world, as well as what motivates or interests the individual.

Empathy also provides an understanding of what frightens, distracts or distresses people on the autism spectrum, and enables those working with autistic people to better understand and respect their valid experiences.

Empathy is vital for developing communication, building relationships and reducing anxiety. A person who wants to demonstrate good empathy to someone on the autism spectrum must be calm, predictable, good-humoured, well organised and analytical.

## **Low Arousal**

The goal of maintaining low arousal for people on the autism spectrum can be achieved through a calm, ordered approach that reduces anxiety and aids concentration. It's essential to minimise distractions and provide extra time to process information, such as instructions at home, school or work. This is because, as we learned earlier, many autistic people have sensory processing difficulties. It's imperative that they aren't bombarded or overloaded with too much information.

It's also essential that low arousal isn't confused with no arousal; some exposure to a range of experiences is helpful if planned in a structured, sensitive way.

## **Links**

There should be strong links between the various aspects of an autistic person's life, such as their teachers, parents, advocates and support workers. This will help them and the individual to become a team, working towards the best therapeutic process.

Developing such links can help ensure a consistent approach to care and reduce the possibility of misunderstandings that might cause confusion or regression. Strong links and open communication provide a holistic approach that is incredibly important for the needs of the autistic person.

The SPELL Framework can be applied across the spectrum. It provides a good basis for care and complements additional approaches to autism.

## 7.2 Other Recognised Approaches to Autism

**The TEACCH Approach is another recognised method to support people on the autism spectrum.**

The primary aim of TEACCH is to help prepare autistic people to live and work more effectively at home, in school, in the workplace, or in the community.

**Grounded in reliable research, the values of this structured programme are:**

- Teaching – sharing autism knowledge and increasing the skill level of professionals and practitioners.
- Expanding – increasing own knowledge to provide high-quality services to people on the autism spectrum and their families.
- Appreciating – appreciating the strengths and uniqueness of autistic culture.
- Collaborating and Cooperating with colleagues, other professionals, people on the autism spectrum and their families.
- Holistic – adopting a holistic approach, looking at the person, their family and community.

The TEACCH approach can be used in conjunction with other strategies to help meet the needs of autistic people.

**The SCERTS Model** (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, and Transactional Support), also exists to target issues like communication, emotional expression, coping with stress, and building relationships for autistic people.

Specific tasks from each area are broken down into more achievable and manageable goals. Progress in each area can be measured over time and they allow for the effective planning of strategies.

**Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)** is another recognised technique that addresses challenging behaviour in autistic people and limits the possibility of anxiety or confusion. In particular, it instructs school staff on how to respond if an autistic person is anxious or upset.

**Sensory diets** are another popular way to address the challenges associated with autism, and they don't have anything to do with food. They are a daily activity plan that integrates sensory activities throughout the day.

Sensory diets can be highly beneficial to those who have difficulty processing or acting on information received through the senses.

In recent years, it has been proposed by leading occupational therapists that sensory diets should not follow a prescribed schedule but are better implemented as and when the child requires sensory input. This proposal presupposes a better understanding by support staff of when input is required.

**Other approaches** to autism include yoga, cognitive behavioural therapy, mixed menus of support, art and music therapy, equine therapy, speech and language therapy, and specific therapies for transitioning into adulthood.

Approaches may even include the use of special interests to focus learning, especially in the classroom. Yoga is gaining popularity in particular because it focuses on breathing, calm, and an ordered structure or routine.

It is also important to consider the medical and other related conditions that frequently accompany autism, such as gastrointestinal problems, epilepsy, and anxiety. Those co-morbid conditions must also be approached, perhaps in a slightly different manner for those with autistic disorders compared to neurotypical people.

Some related therapies required might include seeing a neurologist, gastroenterologist, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, or sleep therapist. This is typically in addition to regular GP and autism specialist visits.

## 7.3 Preparing for Social Inclusion

**As previously discussed, people on the autism spectrum frequently have difficulty developing relationships with others.**

However, this may not be because they don't want to interact, but because they don't yet possess the skills to do so effectively. The intention to connect with other people is there, but an understanding of the rules may not be.

It's important to encourage autistic children to try socialisation out for themselves by approaching their peers and asking questions. However, if they are reluctant or they struggle to do so, other methods can be introduced to help them relate to others.

One of these methods is role-playing, where social situations can be recreated or imagined in a safe environment for children to practise interacting with other people, especially their peers.

Another method is to introduce a new task to a child who prefers a restrictive routine, in order to encourage interaction and inclusion in social activities.

A book called 'Socially Speaking' can be very useful in this regard. The structured programme encourages social inclusion and can help to boost confidence and develop appropriate speaking and listening skills in autistic people. Along with other games, it can also be effective for developing an understanding of common social terms spoken by children which autistic individuals often don't pick up on.

When preparing for social inclusion, it's important to note that some autistic children are withdrawn because they struggle to identify with their peers. They don't know how to share opinions, recognise and act on feelings, or work with others. As a result, they may find it difficult to make friends and can appear indifferent, aloof and isolated from others.

In these cases, it can help children to learn how to greet people, take turns in conversations, and understand the consequences of their actions. The Friendship Game, which can be found online, is an excellent resource for developing self-awareness and social awareness.

Assigning an empathetic buddy can also be an effective way to integrate an autistic child into social settings at school or during extracurricular activities. This is an especially helpful method in large, busy or loud social situations.

As much as children on the autism spectrum should be prepared for social inclusion, it's also important to recognise that they may benefit from time alone, too. This must be respected as much as possible. A distraction-free environment offers the opportunity to focus, recharge, play and work individually. This is important for concentration as well as the chance to appreciate the difference between social activities and solitary time.

## **7.4 The Person-Centred Approach**

**Taking a person-centred approach to autism means treating everyone on the spectrum as unique and helping them plan their life and support with a genuine emphasis on what's important to them.**

**There are five key features of taking a person-centred approach to autism:**

- That the person is at the centre of the planning process
- That his or her family and friends are partners in planning
- That his or her plan shows what is truly important to that person and that the support is consistent with these needs
- That the plan helps the person be a part of the community and helps the community welcome the person
- That the plan is put into action and remains live, meaning that it's revisited to accommodate what the person wants from life as he or she grows and develops

A person-centred approach is ideal for people on the autism spectrum because it is based on the individual. The planning may need to be adapted or the terminology changed to better suit a person, but the core practices remain the same. A person-centred approach must also take the preferred ways of communicating into account, as some people on the autism spectrum are non-verbal.

## 7.5 Meeting Individual Needs

**An autism spectrum disorder diagnosis is just the start of the process.**

After a diagnosis has been made, there must be a clear, well-documented assessment of the individual's needs. This will be the catalyst for the retention of care aides and other support mechanisms that are essential to the wellbeing of the autistic person.

Meeting the individual needs of every autistic person involves prioritising what is most necessary and beneficial for them. This is especially challenging when ensuring adults get the right support after a diagnosis, as they may not have as many opportunities open to them as children do. In the community, this may include affording access to a framework that enables the local authority to provide fair and proportionate support and then evaluate its impact.

Strong advocacy is important to help meet the needs of autistic individuals, and this involves taking action to enable them to say what they want, secure their rights, represent their own best interests, and gain access to whatever services they require.

Advocacy involves supporting and enabling autistic people to express their own views and have a say in the treatment and care they receive. It's essential in ensuring that people on the autism spectrum are respected and treated as equals to their typically developed peers.

Advocacy for autistic individuals may come in the form of self-advocacy for those who feel able to express their own needs. Of course, as covered in earlier modules, some people on the autism spectrum have difficulty with speech and expressive language, but that doesn't mean that they don't have opinions. Advocates can also come in the form of group or citizen advocacy, where people work to understand the individual needs of a person on the autism spectrum and work to represent them.

**Meeting the individual needs of autistic people must include both practical and pastoral care from qualified professionals as well as family and friends.**

This includes support, access to information, local authority support, learning coordinators in school, modifications to learning or working arrangements, additional time to get accustomed to new



environments, reviewing safety procedures, and preparing for changes to routines.

In a school setting, tuition is required to improve language and communication skills. The work should be structured so that it is easier to comprehend. Effective time management techniques should be taught, literal language used within written materials, and extra time must be allowed to understand instructions.

Out in the workforce, the individual needs of autistic people can be met with clear training and structure for staff, partnering with role models to learn from and emulate, therefore, ensuring that people on the autism spectrum are treated fairly and respectfully and not excluded from work opportunities that they're capable of taking on.

### **Special Educational Needs (SEN) Support**

Children on the autism spectrum will usually have a special educational needs plan. The school's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) will spend time with the child to establish what extra support may be needed and whether the child needs an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). The local authority will carry out an EHC assessment and, where necessary, will record what support is needed and from whom.

This support is sought and used when a student with SEN has not been showing learning progress in the classroom, and there is an apparent need for action to be taken to help the student overcome any barriers to learning. This kind of action can include the use of specialist equipment and additional teachers, as well as using alternative learning materials or teaching strategies.

The school may need to collaborate with external agencies to seek support for education, health or care. The child's progress should be monitored and reported regularly.

The SENCO will work with the student's teacher to evaluate the student's needs. The SENCO is also responsible for organising further assessments of a child through collaboration with the local authority.

More information can be sought from the Government website:  
<https://www.gov.uk/children-with-special-educational-needs>

### **Take a Quick Recap Test**

## 7.6 What We've Learned

**In this module, we have looked at several recognised approaches to autism, including the SPELL Framework, the TEACCH Approach and SCERTS Model.**

We also discussed some other methods of approaching the unique needs and challenges of autistic people, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, use of the Socially Speaking book, therapeutic visits to speech or occupational therapists, visits to neurologists, and gastroenterologists - who treat related medical conditions - and even yoga sessions.

We investigated how to best prepare a person on the autism spectrum for social inclusion through methods such as role-playing, Socially Speaking, and the Friendship Game.

In contrast, we also examined when and why autistic people may wish to withdraw from socialisation and that it may also be a good idea from time to time. Time alone can be beneficial, enabling the development of concentration skills and helping to "clear the head".

Next, we reviewed how to take a person-centred approach to autism, which is imperative for respecting autistic individuals and giving them an active role in planning their support and any medical treatment required.

A person-centred approach will vary from individual to individual and encourages teachers, parents, medical professionals, support workers, and anyone else involved in the treatment and care of the autistic person to communicate and be consistent. This will reduce the likelihood of confusion or regression, and help to reduce anxiety.

We also looked at how to best meet the individual needs of each person on the autism spectrum, as these can vary, much like the individuals themselves. Meeting individual needs includes offering the

appropriate support at home, school, and work, or out in the community, and ensuring that autistic people are able to access the resources and types of support they need.

It can often involve group, citizen or self-advocacy to ensure that the individual's rights and wishes are being heard and considered. Meeting individual needs also means making adjustments to enable their involvement and success, such as offering clear instructions, additional time to complete tasks, or people to evaluate progress made or check in with a buddy system.

## **Summary**

Upon completion of this module, you should be able to discuss some of the recognised approaches to autism, including models like TEACCH and SPELL and understand how they can benefit people on the autism spectrum.

You should also know how to prepare autistic children for social inclusion, through role-play, games, and other methods. This will reinforce what you've learned previously about the struggles autistic people can have with socialisation and communication and will help you to give practical advice on what to do about these difficulties.

Finally, you should know how to meet the needs of autistic people through individual approaches and the right support systems.

## **Coming up in Module 8**

In the next module, we'll look at best practices when dealing with autistic individuals, including practical considerations, safety, visual strategies, and aspects of non-verbal communication.

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