

Autism training: the one-eyed wo/man in the land of the blind

The number of people diagnosed with autism is on the rise. According to figures revealed in the Millennium Cohort Study (n= 13,287 families), autism prevalence rates in the United Kingdom (UK) are 3.5% of 11-year-old children. In terms of self-reports, 3.1% of 16-year-old young people and 2.7% of 11-year-olds in Northern Ireland say that they have autism. In Northern Ireland, 2.3% of school children (6-15 years of age) have been diagnosed with ASD (DHSSPS, 2016).

Well-trained staff is important for good quality autism services, especially since people affected with autism generally need more support than others in terms of daily living as well as mental and physical health. Poorly-trained staff can lead not only to staff stress and burn-out, but more importantly, it increases services users' and caregiver burden and risk of economic hardship and mental health problems.

	Total who received training ¹	Level 1 1-2 hours	Level 2 ½ day	Level 3 1-2 days
Teachers	74%	47%	13%	0%
Education Board staff	37%	27%	28%	19%
Private sector staff ²	30%	-	-	-
Health/social care staff	29%	19%	10%	3%
Higher/Further Ed staff ²	25%	12%	5%	-

²Some cells suppressed due to small values for personal information – denoted by a dash

Tab. 1. Proportion of professionals who completed autism training at Levels 1, 2, and 3

We carried out a survey with health, social care, and education professionals, who work within the autism sector in the UK to find out about their knowledge and training with regards to autism. In addition, interviews with staff and service users helped to illustrate the survey findings.

The findings expose an acute lack of autism specific training that has detrimental impacts (Tab. 1). Most of the training was very brief and basic autism awareness raising (Level 1), rather than in-depth training of skills for evidence-based practice. Service users were worried about this lack of staff training.

Only one in ten of the professional participants had received Level 2 autism training (lasting ½ day). In fact, the term 'training' is misused in this context. Clearly, a short evening or lunchtime

talk (i.e., Level 1) or even a half-day course (i.e., Level 2) should not be considered training, it merely serves as familiarization of the audience with some of the issues presented.

Put another way, “Would you trust doctor to perform a Cesarean-section after he/she had listened to a couple of hours of a PowerPoint presentation?”. The proper definition of ‘staff training’ should be defined as enduring change in behaviour that is based on prolonged, in-depth study and the assessment of specific advanced skills.

Health, social care, and educational professionals should be able to identify early signs of autism and to use this valuable ‘window of opportunity’ to put in place targeted and effective interventions. Staff training in the UK falls considerably short of requirements and does not meet international standards of best practice. Clearly, a short evening or lunchtime talk (i.e., Level 1) or even a half-day course (i.e., Level 2) should not be considered training, it merely serves as familiarization of the audience with some of the issues presented.

Findings reported here show that in a culture where lack of apposite training is the norm, those who attend minimal ‘autism training’ are regarded as ‘autism experts’ in the eyes of others who know even less. Dangerously, they may even become the trainers for the next generation. In reality, they are the one-eyed wo/man in ‘the land of the blind’.

Data reported here were collected as part of a larger project entitled “Helping the most vulnerable out of the poverty trap and reducing inequality: Policies, strategies, and services for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, including intellectual and neuro-developmental disabilities”, that was funded by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in Northern Ireland. Full reports are available elsewhere (BASE Project, 2016). The views expressed are those of the authors.

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Publication

[Staff Training in Autism: The One-Eyed Wo/Man....](#)

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Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2016 Jul 16