

ilíocht

Celebrating Diversity in Gaelscoil Bhaile Brigín



Congratulations

Thanks to everyone who participated in the "Dress Blue for Autism" Day just before the mid-term break. With your help we raised €470 which will be going to Irish Autism Action.

AUTISM IRELAND'S Family Fun Day

Sat. 18th April, Airfield

Organised by Irish Autism Action, families will take part in a fun trail and enjoy 4 exciting activities along the way, including:

- SEED SOWING
- HOUSE TOUR
- BUG HUNTING
- MEET THE ANIMALS

Upon presenting an IAA membership card, all children will go free and parents will go half price. Information and details on how to register for this Autism Ireland family fun day can be found at www.iregister.ie or at www.autismireland.ie

Adam Harris

Adam will be giving a talk at the school on April 27th about life with Autism.



April Awareness

Welcome to the second edition of our newly named *ilíocht* newsletter. *Ilíocht* means "Diversity" and encapsulates everything our newsletter hopes to promote.

As you may know, April is Autism Awareness Month and we are very pleased to announce that, on April 27th, we will have Adam Harris at the school to give a talk about what it's like to live with Autism. Adam, the winner of the 2014 Social Entrepreneurs Ireland Elevator Award, is a 19 year old from Co. Wicklow who was diagnosed with Autism as a child. He takes a very active role in raising awareness of Autism throughout Ireland. He is the founder and CEO of AsIAM.ie, an extremely comprehensive website which is so much more than just an information point and is well worth a look.

This issue covers what to do if you feel your school going child is struggling – be it with the school curriculum, or with behavioural problems. Sometimes these problems are easily addressed, however, there are times when a child's difficulties are such that a more comprehensive assessment is required. This article attempts to give some clarity to the avenues available to you.

This issue's Parents Piece also features Autism. Kevin McGales article on Aspergers is an extremely honest and heartfelt account of the challenges a diagnosis of Aspergers brings to the whole family. I cannot stress strongly enough how much we value these parent pieces and how much we admire the honesty of the parents who write such personal and insightful accounts in the hope of raising awareness.

If you would like to submit a parent piece, an article of interest or get involved in *ilíocht* in any way,

Please contact celinecronan@gmail.com

Reaching Our Full Potential

By Kevin McGale

When I was told my four year old son had Aspergers Syndrome, I didn't know a lot about the condition. For a while my wife and I were concerned about his impulsive behaviour and our inability to manage him when we were out and about socially. We had heard of conditions like ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder) but knew very little about Aspergers Syndrome and what it would mean for Luke's future and us as a family. It was frightening to be told that Luke had a condition that would affect him his whole life and we had all the concerns that any parent would have such as how would we cope, would Luke have a normal life and would other people understand him and accept him.

Aspergers Syndrome is a condition on the Autism Spectrum. In recent years it has been reclassified and is now more commonly referred to as a condition on the scale of Autism Spectrum Disorders or a Pervasive Developmental Disorder.

“It is typically characterised by poor communicative ability and a lack of social skills.”

People with Aspergers Syndrome often find it difficult to make friends and have difficulties in interacting with their peers. They often have a lack of empathy for the emotions and feelings of other people and can become obsessed with special interests and repetitive patterns of behaviour. All of this can make life very difficult, especially for children and teenagers who would often suffer bullying and mistreatment from other children who see them as being odd or indifferent. The condition often coexists with other disorders such as ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder

and Tourette's Syndrome giving the sufferer further challenges and difficulties in their lives.

Following Luke's diagnosis we began to see clearly the traits of Aspergers Syndrome in him. He would often be aggressive and lash out at those around him. He seemed to have very little interest in making friends and would often be awkward around other children. He would have great difficulty sitting still and focusing on things and would find transitioning from one activity to another very upsetting.

Luke's coexisting disorder of Oppositional Defiant Disorder means he has problems following orders and instructions and will often refuse to comply with requests of adults and indulge in behaviours deliberately to disrupt or upset the activities of other children. His Special Needs Assistant (SNA) is crucial in ensuring that his behaviour doesn't impact on his classmates too much. He also suffers from ADHD affecting his concentration and often leaving him inattentive, hyperactive and impulsive. He has a special interest in

computers and mobile devices and if allowed could easily spend hours on them.

Although the challenges that Aspergers Syndrome presents are a daily struggle for children like Luke, their families and teachers and fellow classmates, the good news is that with early diagnosis and interventions the condition is manageable.

A lot of the skills that children with Aspergers lack can be learned through occupational therapy, speech therapy and behaviour management techniques.

Luke tends to be a very visual learner, so we have realised the benefits that this has in showing him what we expect of him and how he is to carry out certain tasks. This is something that has been replicated with some degree of success in his school through the use of wall charts and flash cards. As he approaches the final term of junior infants, we can see the hard work Gaelscoil Bhaile Brígin

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has done for Luke. Although there are many challenges and difficulties encountered in a typical school day, there are some good moments as well and there is no doubt that classroom support through special needs assistants and resource teaching makes all the difference for children like Luke in giving them the one to one attention they need.

Since Luke's diagnosis we have found the services offered to Autistic children within the HSE are very limited. Budgetary constraints and bureaucracy mean that services like occupational therapy, social skills and behaviour therapy are not offered with the frequency and consistency that our son requires. A lot of these services are available privately but can be extremely expensive, so are not always an option for everyone.

Support groups like Snowflakes in Swords and Remember Us in Balbriggan have been a great help to us not only in supporting Luke but also his older sister. Siblings often have a hard time coping with autism. The daily demands of the autistic child can play havoc with family life so it's

not uncommon for other siblings to feel resentment toward their brother or sister. They may also suffer feelings of rejection or feel unloved or neglected. One thing that was really beneficial for us was a sibling group which our older daughter Grace attended. It was very useful in helping Grace understand her brothers condition and helped her gain a better insight into autism through the shared experiences and stories of other children.

It is almost a year since Luke's diagnosis and although those feelings of despair and worry that we initially felt are still there, they are definitely present to a lesser extent and we can now look to the future with optimism.

The terms Autism and Aspergers Syndrome are not as frightening now as they once seemed because we have come to the realisation that with support and understanding a lot of children with these conditions can become independent adults and reach their full potential.

It's so important for people to become aware of Autism. Initiatives like Autism Awareness Month in April is a really positive way to educate the public.

Autism has often got few physical manifestations so the behaviour of autistic children can often be put down to boldness or poor parenting. We all have a duty and responsibility to bring about change in this way of thinking.

Luke will be six years old in December. Although the problems created for him with Aspergers Syndrome are apparent and will be there for the rest of his life he is a happy contented little boy who can be extremely loving, clever and very funny. We are so proud of him and wouldn't change him for the world.

ADAM HARRIS

Mon. 27th April, Gaelscoil Bhaile Brigín

Check out Adam's interview online, with Brendan O'Connor on The Saturday Night Show. Education is an opportunity for people with Autism, of all abilities, to pursue their strengths, gain understanding in the local community and achieve their own personal potential.

For more information & downloads, please visit AslAm.ie



Methods of Assessment

Options & Support Available To Parents

I can think of no scarier time for a parent than when they realise that their child is struggling. Whether it's a case that they are experiencing behavioural problems or struggling with the school curriculum, often parents do not know where to turn. However, there are a number of options open to you, depending on the area of difficulty.

If your child is struggling in school your first port of call will always be your child's teacher. Make an appointment so you have adequate time to discuss the problem. Try to bear in mind that lots of children will struggle at some point during their primary years, be it with fitting in socially, accepting behavioural boundaries in the classroom or with the curriculum itself. Often simple strategies can be put into place to help, for example, revising a list of commonly used words can be really beneficial to a child who is struggling a little with literacy. Your child's Teacher is perfectly placed to help devise a plan of action.

National Educational Psychological Support (NEPS)

In some cases, additional help is required and NEPS may become involved. NEPS (National Educational Psychological Support) psychologists work with both primary and secondary schools and would cover concerns around learning, behaviour, social and emotional development.

There are three methods of support given by NEPs, depending on the needs of the child. Classroom Support is the most common, and typically the first response given to a child who is having problems. It involves an in-depth discussion between the class teacher and the parents to ascertain the nature of the problem before a plan is made using informal problem solving strategies. It's done within the classroom environment, and uses strategies which are commonly used by Teachers.

In some cases further intervention is required to meet the child's needs. School Support involves putting a School Support Plan in action for the child, which basically consists of a more structured information gathering process followed by close monitoring to see if the interventions are working. The schools Resource/

Learning Support Teacher would be involved in the problem solving process and in some cases learning support will be given outside the classroom.

If the students' needs are severe, or persistent, an increased level of support is very likely required and in these cases School Support Plus is needed. This will involve outside professionals who may assist in the assessment process. A NEPs Psychologist would often be consulted at this stage and may work with the child on a one to one basis.

Unfortunately, although an effective approach, schools are extremely limited in the amount of times they can access School Support Plus – as little as two or three assessments per school a year is typical. All of the information gathered from the classroom support/school support process would be used here to put together an individual educational plan (IEP), i.e. an educational plan which takes into account the child's strengths and weaknesses and is specific to the child in question. Interventions will be monitored to ensure that they are effective and the IEP is reviewed yearly.

The Assessment of Needs (AON)

If you suspect your child has a disability then his/her needs can be assessed using the Assessment of Needs (AON) through the HSE. There is a lot of misinformation surrounding the AON in regards to age limits, with some people being told that their child must be under 5 to be eligible for the assessment. While it's true that this assessment would commonly be conducted on children under 5 (usually as a result of a referral from a GP/Public Health Nurse over a concern about not reaching childhood milestones), it is certainly not limited to under 5s.

There are many disabilities which are not as obvious in the early years and may have been missed by healthcare professionals. Often the needs of these children only become apparent when they enter the school system and the Assessment of Needs can be critical in the diagnosis of such cases. Under the 2005 Disability Act, any child born after June 1st 2002 is eligible to apply, regardless of their age at the time of application.

You must apply through your local AON Officer – every local Health Office has one. He/She will guide you through the application process and discuss with you which assessments your child needs (if any), in addition to arranging for these assessments to take place.

The Assessment itself is a very comprehensive one. It can involve many different professionals from different areas, for example Occupational Therapists, Speech Therapists, Physiotherapists, and Psychologists depending on your child's requirements. The assessment is carried out regardless of the cost or availability of services.

The Assessment must commence within 3 months of your completed application being received by the HSE. It should be completed within 3 months of its start date. In exceptional circumstances the assessment may take longer than 3 months but it must be completed without undue delay. When the Assessment is complete you will receive information on the following:

- Whether the child has a disability as defined by the Act.
- If it's determined that your child has a disability you will receive details on the nature and extent of the disability.
- You will also receive a statement of the health and educational needs of your child, if any, and a statement of services considered appropriate to meet the child's needs. It should be noted however, that there is no statutory requirement to provide services outlined in AON Report.

Private Assessments

Parents can also choose to have their child assessed privately. Early Intervention can have a huge impact on how a child with special needs progresses, and with long waiting lists for NEPs assessments or an immediate need for Special Needs Assistant support, more and more parents are choosing the private route for their child.

In a time where "Early Intervention" is cited as being a key component to a child's prognosis, going private allows therapy to begin as soon as

the areas of need are identified, and at a time/place that suits you and your child.

If you do decide to consult a private practitioner, I would strongly advise that you ensure that a diagnosis from the professional in question is recognised by the HSE. You can do this by contacting your local HSE office. If not, you may have serious problems accessing supports for your child, for example Special Needs Assistants, Resource Hours or therapies through the public system.

Autism Spectrum Disorder Unit

Clodagh Ní Mhaoilchiaráin, An Príomhoide

ASD Units cater for the needs of children with Autism who are of school – going age and are attached to a mainstream and special schools. The pupil-teacher ratio in these Units is 6:1 and pupils are further supported by a minimum of two Special Needs Assistants per class, when full.

We are lucky enough to have had an ASD unit sanctioned for our school community. At present it is at the consultation stage and will be progressing to planning very shortly. Not all children with ASD attend the unit and different children attend for different lengths of day and can be integrated fully into mainstream, depending on the needs of the child. Our aim with the unit is to be as integrated as possible and we would aim that there would be at least some integration for each child with the mainstream class. This however, obviously depends on the needs. The unit will afford us the opportunity to support the children in our school community who would need the support of a unit.

This is a very positive step for both our school community and for indeed all Gaelscoileanna. To date, there is only one ASD unit attached to a Gaelscoil, and it is extremely successful. However, over the coming few years there are units due to open in other Gaelscoileanna. This will ensure that families who wish for their children to be educated through the medium of Irish can continue to do so while also ensuring that they are receiving the most appropriate support necessary.

In order for a child to secure a place in the ASD unit, there must be a diagnosis of ASD and also a recommendation from the psychologist in the report that the child has access to a unit. If anyone requires further information, please feel free to contact the school,

01 8416036 / oifig@bhailebrigin.ie / www.gsbhailebrigin.ie

July Provision

The Dept of Education allows for an **extra 40 hours of teaching support for children with Autism** during the month of July. Where the school cannot accommodate this on the premises, you are allowed to receive the support at home via a qualified Teacher (whom you must source yourself but the Dept will pay for subject to their terms and conditions). For further information or to apply for July Provision for your child, please check out,

<http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/July-Provision/Home-Based.html>

Things You May Not Know About Aspergers

- #1** Aspergers is a lifelong neurological condition. **It is NOT caused by bad parenting!**
- #2** People with Aspergers have at least average IQs but in a lot of cases they are actually above average. Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Hans Christian Anderson, Charles Darwin, Michelangelo, Mozart and Beethoven are historical figures who are commonly said to have strong Asperger traits. However a diagnosis of Aspergers doesn't mean you are automatically a genius (despite what the movies portray!)
- #3** Social Communication for people with Aspergers has been likened to "trying to understand a foreign language."
- #4** People with Aspergers tend to be very literal so the idioms we use every day like "it's raining cats and dogs" can either be hilarious or extremely scary!
- #5** Social rules are very difficult to understand so people with Aspersers can appear to be rude, without meaning to be. Standing too close or interrupting conversations is a common trait.
- #6** Children with Aspergers desperately want to fit in our world but don't know how. Maintaining friendships is difficult and this can lead to social exclusion and even depression.
- #7** Sensory processing problems tend to go hand in hand with Aspergers/Autism. Sounds can be too loud/smells too strong/lights too bright/touch can be painful/tastes too strong. Balance and coordination are also affected. Children will often spin/rock/flap their hands (stimming) to help themselves deal with the stress of sensory overload.
- #8** Knowing what's coming next is essential. Visual timetables and strict routine can be a great comfort in a very confusing world.
- #9** Kids with Aspergers will often have a very intense interest in a hobby. The hobby may change over time but not before the child has pretty much learned everything there is to know about it!

SUPPORT AND WHAT'S ON

North Fingal Autism and Aspergers Parent Support Group

Contact Audrey Sheridan-Walsh / Fiona Halligan

01 8020484 / info@fingalautism.com

Snowflakes Autism Support

Our aim is to organise events for and provide local support to families affected by Autism

info@snowflakes.ie / www.snowflakes.ie


Circle of Friends is an Aspergers/Dyspraxia support group which meets in Skerries Mills Coffee Shop once a month.

Contact Karen on **087 9778715** for more details

Irish Autism Action

IAA operate a membership scheme which involves an ID card for your child. Many establishments around the country recognise the card and allow the child to bypass queues or give a reduction on admission prices.

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