

AUTISME EUROPE  AUTISM EUROPE
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Autism and Education

A POSITION PAPER ON EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE WITH AUTISM

Article 3 of the Autism Europe **Charter of Rights for Persons with Autism**, presented at the 4th Autism-Europe Congress, Den Haag, May 10th 1992, clearly states, in accordance with all international treaties and declarations, that education is a fundamental right for people with autism.

<p>Article 3. The right of people with autism to accessible and appropriate education</p>
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The Autism Europe Charter was adopted in a Written Declaration by the European Parliament on May 9th, 1996. Its strength was reinforced when the Revised European Social Charter of 3 May 1996 was also voted on July 1st 1999. Action by Autism Europe in this domain is constant. We defend the right to education of people with autism by all the means we have at our disposal, through information to families, professionals and the public at large. We advocate appropriate educational means for people with autism through publications, conferences and mutual exchanges between parent associations in Europe. When necessary the right to education of people with autism is and will be defended via legal action at a European level¹.

The right to education is a minimum requirement. Strictly interpreted, the right to an education would only provide that kind and amount of education that is necessary for children who do not have autism and would not address the specific learning difficulties of children and adults with autism.

For people with autism education represents a lot more than a basic right:

Life long education is necessary to achieve and maintain the highest possible degree of self-sufficiency and to compensate for the great difficulties that people with autism have in extracting meaning from simple experiences. Most other people do not need any educational support to acquire basic everyday life skills, and learn things without being conscious of doing so, through incidental non-structured learning, which arises from a spontaneous interest in something, or through automatic/natural self-derived learning, by simple imitation, observation, experimentation and natural categorisation.

¹ Autism Europe has lodged a complaint to the Council of Europe on the grounds that France has not satisfactorily implemented Articles 15 and 17 of Part II and Article E of Part V of the Revised European Social Charter of 3 May 1996, which came into force on 1 July 1999. See annex for details.

On the contrary, most current research shows that people with autism have difficulties in the following learning abilities:

- curricular learning, as they may not be motivated by the interest of the teacher and may not understand the means of communication used.
- incidental learning, since they may not share their interest with other people,
- automatic/natural or self-derived learning, as many of the basic requirements needed are not present or do not evolve spontaneously,

Their absence or just limitations will seriously impair personal development, social relations, further learning and autonomy in everyday life. As a result, without a specific education, they will miss learning important basic everyday life skills and knowledge that tend to be taken for granted and that enable people to live satisfactory lives.

The primary role of education for people with autism is therefore to compensate and possibly overcome the difficulties they have with automatic/natural or self-derived learning and communication.

Education is the only way children with autism can learn all the things that other children learn so easily by themselves

EARLY EDUCATION

Difficulties to learn from the environment are already present in autism early on during infancy, when automatic/natural or self-derived learning is most important, Children, including children with non-autistic intellectual disabilities, acquire basic life skills without being taught, just by observing what others do. Yet strategies for teaching them to children with autism, who cannot count on ordinary learning abilities, require both a profound knowledge of autism and a great deal of creativity.

That is why **Autism Europe believes that early education in skills indispensable for all future learning should be a priority for children with autism.**

Moreover, the close involvement of parents is a determining success factor for major improvements in the quality of life of people with autism and their families.

In order to ensure that persons with autism receive the most appropriate and effective education from early infancy onwards, Autism Europe especially recommends that parents:

- **receive help in determining which of these basic pre-school skills need to be developed in their child,**
- **be informed of the available options for education and of their respective merits**
- **always be involved in determining the individualised educational programme that will be offered to their child,**
- **be informed and themselves trained on simple education strategies in order to implement an individualised programme at home and complement the work of professionals.**

PRE-SCHOOL AND SCHOOL AGE EDUCATION

Like European society, schools should be comprehensive and inclusive. With due respect for specific and individual educational needs, being with their school companions has positive outcomes for both the students with autism and the other students.

However, **mainstreaming should not be an all or nothing option**. Mainstreaming a child with autism in regular classes, be it at nursery, primary or secondary level, is by no means sufficient to acquire communication and social skills or promote the emotional and cognitive development of the child because of the difficulties in incidental learning, automatic/natural self-derived learning and problems with generalisation and social interaction disorders.

Moreover, in order to be successful, mainstreaming requires a lot of material, technical and personal investment, a creative use of resources, flexibility, and strict collaboration between the school, health services and the family.

As the profiles of functioning of children with autism are very different, ranging from severe learning disability to normal academic ability, individual education programmes (IEP) should be drawn up for each child on the basis of the assessment of his/her skills and potentials in functional areas. Many children with autism may still need to be taught basic life skills, in primary and secondary school. Some children with high functioning autism are able to learn academic skills, such as those provided to all children, but even specific teaching strategies are needed to accommodate problems of verbal communication, on which traditional education is founded.

Children with Asperger syndrome may have no difficulties in verbal communication or in learning academic knowledge, in spite of very poor social skills which require specific education programmes and strategies. Teachers should be aware of the limitations of children with autism spectrum disorders to avoid misinterpreting their behaviour as non-responsiveness or showing "negativism". In fact, relational problems that may arise from such a negative attitude may lead to more problems.

That is why, even in the case of a mainstream environment, there is an effective need for special areas, special places, with specialised teachers, to work on an individual basis or in small group placement. With proper adaptation of schools, teaching strategies and curricula, mainstreaming should be a perfectly valid choice for parents. When mainstream integration is problematic, parents should have the possibility to choose, in the child's interests, special education services. However, these services should also strive to provide an education program maximising the child's potential for inclusion.

Autism Europe recommends that nursery, primary and secondary schools:

- **promote a more flexible approach to curricula development and to the organisation of the school environment within a "pro-diversity" culture in education,**

- **facilitate strict collaboration between the school, health services and the family,**
- **provide teachers with a specialised knowledge of autism education to support regular teachers and ease contact with other children,**
- **"equip" mainstream teachers and special needs teachers who know Autism-specific educational strategies not only to teach the more general curriculum, but to continue teaching the basic skills and the self-help skills necessary for personal autonomy in daily activities,**
- **base their teaching on Individualised Educational Programmes (IEP) after evaluation with standardised tests of the individual child's skills, preferences and potentials, of their interests and the priorities of the family.**

LIFELONG EDUCATION

The right to lifelong education is a fundamental right for all and a fundamental need for adults with autism.

It is only through lifelong education that people with autism will be able to maximise their participation in the world from early infancy to adulthood

Throughout the education process, receptive communication disorders and the concrete mode of thinking of all people with autism should always be taken into account and in particular with those children, adolescents and adults who develop language. Indeed, parents and professionals often assume that once language appears, things become easier. To some extent this is true, but language acquisition is not an end by far to the difficulties of people with autism to communicate and to develop social interactions with other people. It is therefore necessary for social, functional and knowledge acquisition to be guided, with the appropriate educational means, throughout life.

In the case of autism, lifelong education will always have to take into account the symbolic and attention difficulties that people with autism have with imitation and integrating and making sense of information coming from the environment

In order that all adults with autism may lead as independent a life as possible in the community in which they belong, Autism Europe recommends that lifelong learning for persons with Autism Spectrum disorders include:

- **community centres and residential structures and resources**
- **community integration programmes**

that actively support and promote the development of

- **the social and personal skills to access vocational training,**
- **the self-care and self-help skills necessary to manage free time and domestic tasks**
- **self-advocacy skills**
- **the personal interests and inclinations of the individual.**

<p>Annex The Right to Education in the Revised European Social Charter (1996)</p>
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Article 15(1)(Part II) of the Social Charter (hereafter referred to as “Article 15”):

“With a view to ensuring to persons with disabilities, irrespective of age and the nature and origin of their disabilities, the effective exercise of the right to independence, social integration and participation in the life of the community, the Parties undertake, in particular: to take the necessary measures to provide persons with disabilities with guidance, education and vocational training in the framework of general schemes wherever possible or, where this is not possible, through specialised bodies, public or private ...”

Article 17(1)(Part II) of the Social Charter (hereafter referred to as “Article 17”):

“With a view to ensuring the effective exercise of the right of children and young persons to grow up in an environment which encourages the full development of their personality and of their physical and mental capacities, the Parties undertake, either directly or in co-operation with public and private organisations, to take all appropriate and necessary measures designed: to ensure that children and young persons, taking account of the rights and duties of their parents, have the care, the assistance, the education and the training they need, in particular by providing for the establishment or maintenance of institutions and services sufficient and adequate for this purpose ...”

Article E (Part V) of the Social Charter (hereafter referred to as “Article E”):

“The enjoyment of the rights set forth in this Charter shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national extraction or social origin, health, association with a national minority, birth or other status.”