


# Good practice in autism training

**A code of practice**  
2012



Accept difference.  
Not indifference.

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## Participating organisations

- The Association of Directors of Social Services
- Autism Cymru
- Autism Research Centre (ARC)
- Autism Sussex
- Autism West Midlands
- The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities
- Hampshire Autistic Society
- The Institute of Psychiatry
- Studio III
- The Tizard Centre, University of Kent
- University of Birmingham
- University of Cambridge
- University of Cardiff
- Welsh Assembly Government

## Project leads



## Introduction and background

Greater awareness of autism as well as developments in statutory guidance and services create an environment where training activity in the area of autism is likely to increase. A group of organisations involved with autism met towards the end of 2010 to consider this and make recommendations as to how quality of training could be encouraged and poor practice discouraged.

This group concluded that effective training is essential to the development of best practice and to good outcomes in autism but that it should be properly organised and ethical, and delivered in a context that is meaningful. To this end, it was decided to devise this code of practice for individuals and organisations involved in the delivery of training, and to provide guidance for commissioners of training that reflects the experience and values of some of the leading organisations involved in this field.

The abundance of available information about autism does not mean it is reliable. Competing and conflicting views of the nature of autism and the best ways of responding are commonplace. Despite advances in understanding of the nature of autism, the search for useful interventions has so far met with only limited evidenced success.

Similarly with training; most training in autism is unregulated. This creates the potential for bad or inappropriate practice and for unaccountable forms of training to emerge based on false, misleading or incomplete theories of autism. Such training may even be detrimental.

This code of practice aims to provide safeguards against approaches based on negative attitudes and stereotypes of autism conditions – or which underestimate the difficulties experienced by many people with autism and their families. It also seeks to

discourage those interventions or training approaches based on false or incomplete theories. It aims to provide a context for the delivery of training that will develop the understanding and skills of professionals, leading to appropriate help for individuals. Practice should be based on knowledge and experience and reflect the best available evidence.

This code is not prescriptive but seeks to encourage a flexible, dynamic and progressive process based on knowledge, shared values and standards of best practice and accountability.

It is intended to be of assistance to commissioners of autism training to safeguard quality and accountability, and to support the development of practice by adherence to the code or by affiliation to the Good Practice in Autism Training Group.

Throughout this code of practice, the term 'autism' is used to describe all of the conditions on the autism spectrum, including Asperger syndrome.

## Membership of the Good Practice in Autism Training Group

The group comprises any individual or organisation that observes this code of practice. In this way, a network of trainers will emerge to provide mutual support and opportunities for sharing ideas and best practice, and who can be recommended to commissioners.

## Aims and scope of the code of practice

### **What it is**

A framework that:

- offers guidance for trainers and training organisations in the delivery of dynamic, specialised, values-based training that promotes evidenced and ethical approaches
- recognises the heterogeneity of autism and that no one approach will meet the variety of need – a flexible approach will be needed
- supports the inclusion of people with autism and offers consistent and rational explanations for understanding and responding to them
- applies lessons from research and best practice sensitively, appropriately and systematically but with flexibility – having regard for individual circumstances
- is open to critical evaluation and development of ideas and measurement of impact
- will reassure commissioners as to the efficacy, credibility and ethical integrity of the training to be provided and what to look for in good training, and what to avoid.

### **What it is not**

The code is not:

- an accrediting body for training or training organisations, although we hope the code of practice will lead to a register of organisations and trainers that adhere to it



- an attempt to regulate or stifle innovation, or impose conformity
- intended to apply to informal events or public talks (although such speakers are invited to make use of the code of practice).

## Ethical standards

### What is involved

It is important that training observes ethical standards. This will involve, among other things:

- avoidance of any training that may result in pain, harm or other hazard to any individual
- avoidance of making claims for outcomes that cannot be substantiated
- evidenced or opinion based on a respected consensus of best practice
- avoidance of aversive or punitive approaches
- recognition that people with autism are a highly heterogeneous group demanding a highly flexible and individualised approach – one size will not fill all; personalisation is the cornerstone of the approach
- an ability to demonstrate that all training is provided in the context of best interests and personal well-being
- respect for individuality and the right to be different but balanced with the need to offer support and safeguarding
- avoidance of demeaning, patronising or otherwise negative attitudes, language and imagery
- a positive ‘can do’ approach but avoiding inappropriate ‘glamorisation’ of the topic – and acknowledging the severity of difficulty faced by some individuals and their families.

## **Examples of unethical approaches**

This includes training on interventions that:

- claim cure or recovery
- reflect a simplistic or unitary concept of autism
- are based entirely on anecdotal experience or cherry picked examples
- fail to take account of any known adverse effects of any intervention concerned
- fail to reflect available evidence or best practice
- are aversive, painful or hazardous in any way
- demean or devalue the individual with autism
- involve punitive sanctions, physical or emotional confrontation or punishment or removal of possessions or privileges
- exploit vulnerable individuals or their relatives by promising outcomes that cannot be delivered or as a 'loss leader' or other commercial mechanism in support of any product or programme
- disregard the risk to health or safety of any individual
- are beyond or outside the area of expertise of the trainer
- are not clear or specific about content or outcome
- act as a source of profit for the trainer without regard to quality or outcome

- are not linked to a broader context of understanding autism eg a specific approach or technology taught out of context
- involve the instruction of learners in specific technologies, techniques or approaches without the essential underpinning professional knowledge or expertise
- ignore, patronise or over-simplify the perspectives of individuals with autism.

## Content of training

- The code of practice recommends that training be approached systematically and incrementally. The context and sequence of acquiring knowledge and understanding of autism is very important.
- This is particularly so for staff working ‘hands on’ with people with autism. It is important for them to know what to do but also why they are doing it. In short, learners need to understand a conceptual framework before more advanced instruction is delivered.
- There are myriad fads and fashions in autism as well as particular techniques or technologies that in the wrong hands or wrongly applied can do great harm. It is essential that good induction and baseline knowledge are in place before training in other more sophisticated approaches takes place. A little knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing.
- We recommend that a core of essential knowledge is in place prior to any training in specific approaches.
- It is very important to develop an understanding of the essential concepts and elements of autism, and these should be assessed as part of an ongoing process of staff monitoring and support. This is the case whether the training relates to highly technical aspects or to more everyday activities.
- The emergence of technologies delivered via various computer program applications is of particular interest. These have enormous potential benefits but are not free of risk. The potential benefits should be examined alongside such risk.

## Core values

The following overlapping core values shall underpin autism related training:

### **Personalised**

- Recognition of the spectrum as highly diverse and heterogeneous, requiring personalised approaches to diagnosis, planning and interventions.
- It is important that training is undertaken in the context of promoting choice, well-being, independence and opportunities for the social, academic and personal development and inclusion of people with autism.

### **Best interests**

- Training should reflect the best interests of individuals with autism and challenge poor or unethical practice where this is found.
- Training should recognise the diversity, humanity and individuality of people with autism and the impact on their rights and well-being.
- Abuse of any form is not acceptable, be it through pharmacological, behavioural, environmental, social or any other means.
- The best interests and well-being of the individual shall be paramount and all training delivered in this context.

## **Inclusive and positive**

- Training will take account of the overlapping needs related to gender, age, culture, ethnicity and geography.
- Although diagnosis may be a medical process, in general autism should be seen as a developmental and not a medical condition. That said, medical aspects may be highly relevant and it is important to identify and deal with them where they exist.
- We recommend that people with autism are appropriately involved in the design and delivery of training in line with their experience and capabilities. Organisations will be expected to show how such involvement is encouraged and facilitated.
- Training will reflect an approach that recognises and promotes strengths and opportunities for development rather than a sole focus on problems or disability. This is not to say that where difficulties exist they will be ignored or dismissed.
- Training should reflect the belief that development is life long and that no person is beyond help. Every person will grow, mature and change over time.
- Training should recognise the often complex needs of people with autism and the need for consistent understanding across support teams and agencies. Multi-disciplinary approaches are important.

## **Honest and evidenced**

Trainers and training will:

- be related to relevant research and/or accepted models of best practice
- avoid gimmicks or experimental approaches unless as part of a properly conducted research trial that has achieved the necessary approvals
- reflect on the impact of training on practice
- always seek to improve through formal evaluation and reflection
- only provide information and data that is honest and reliable, not cherry picked examples
- recognise and assess risk where it exists
- acknowledge shortcomings in methods and gaps in trainer knowledge and expertise, and admit when unsure
- recognise autism as frequently complex and that simple explanations and ‘quick fixes’ are not appropriate
- employ best practice in the delivery of training – trainers will be trained in the skills of delivering training.

Trainers will not:

- make claims that cannot be substantiated or based on biased hypotheses or incomplete research
- exploit parental or family guilt or vulnerability by using terminology or other methods that apply pressure on parents to adopt a particular approach or product



- act without regard for the sensitive nature of the topic
- portray autism or people with autism in demeaning, negative or pejorative terms
- exploit people with autism by using them in training programmes without informed consent and without addressing any of their support needs.

### **Competent and credible**

Training and trainers will:

- demonstrate the necessary level of expertise and experience in the specific topic in order to deliver effective training
- be trained in the delivery of training and committed to evaluation of their practice
- be open to criticism and keep their practice and portfolio under constant review
- not apply any technology or approach (eg psychological, behavioural or biomedical interventions) unless qualified, competent and if necessary licensed to do so
- aspire to have their training accredited with either a university or independent training organisation, or be registered as a continuing professional development centre (CPD).

### **Organised and professional**

- Training will be based on the scope and needs of the commissioner and delivered in accordance with their requirements. If the scope or brief is unclear, every effort will be made to clarify and specify in writing prior to the

commencement of any training programme. This will establish that trainers are competent to carry out the required training and provide the essential baseline for evaluation.

- Training will be clear, high quality and up to date. Materials shall be of good quality and support the training task. They will be written in plain language, avoid jargon or inappropriate or offensive terminology and language. Where technical terminology or acronyms are used, they will be explained. Where references are used, they will be properly cited and recorded.
- Training will be well organised. Timeframes and timetables will be adhered to, having regard to the needs and nature of the participants. Aims, objectives and learning outcomes will be specified in advance and published. Evaluation will be against the stated aims.
- Training will be based on best practice in autism training, reflecting up-to-date perspectives of autism.
- Training will be suitably delivered, wherever practicable, by more than one trainer. Where delivery is by a single trainer, adequate supervision and monitoring will be available, either from the training organisation or a mentor. Ideally a minimum of two trainers will be used, but it is recognised that this is not always possible.

## Requirements of training

### **Requirements of training and trainers**

Training and trainers will:

- be linked to an overall strategic context for training which reflects organisational behaviour and goals
- challenge and report unethical or poor practice where this is encountered
- be rooted in an overall framework for understanding and responding to autism that will provide a context for subsequent training and personalised practice – this framework will include the overlapping areas of knowledge and awareness informing practice
- identify existing knowledge and understanding of participants and, where possible, seek to invest in and build on this
- attempt to discover the optimum learning style of the audience and match training to this
- employ a variety of training media in order to achieve maximum impact
- be reflective and self-critical
- be monitored or receive support from a mentor or supervisor
- avoid self-promotion or ‘style over substance’ delivery – a measured approach backed up by solid research opinion will ultimately be more trusted than gimmicks

- seek to impart knowledge, not ‘blind with science’ – it is about what the audience needs to learn, not what the trainer knows
- avoid criticism of other methods or approaches, unless supported by research or accepted professional standards
- respect client and participant confidentiality – the use of real life examples is useful, but care should be taken that this is done in an illustrative context only, unless agreed in advance as part of the brief and subjected to the necessary safeguards
- know their limitations and only provide training in areas where they have the requisite qualifications and expertise
- avoid speculative or unsubstantiated theories, except to explain them and the context for them – these should never be promoted
- not use training as a substitute case conference or to promote a particular belief or ‘hobby horse’
- not depart from or vary the brief other than through agreement with the commissioner.

## **Requirements of learners**

For autism training to be most effective, it is also important that learners are willing to accept and work with the principles of the code of practice.

Autism training should present learners with an opportunity to alter existing ways of thinking about autism and providing appropriate individualised support. This can be difficult, especially for those professionals who have spent many years

following a certain way of working or one that does not fit the current evidence base or the values of this code of practice.

The following principles should be used by trainers in their materials to set the scene for learners.

Learners should be encouraged to:

- adopt the value system embedded within the code of practice in their everyday work
- ensure they use only ethical practices in their everyday work that are accepted as good autism practice or are evidence based
- develop their knowledge base of the principles of good autism practice to enhance individualised ways of working with people across the autism spectrum
- be reflective of their practice and question the thoughts and motivations behind their actions/interventions, when supporting individuals with autism – learning does not end at the training room door; ongoing continuous professional development is essential for learning to translate to practice
- develop their skills and knowledge base to ensure they can make positive connections with people with autism – this should take account of the personalisation agenda that underpins this code of practice
- respect the opinions and experiences of fellow learners and trainers that may be different from their own – learners should feel safe to challenge opinions positively that are not based on current evidence or good practice

- use newfound knowledge and understanding to actively challenge inappropriate practices amongst colleagues when back in the work place.

## Risks

- Training organisations shall ensure that they have evaluated and recorded any foreseeable or likely risks associated with any training. This is particularly so when training concerns an intervention of any kind, especially physical interventions.

## Standards and records

- Training organisations shall ensure that any trainer is competent to carry out the required training and is able to maintain and retain documentation to demonstrate this.
- Where trainers do not have a professional qualification, they should be able to point to substantial personal experience in a range of settings and or experience with autism.
- Where trainers with autism deliver training, steps should be taken to ensure that their experience is relevant to the learners and that they are supported appropriately.
- Trainers are encouraged and given the opportunity to maintain and develop a personal portfolio of experience and development and to undertake training in delivery and related methods.
- Trainers and training organisations shall comply with all statutory requirements and maintain and retain records to demonstrate this.
- A record of each course or event shall be maintained and retained by the training organisation for a period in line with any legislative requirements or not less than five years. This record should include:
  - details of the event, trainers and names of participants and their organisations
  - the organisation commissioning or purchasing the training
  - any untoward events, illnesses or injuries and actions taken



- all suggestions for good practice that emerge that can be shared with the wider network
- details of any certificates issued
- details of any further training indicated.

## Advice for commissioners

- Commissioners have a responsibility to see that training is effective and delivered in accordance with ethical principles.
- Where commissioners are responsible for arranging a venue, this should be fit for purpose and conducive to the training event in terms of health and safety, accessibility, comfort, ventilation, heating and lighting, and size. It should be free of distractions and equipment, and of a standard specified by the trainer.
- It is also the responsibility of commissioners to ensure training complies with relevant legislation and can deliver the required outcomes in terms of statutory and other guidance. To this end, they have a duty to ensure training is fit for purpose, with clear aims and outcomes and capable of evaluation.
- Commissioners should avoid commissioning training that does not comply with this code of practice.

## Examples of good practice

- The use of ‘experts by experience’ is extremely valuable but needs to be carefully organised.
- Supporting individuals with autism to give a personal perspective within the training session adds value to the points being made on that theme eg a young man who spent time in an adolescent psychiatric unit and subsequently got an autism diagnosis talking in a training session about mental health issues and autism, and how he came to terms with his own diagnosis.
- It is important that such speakers are not subjected to environments they cannot cope in or faced by questions they do not know how to answer, so relationship building between the trainer and the person with autism is essential in advance of using such personal perspectives, in order to ensure appropriate use of the individual’s experience and knowledge of the support needed and any anxiety triggers, sensory issues, etc.
- Setting up a scripted interview (rehearsed beforehand) is effective where the person with autism lacks the confidence to give a presentation but is able to give useful responses to carefully crafted questions that prompt the required information. Similarly, the use of video clips to illustrate points being made can be effective where the individual cannot cope in a ‘live’ training session.
- Example: Bill, 23, has a diagnosis of autism. He is able to discuss how the delay of diagnosis impacted on his life and how it has changed for the better – and worse – following diagnosis. Such personal testimony is powerful and appropriate.

- Example: Susan is a researcher at a leading university. She also has a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome. She is an acknowledged expert in her subject. The commissioners of the training are able to ensure that the environment is suited to Susan's sensory differences, and the negotiations with Susan and her co-presenter are conducted in writing to avoid any ambiguity or misunderstandings. Susan is given a full list of learners and participants in advance. On the day of the training, Susan is greeted by a host who is familiar with all aspects of the venue and ensures that Susan and her colleague are comfortable throughout the day. By agreement with Susan, the host introduces Susan and asks that any questions are written down and passed for Susan to consider before responding.

## Examples of poor practice

- Using ‘experts by experience’ without due regard for their ability to cope in the training environment and/or without checking support needs, exposing them to the anxiety of answering questions they do not understand or ‘setting them up’.
- Trainers that illustrate a particular theory by having someone with autism along to simply agree with them about that theory or approach.
- Allowing the ‘expert by experience’ to flounder in the training situation in order to illustrate a point about their inability to cope. In other words, ‘setting them up to fail’.
- Using ‘experts by experience’ in support of a commercial venture, to demonstrate how a particular service or treatment has ‘worked’.
- Using venues where there are frequent interruptions or distractions – or where confidentiality cannot be guaranteed eg areas where the public have access to, such as a bar.

## Appendix 1. Checklist of good practice

- There are clear written outline aims and objectives and learning outcomes.
- Outcomes reflect the needs of the learners.
- Content is clear, well presented and well written.
- Content and aims are clarified and refined with commissioners before commencement.
- Materials and media to be used:
  - are appropriate to the training
  - are appropriate in terms of terminology
  - avoid patronising or disrespectful terminology
  - are up to date
  - contain references of any papers or research quoted.
- Trainer profile is available with details of all relevant experience and expertise, qualifications and declarations of interest. References are available if requested.
- Evaluation includes how well the training met expectations and fulfilled the brief.
- Trainers or commissioners ensure equipment and venue are fit for purpose.
- Trainers are suitably qualified to deliver the content of the training and are suitably experienced in autism.
- Trainers are suitably qualified and experienced in any additional specific technical aspect that they will be teaching.

- Trainers are able to reflect and address any cultural, racial and locality related issues in their training.
- Trainers will declare any interest in any product or service that may be promoted during the course of the training.
- Trainers supply the credentials, qualifications and expertise of all trainers to be used to the commissioners of training in advance.
- Trainers agree to independent evaluation of content and delivery, and will make use of feedback in the review of their training.
- Trainers welcome critical evaluation and peer review of training. The opportunity for learners to provide this anonymously is essential.
- There is a complaints procedure – informal and formal.
- Costs are transparent and agreed ahead of the start of training.
- Adequate insurance is in place.

## Appendix 2. Evaluation checklist

### Preparation

- Did the trainer supply details of their references and expertise and qualifications in advance?
- Was this in a format that was useful?
- Did the trainer agree scope objectives and learning outcomes in advance?
- Did the trainer provide content in advance?
- Did the trainer specify any preparation work that was necessary in advance by learners?
- Were any costs and charges agreed and clear?
- Was the administration satisfactory?
- Was the complaints process explained?
- Was liability explained?

### Delivery

- Was the training as described in the documentation?
- Was the trainer knowledgeable about autism?
- Was the training style suitable for the learners?
- Was the trainer approachable?
- Was the trainer appropriate in their professional conduct?



- Did the trainer answer questions and deal with clarifications confidently?
- Did the trainer cite sources of opinion and produce evidence to support the content delivered?
- Did the training take account of the different styles of the learners?
- Did the trainer suggest further reading and provide references for any statistics used?
- Was the trainer punctual and did the course run to time?
- Was the training environment suitable and conducive to learning?
- Were technical aspects clearly described?
- Was the language used appropriate for the audience?
- Was the pace of delivery right?
- Were materials consistent with the message?
- Did the trainer show sensitivity and respect for people with autism?
- Were contentious or controversial matters handled well?
- Were materials of a high quality, well written and accessible?
- Did materials avoid negative or outdated stereotypes of autism?

- Were materials based on evidence from research and best practice?
- Was the training appropriate to the needs of the learners?

### **Outcome and impact**

- In your opinion, how likely is the training to have an:
  - impact on awareness?
  - impact on knowledge?
  - impact on practice?
- In your opinion, has the training:
  - highlighted a further need for either more training or other changes eg in policy, provision or practice?
  - created any problems? If so, were they as a result of poor training? Has good training highlighted shortcomings?
- Did the trainer debrief on the training, giving feedback on the experience?
- Was the trainer given the opportunity to raise any concerns with the commissioner?





In 1962, we started as a small group of friends, frustrated at the lack of understanding and help available for us and our children. We decided to act for ourselves, and now our small group has grown into a national society of friends and the UK's leading autism charity.

From good times to challenging times, we're there at every stage, to help transform the lives of everyone affected by autism.

By sharing good practice on autism training, we're helping to raise the standard of support received by people with autism.

**We're proud of the difference we make.**

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