Parents' views on effective educational settings (n=72 parents)

(Analysed and compiled by Damian Milton and Katerina Giannadou)

Note on the sample:

Parents with children with autism completed a brief form to give information on what they considered to be important in the education of pupils with autism. These responses were used in the development of the Standards. The ages of their children ranged from 3 to 22 years and the average age was 10 years. Most of the pupils were in mainstream settings, with about a fifth attending a special school or unit.

Type of provision	No
Mainstream	53
Special	12
Special nursery	1
Special residential	1
Mainstream + home tutored	1
Health related education	1
Mainstream and special school	1
Mainstream nursery	1
Working	1
Total number of respondents	**72**

What is working well in your child's school?

Parents were able to give three answers to this question. The numbers show the number of parents giving this response. Just one parent said that she could not think of anything positive to write.

Working well – first comment	Detail
Individual pupil	Staff understanding/training - 5
	Staff level of commitment
	Individual qualities and strengths recognised – 3
	Teacher listens to pupil concerns

Working well – first comment	Detail
Building relationships	External – support from autism team – 2
	Communication between parents and staff – 7
	Regular meetings with staff – 3
	Having friends during play time
Curriculum and learning	Child meeting his targets
	One-to-one sessions – 4
	Having good teaching assistants – 4
	Structural – 'good support system'
	Praise
	Physical activity - 2
	Reward charts
	Behavioural program
	'Socialisation' programme
	Structure and routine – 6
	Individualised curriculum/differentiation - 4
	Arrangement of assessments
	Visual aids/timetables – 2
Enabling environments	Structural – quiet place provided
	Structural – small classroom – 2
	'Safe-guarding'
	All needs are being met / accommodation of needs – 2
	Feeling part of school community (inclusion)
	Autism forum support group

What is evident in the above, is that parents value good communication between staff and parents (7), structure and routine (5), staff understanding and training in autism (5) and one to one support.

Second response to what is working well in your child's school

Twenty of the 72 participants did not give a second response to this question.

Working well – second comment	Detail
Individual pupil	Understanding child's individual needs - 3
Building relationships	Communication with / support from school - 6
	Time with teachers to discuss progress - 2
	Feedback of problems – 2
	Support of the autism team – 3
	Parent strategies
	Teaching assistants – 3
Curriculum and learning	1-to-1 teaching approach - 3
	Circle time
	Focusing on increasing child's independence – 3
	Art projects
	Variety of teaching strategies
	Reward chart / Rewards – 2
	Speech therapy
	Autism specific education
	Personalised education
Enabling environments	Patient staff
	Safe haven
	Equipment and facilities available
	Activities at lunchtime – 2
	Great atmosphere

Working well – second comment	Detail
	Additional support in the mornings
	Good adult-pupil ratio
	Letting child go in through a side door – avoiding other children

Again, communication and collaboration with parents and carers was highlighted, as well as one-to-one sessions and individualised programmes of study. Teaching towards independence is mentioned here, but autistic advocates prefer the term autonomy to independence.

Third response to what is working well in your child's school

Thirty-two of the 72 parents did not make a third comment. Communication with parents/carers was again the most frequent answer given.

Working well – third comment	Detail
Individual pupil	Staff knowledge of autism
	Good knowledge of child's needs - 2
	Extra attention
Building relationships	Help and advice
	Reviews and meetings
	Communication with parents - 3
	Autism team
	Support from autism team
	Good use of therapists (e.g. SALT, OT) - 2
Curriculum and learning	School and home matching up methods
	Encouraging social interaction
	'Girl sessions'
	Opportunities to try new things
	1-2-1 support

Working well – third comment	Detail
	Individualised program - 2
	Excellent staff to pupil ratio
	Teaching assistants - 2
	Reduced number of subjects to study
Enabling environments	Time allowed for transition
	Relaxation area within the classroom
	Adjustments to behaviour policy
	Quiet areas
	'Structure – child feels safe'
	Structure – small school
	Sensory diet features heavily
	Interaction with peers - 2

Aspects of their child's school that parents/carers valued

The most highly valued aspect of educational practice for these parents was communication with approachable staff. The understanding of autism and individual differences was again emphasised. Four parents valued the location of the school most. Nine parents did not write anything down, potentially suggesting that they did not value anything at all. The majority of responses were around building relationships (family-centred education) and enabling environments.

First response

Something valued...	Detail
Individual pupil	Acceptance
	Staff knowledge and understanding of autism - 3
	Understanding of individual differences - 3

Something valued...	Detail
Building relationships	Support from autism team (structural – external)
	Good communication / working with parents - 14
	Helpfulness / approachable staff - 7
	Positive attitude / supportive - 2
	Staff following guidance from outside agencies
	Good feedback given
	Open door policy
	Communication between staff
Curriculum and learning	Quality of education - 2
	Visual schedules and timetables
	Teaching assistant support - 3
	1-2-1 support
	Willingness to try different teaching strategies
Enabling environments	Safe environment and child involved in decision making
	Staffing – appropriate provision
	Location - 4
	Structure – size of school
	Structure – small classes
	Nurturing ethos
	Good head teacher – decision making – 2
	Autism friendly environment
	Staff – 'second to none'
	Inclusive nature of whole school

Second response to what parents valued

Twenty-four of the 72 parents did not give a second response.

Something valued – second comment	Detail
Building Relationships	Approachable staff - 4
	Committed teachers
	Parent volunteers
	Teacher feedback
	Honesty
	'Somewhat listened too'
	Working with parents
	Supporting family
Curriculum and learning	Increase in performance assessment
	Annual reviews / reviews - 4
	Gender related material taught
	Education
	Rewards for all achievements
	Teaching assistant support
	Consistency in teaching procedures
	Autism strategies
Enabling environments	Safe environment / happiness
	Supportive staff – 4
	Structure – small classes – 2
	Nurture room
	Open minded and flexible approach
	Friendly and helpful children

Something valued – second comment	Detail
	Meeting needs
	Flexibility – 2
	Unique setting
	Community spirit
	Positive attitude

Supportive and approachable staff came through strongly, as well as well structured meetings and reviews of progress that involved the parents/carers.

Third response to what parents valued

Twenty-nine parents of the 72 parents wrote down three things they valued and the table below gives their third choice. Communication between staff and parents/carers figured strongly.

Something valued – third comment	Detail
Individual pupil	Willingness to learn about autism
Building relationships	Communication -5
	Approachable and friendly staff
	Respect for parents views on all matters
	School 'form'
	Working with outside agencies - 2
	Helping family to meet child's needs
Curriculum and learning	Extra time and help given
	Individual help
	Encouraging non-academic skills – social and emotional development - 2
	Teaching assistant support

Something valued – third comment	Detail
Enabling environments	Facilities
	Out of school club
	Nurture group
	Friendship groups
	Child's awareness of what is happening at school
	Transition between years/teachers
	Soft play area
	Break and lunch time activities

Aspects of their child's school which could be improved upon

Sixty of the 72 parents commented on aspects which could be improved. Although many were happy with the provision for their child, many commented on a lack of awareness regarding autism (or even an acknowledgement of it), a lack of support at break times, poor communication with parents, and a lack of focus on the child's interests and inclusion in social activities.

First comment on what might be improved

Something to be improved	Detail
Individual pupil	Understanding and acceptance of child – 3
	Ongoing staff training and acknowledgement of/on autism – 7
	Taking account of individual need
	All pupils voices to be heard
Building relationships	Communication – 5
	More input from autism team
	New headteacher
Curriculum and learning	Learning support – e.g. text books to bring home
	Clear reasoning given to child

Something to be improved	Detail
	Adopt strategies to increase social interaction
	Development of social 'skills' – 2
	Focus on child's strengths and interests – 3
	Opportunities to show talents
	Opportunities for involvement in activities
	Modifying group work (ASD not the same as behavioural difficulties)
	More speech therapy
	More flexibility in curriculum
	Specialist teaching – e.g. dyslexia support
	Extra tutor
Enabling environments	Adopt strategies to address name calling
	Following the school schedule
	Maintenance of routines
	Smaller groups and 1-2-1 teaching needed
	Preventing bullying - 2
	More support during break times – 3
	Sustaining current provisions
	Friendship groups
	More supportive environment – 3
	Better inclusion
	Understanding and patience
	Attitude of all the school staff
	More funding

Second comment on what might be improved

Forty-three parents noted a second area which might be improved.

Something to be improved	Detail
Individual Pupil	Better trained staff – 3 (1 – including lunch time staff)
	Better informed of pupils concerns
	All teachers read child profile
Building relationships	Communication - 2
	Feedback regarding outside agency reports
	More support from SALT
Curriculum and learning	Visual aids
	1-2-1 teaching
	Increase social interaction
	Emphasis on musical activities
	Direct teacher involvement
	Extra reading time
	Small group work
	More physical activities
	Not expecting all pupils to attain the same level
	Extra time to process information on the board
	Targets set
	Teaching 'how to play appropriately with peers'
Enabling Environments	Involving child in all aspects of the school – choice / explanations
	Social groups
	Whole school approach

Something to be improved	Detail
	Better organisation - 2
	More staff
	Protection
	Support at lunch
	Smaller group work and time out
	Friendship development
	IT specialist provision
	More teaching assistants
	Better access to toilets for disabled people

Third comment on what might be improved

Something to be improved	Detail
Individual pupil	Knowledge of individual needs
	Aware of the impact of anxiety
	Staff training
	Understanding of autism and needs arising
	Knowledge of dyslexia and other hidden disabilities related to autism
Building relationships	more reviews
	Educational referrals
	Communication - 3
	Support for family
Curriculum and learning	less subjects to study
	Physical activities

Something to be improved	Detail
	Teaching social skills to those who behave inappropriately to those with ASD
	Less formality
	Tailored curriculum
	1-2-1 support
	Help pupils to find different ways in which to present their work
	Better classroom control
Enabling environments	providing prior information about lessons
	Social activities
	Monitoring of break times
	More resources
	Help with transitions

From these responses, what parents are looking for is primarily good communication and strong relationships with the school, where both child and parent are listened to, and their needs are met. There is a much often stated about the need for better staff training and understanding of autism in general and of how it affects their own individual child. One-size-fits-all models are rejected in favour of tailored curricula that focus on social activities and integration, and on building upon the child's interests and strengths. This last point would be echoed and emphasised by the voices of autistic adults. Good relationships with outside agencies and practitioners were also valued. The general message is that school's need to be less imposing in their own ideologies, and more accepting of the autistic difference and the need to build more inclusive environments and learning strategies.