



TRACKS AUTISM

Identifying the uniqueness of TRACKS autism, a
specialist early years' centre for children with an
autistic spectrum condition

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Introduction

TRACKS autism commissioned the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire to carry out an evaluation in order to identify the uniqueness, in a systematic way, of TRACKS autism and to highlight the benefits that engagement with TRACKS has on children, their families, and the wider community.

Taking TRACKS autism as the unit of analysis, its uniqueness has been explored through an evaluation that looked at the Centre from different viewpoints, namely that of: the children, the family, and TRACKS staff and trustees. This report summarises the evaluation's findings.

Following a section on the background to TRACKS autism, the report focusses on the following areas:

- The impact of TRACKS autism on the individual child;
- The impact of TRACKS autism on the child's family;
- The impact of TRACKS autism on the community.

The main findings from these sections are brought together in a section that draws out the key features that make TRACKS autism unique. In addition to identifying the uniqueness and impact of TRACKS, the evaluation is also formative in nature, providing feedback on areas for development and enhancement. This report is a snapshot of current practice at TRACKS autism. In order to continue to enhance and develop provision, an ongoing formative evaluation and impact measurement process should be put in place. The report ends with some questions to consider in relation to establishing a continuing evaluation and impact measurement process. A toolkit to support this process is provided in an appendix.

Data collection

This evaluation draws on a range of data from different sources. The collection of a range of data is important here as TRACKS autism is a small organisation and any single data collection method would provide insufficient data to make a valid and credible argument. Using multiple methods to explore the same question provides a form of 'across-method triangulation', which helps to confirm emergent findings, ensure completeness of data, and provide an enhanced understanding of the question being explored (Bekhat & Zavszniewski 2012).

The evaluation draws on data collected specifically for this evaluation. It also uses existing monitoring data that is collected as part of routine everyday practice and on information that is publically available.

The project was reviewed by: The University of Hertfordshire Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority (UH protocol number: EDU/SF/UH/02812).

The table below summaries the data collected.

Type of data	Scale (where appropriate)
Children's progress sheets	n=7
Children's Learning Journeys	n=24
Interviews with teachers in transition schools	n=3 (1 SLD, 1 MLD, 1 mainstream)
Appreciative inquiry focus groups with staff and trustees	n=3, involving n=24 people in total
Interviews with staff and trustees	n=4
Interviews with parents	n=10
Evaluations of parent courses	n=1
Attendance logs	
Meeting logs	
Postcode data	
Analysis of press coverage about TRACKS autism	
Trawl of similar provisions locally	
Observations of sessions	n=2
Questionnaire comprising open and closed questions	n=11 responses, reflecting a 55% response rate.

Table 1: Data collected for the evaluation

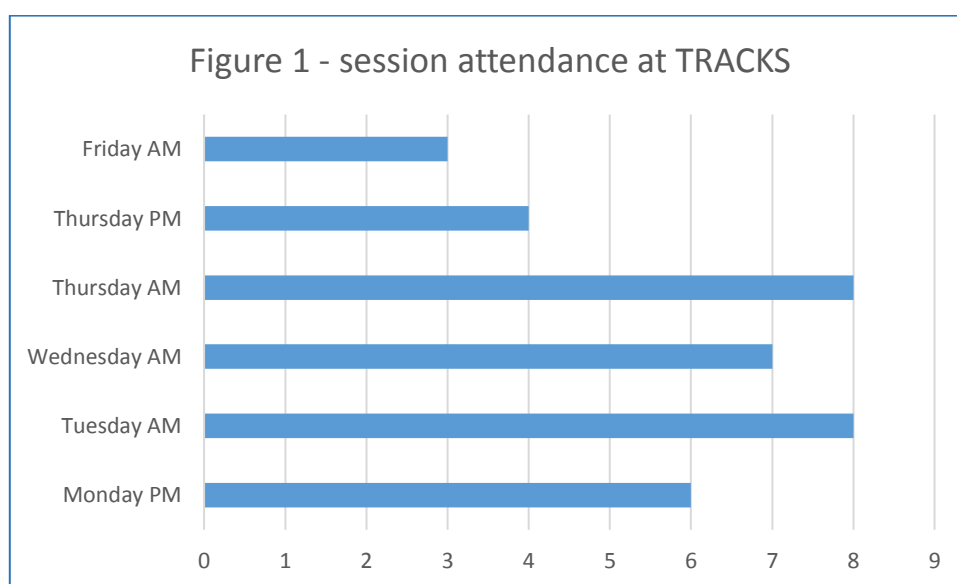
In the presentation of the data, the questionnaire comments are indicated by a 'Q'; focus group discussion by 'FG'; TRACKS autism staff and trustees' interviews by 'T'; transition school teacher interviews by 'TT'; observations (Obs); Learning Journey data (LJ); and the parent interviews by a single number. Based on children's progress sheets (via the *Early Years Development Journal*), line graphs are also presented plotting children's progress over the period of September 2016 to July 2017, although time-spans vary for individual children. The data covers the Early Years Developmental Steps 1-14 in the four main areas of 1) Personal, Social and Emotional 2) Communication 3) Physical Development and 4) Thinking. Those with baseline data and Steps 1-14 on their progress reports are included in the graphs, giving a total of seven children. (Numbers by colours in the line graphs denote individual identification codes.) All the children's names referred to in this report are pseudonyms.

Background

TRACKS autism is an Early Years Centre, based in Stevenage, for children with autism and related conditions. TRACKS is a small organisation, providing a calm environment for up to nine children in six 3.5 hour sessions, over five days for forty-eight weeks of the year. The Centre works with parents to meet children's individual needs and in addition provides respite care for families and carers during the school holidays.

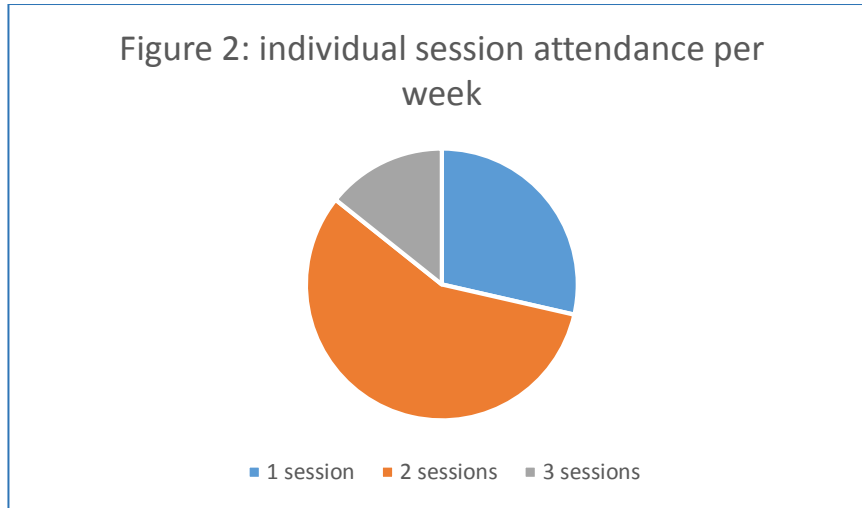
As an independent charity, TRACKS receives no government funding and relies on external funding, sponsorship and donations to support and continue the work that they do.

There are currently twenty individual children on the TRACKS autism roll. Their pattern of attendance can be seen in Figure1



There is on average six children in each session (range 3-8).

As shown in Figure 2, most children attend two sessions at TRACKS autism per week. Most children (91% (n=10) of questionnaire respondents) combine attendance at TRACKS autism with attendance at another preschool or nursery setting.



TRACKS autism staff reported that they would like all children to be able to attend at least two sessions per week and ideally more, recognising that it makes a difference the more children come. 82% (n=9) of questionnaire respondents reported that they would like their child to attend more sessions. Some parents felt the number of sessions that their child attended was appropriate, enabling the children to experience a mix of provision: ‘we feel the number of sessions complements his mainstream education well’ (Q). For some children, this mix of provision continues into compulsory education: ‘when he went to fulltime education, his parents asked if he could continue for the two afternoons a week at TRACKS, which the school facilitated. The intention is for this arrangement to continue into year one, and the school has gained agreement from the local authority’ (TT-MLD).

Other parents reported that they would like their child to attend more due to the progress they were making in TRACKS autism. For some, however, the cost of the sessions (currently at £45.00, subsidised through fundraising from the actual cost of £120.00) was prohibitive to further attendance; e.g. ‘if I could afford it, I would send him more’ (4), ‘if we could afford to send her more often we would do’ (5), ‘we do want him to go more than once a week, but at present we can’t

TRACKS is something I can pay for to give Freddie the interventions and support he needs [...] We could get our own private speech and language therapist, it would be much more expensive and would not deliver the same kind of thing. We can afford two sessions a week [at TRACKS] this way, instead of one (1).

afford it as we’re also paying for private speech therapy’ (Q). The lack of access to the government funding for 15 hours of preschool care was seen as an issue and parents reported spending all their part-time earnings on TRACKS provision (8) and actively fundraising to enable extra sessions for their child (3). Parents recognised that although TRACKS autism was expensive, it provided good preparation for the next educational stage when compared to, or combined

with, other provision to warrant the expense and that it is something that parents can actively do to support their children.

As a Stevenage-based centre, most of the children who attend or have attended TRACKS autism are from Stevenage or from the local area, as can be seen in Figures 3 and 4 where the concentration of red dots lies over Stevenage. As can be seen in both figures, however, some children attend TRACKS from much further afield, with Ilford being the furthest recorded at a distance of 48 miles away from TRACKS. TRACKS autism staff recounted a family making an 80-mile round trip three times a week so that the child could attend TRACKS autism and another family choosing Stevenage specifically when relocating from India because of the specialist autism provision (FG). This suggests that there is limited alternative provision either locally, or indeed nationally.

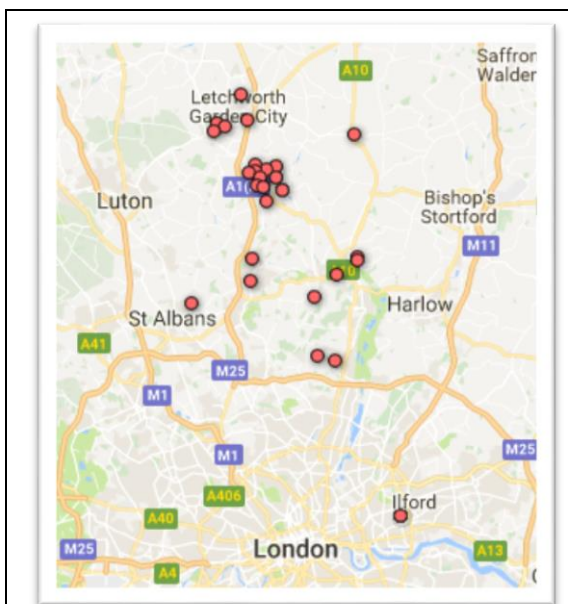


Figure 3: location of current TRACKS children's homes



Figure 4: location of previous TRACKS children's homes

While TRACKS autism does recruit well locally, there appears to be scope to target other areas of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. There is concern that while TRACKS autism is well known in Stevenage, it is less so outside of the town (FG) and that there could be a more concerted effort in raising awareness of the Centre and what it offers in the surrounding area.

A lot of people don't know they are there, or what they do, or that they are charity-funded, don't know there are only two of these in the UK, people think it's just a normal nursery and it isn't (6).

In terms of the current children at TRACKS autism, parents heard about the provision through a variety of different means:

- Internet research (including social media sites);
- Friends;
- Parents with children already at TRACKS autism;
- Autism advisors, special needs advisors, paediatrician;
- Preschool or nursery (e.g. through SENCO).

Yet, they felt that more could be done to get the message out to parents, who are often faced with a lot of information when their children are first diagnosed.

You need to draw it to people's attention. With the diagnosis, TRACKS was on a list with many other things, but you read all those things. When they get a diagnosis, they should be told about TRACKS verbally, as it's such a useful setting. I had googled for some time in Hertfordshire. I did not find it in my first attempts. Health visitors should mention it, doctors, schools, SENCOS (2).

This was reiterated in a comment from a teacher in transitioning mainstream school who felt that TRACKS autism needed to 'blow their own trumpet more' (TT-mainstream). This teacher had only heard of TRACKS because the parents had been advised to use the service. The teacher felt that more children could benefit positively from what TRACKS autism does.

TRACKS autism is a relatively small centre, currently operating one full day and four half days per week. Most children two sessions at the centre each week. The centre draws primarily from the local area and there is potential to extend the geographical reach if people were more aware of the Centre's existence and also to set up other TRACKS autism centres in other parts of the country.

Impact on the child

Overall, the parents are very satisfied with their child experience at TRACKS autism. In the questionnaire, all 11 respondents strongly agreed with the following statements:

- My child feels happy at TRACKS
- My child feels safe at TRAKCS
- My child is well looked after at TRACKS.

Parents reported that their children were 'happy' and that they 'loved going to TRACKS' (Q). All the parents who completed the questionnaire said they would recommend TRACKS autism to other parents whose preschool children who have or are suspected to have an autism spectrum condition.

While the parents are extremely satisfied with TRACKS autism, the remainder of this section looks in more detail at what contributes to that satisfaction by exploring the impact that TRACKS autism has on an individual child. This section is guided by the Early Years Autism Standards framework (Autism Education Trust, 2014: 3), which describes ‘key factors common to good practice for children with autism’ as relating to: the unique child; positive relationships; learning and development; and enabling environments. These headings are used to describe the impact that TRACKS autism has on the children who attend.

Unique child

This section is split into three subsections, which describe the ways in which TRACKS autism works with each individual child: individual, tailored support; supportive challenge; and through the experience and expertise of the staff.

Individual, tailored-support

One key advantage that TRACKS autism has over other preschools and nursery is the high staff to child ratios. This means that there is a lot more opportunity for the children to have more one-to-

I know he’s getting one-to-one attention. He’s getting what he needs (1).

There is one-to-one the whole time, geared on them [...] Preschool could not provide one-to-one, the groups were smaller, but not one-to-one (7).

He has one-to-one with trained staff who know how to get him to communicate, and tailor things for him (2).

It is able to target the needs of each child individually and support them to develop positively (Q).

one interaction with specialist staff; for the parents this is extremely reassuring. In mainstream settings many autistic children can ‘get lost’ (T2) or ‘left behind’ (T3) as keyworkers have ‘too many children to look after’ (5).

TRACKS autism works hard, however, to ensure that the child does not become too dependent on their keyworker, as one staff member noted: ‘we can have one-to-one some of time, but not all of the time’ (T1).

This is recognised by transition schools who see ‘more emphasis on getting children to be independent and have a go, and do things with an adult necessarily being present’ (TT-MLD).

The high staff-child ratios mean that the staff can work in different ways with the children. They have ‘more time with each child’ (Q) and there is ‘more bonding going on’ (5). The staff develop extremely strong

relationships with their children.

We know the children through the key workers. You really do know your individual child. And while you know all of them, those children that are your key children, really are yours. You have a relationship with them (FG).

These strong relationships enable the children to access new environments, checking in regularly with familiar adults when necessary (LJ).

The parents value how well their child is both known and understood by the staff at TRACKS autism. The staff at TRACKS autism work hard to develop those relationships and to develop them quickly in order to facilitate transitions. They use 'all about me' sheets to find out in advance what activities the children like, what makes them relaxed, what is familiar (T1). This means that relationships can get off to a positive start with the development of trust, which is crucial to ongoing development.

With this knowledge and understanding of the child comes the ability to individualise, tailor and provide a genuinely child-centred experience: 'they go into their world and bring them out, find their interests and their likes and work with them' (7), their motivators and de-motivators, and what can calm the children (LJ), see also Figure 5. This was reinforced through a staff interview 'we get down to their level – see how they feel, see what interests they have and what's affecting them' (T4). TRACKS staff 'see the individual, they don't see the condition' (2). This focus on the individual is very important because 'all children have their own idiosyncrasies – some love being touched, others don't, some spin, some don't. You need to understand those differences, as they will show them strongly' (T2).

TRACKS autism staff have the time to work carefully and individually with the children and develop the children's skills gradually – building on from doing a puzzle together through to turn-taking (8) for example. There are a lot of varied activities that are designed around the children's interests (T2). These activities support targets aligned with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which all staff are aware of and work towards. The targets are developmental and challenge the children to progress.

Knowledge about the children is phenomenal (3).

They are able to meet his needs [...] At mainstream, I don't think they understand him as well (1).

The goals and targets are tailor-made to suit his needs and disability (Q).

It's a small facility and they can really personalise what they do for the individual child and I think that's been excellent (TT-mainstream).

Supportive challenge

TRACKS autism staff challenge their children, but they do so in a supportive way. Parents reported that children rose well to these challenges, often doing things at TRACKS autism that they had not done elsewhere, and bringing out the best in their child (see Figure 6). This was often in stark contrast to experiences in other mainstream settings, where a lack of understanding of both the individual child and autism meant that the children were sometimes not encouraged to do different things and were instead left to do the things that they were comfortable with that were easier for the other settings to manage.

There was also an impressive level of positive behaviour management where TAs [Teaching Assistants] effectively de-escalated potentially difficult situations by re-directing children to activities which were motivating for them, so avoiding distressing meltdowns (Obs1)

They challenged him to do it, they wouldn't let him sit out, which is what they do at mainstream, they [TRACKS] found a way around it, very creative (2)

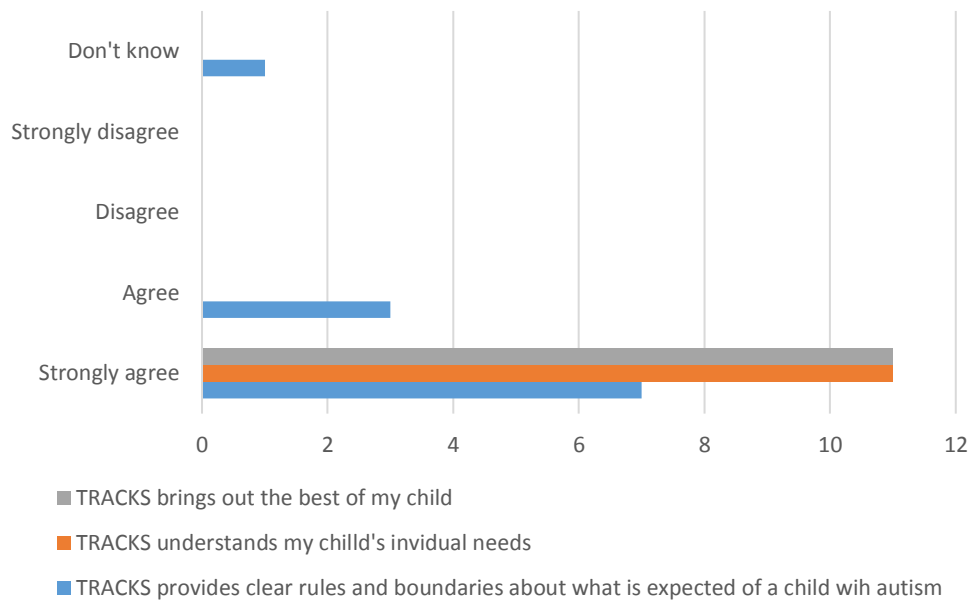
When he started preschool, he would just flit around the different activities and if he got bored or stuck, they would just put him onto something new, rather than extend play on what he was on (1)

At nursery they just leave him. At TRACKS he does so much more (10)

In mainstream, people can be very nice. But they are too nice in a way, bend over backwards because of the condition. At TRACKS they know when the child is being cheeky or stressed and they deal with it (2).

Facing these challenges are important if the children are to develop the skills necessary to cope with change and difference (T1). The staff themselves approach their work as a series of small challenges, and they share ideas and strategies on how to overcome them. At TRACKS autism they have the time to deal with the challenges and to recognise and value the importance that little steps can have on a child's learning and development.

Figure 6: impact on the child



Staff experience and expertise in autism

The parents really valued the staff's expertise, understanding and knowledge. They recognised that staff at TRACKS autism were specialists in the autism spectrum condition and they felt that they were getting the best and most appropriate support for their child. This specialism was what set TRACKS autism apart from other settings and was one of the key reasons for sending their children there.

While parents reported some good relationships with staff in other settings, they felt that they were just not sufficiently qualified or experienced in autism to provide the most appropriate support for their child. The expertise and

experience in autism of the TRACKS autism team means that parents have more confidence and trust in their practice: 'I completely trust them to get on and do it' (1).

For most of the staff and volunteers at TRACKS autism this expertise has been developed through an interest in autism and the experience of their daily working with autistic children. Close and supportive team working between all the staff members along with regular reflective de-briefing and planning also help to develop the professional understanding of those who have less experience. Communication between the team is open and honest. These traits are present in the way in which TRACKS autism builds relationships with children and families.

Positive relationships

The partnership that TRACKS autism fosters with children and families is key to the positive impact that they have on them. Integral to this partnership is the development of supportive relationships,

They have knowledge, experience and understanding of the particular issues that ASD children face. At the other setting they are not experts. At TRACKS you don't have to explain, they just get it (2).

They are all specialists at TRACKS [...] They have done training in autism, they know how to handle the child better (4)

The staff are trained differently. They have more tools to use than mainstream [...] They have more specialised knowledge. They speak differently – you can hear the knowledge and understanding. Mainstream is not geared for ASD issues (5)

It's just specialist, what it's doing, they know what they do and that is all that they do. They are not trying to focus on anything else. That's their thing (1)

The wealth of knowledge and experience is invaluable and the staff are, without exception, caring and committed. If you are new to the world of ASD (as parents often are at pre-school stage), this is enormously comforting (Q).

The staff are well trained, they know their stuff, they understand the children (TT-mainstream)

built on trust, confidence and understanding. There are features that appear to encourage the flourishing of relationships between TRACKS autism and families, these are:

- The character of TRACKS autism staff and volunteers;
- TRACKS autism's communication channels.

The character of TRACKS autism staff and volunteers

Based on evidence from parents, the staff at TRACKS autism are committed, dedicated, professional and motivated. Most have chosen to work for TRACKS autism because they care passionately about children, and particularly children with autism. They have no fear of autism and see 'every child as a challenge' (T1). These challenges do not phase the staff at TRACKS autism and they enjoy the rewarding work that they do.

You feel as though you are seeing a bit of magic happen. It is really very special (T2).

TRACKS autism also focuses on the positive.

This is very important to parents, who might have 'come out of school and all they've heard are negative comments, and the first thing we say is "your child's amazing" [...] Mum was refreshed to hear a different voice saying her son was doing really good things' (FG). Parents begin to see that their children are making progress. The progress might well be small steps, which 'mainstream might not see' (T3), but it is progress and it is worthy of celebration.

What is special is the warmth of the people and how well they treat the children to get the best out of them, come out happy, it's nice to have a place where they can be children and not feel scared by the environment, in fact enjoy it (2).

Happy faces across the staff and their passion in working with special kids (Q).

They do it as a job, but they do it because they feel it in their heart, that passion (FG).

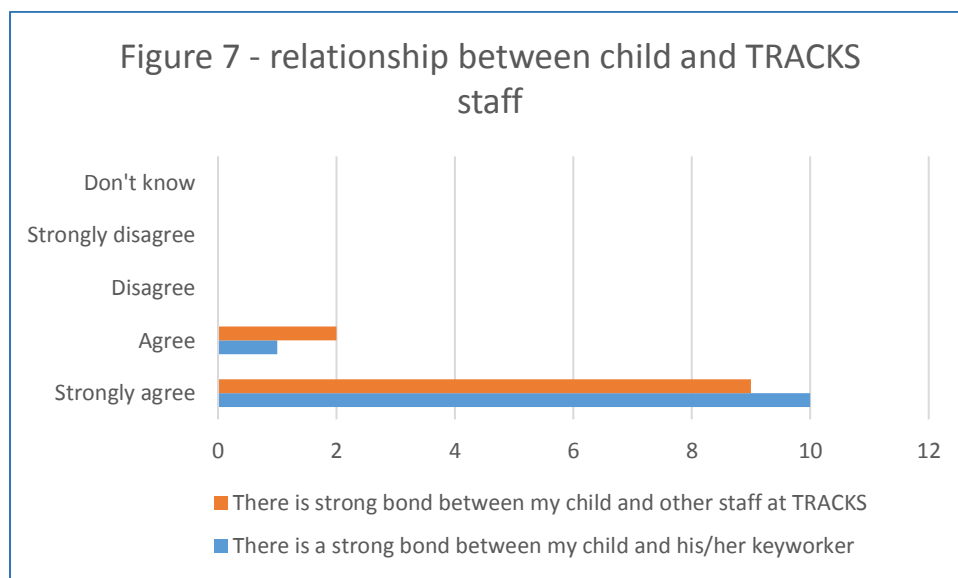
It's nice to work in an organisation where there isn't such a high turnover of staff. This says something about the organisation (T3).

Josh went to preschool where there was a high staff turnover which did not help as he needed routine (4).

The workplace is friendly and the environment is warm and welcoming. It is perceived, by the parents, to be well-led and managed (91% (n=10) strongly agreeing and 9% (n=1) agreeing) and responsive to any concerns raised (91% (n=10) strongly agreeing and 9% (n=1) agreeing). The Principal received particular praise: 'special praise must go to the Principal, who is tireless, no nonsense and full of fun ideas to get the best out of the children' (Q).

It is also a good place to work, and that encourages staff to stay. While there is a trend towards retention of staff in early years' settings (Simon, Owen, Hollingworth & Rutter, 2015: 3), both parents and staff contrasted their experience at TRACKS autism with the higher staff turnovers in other early years' settings. A stable workforce is immensely beneficial for the children who struggle with change. This allows for strong bonds to develop between not only the children and their keyworkers, but also with the range of teaching and non-teaching staff and trustees associated with TRACKS autism. Parents reported that their children had strong bonds with their keyworkers and other staff that work at TRACKS autism (see Figure 7)

Rebecca does not talk about the keyworker at mainstream, but at TRACKS she knows all the staff's names (5).



Modes of communication channels

TRACKS autism uses multiple channels to communicate with families. The questionnaire respondents strongly agreed (73%, n=8) or agreed (27%, n=3) that the information that they received from TRACKS autism on their child's progress was valuable.

The most formal documenting of a child's progress is through the Learning Journeys. These Journeys document, through observation reports and collated evidence (photographs, pieces of artwork, mark-making), the child's progress in key areas. The sharing of these journeys with parents can be reassuring 'I look through the learning journals, everything that I've been reading, I've been happy with' (1), 'love the learning journals and to see that my son is doing all the things a four-year old should be doing!' (Q) and they show the extent to which TRACKS autism knows its children: 'looking in the Learning Journey, they are so tuned into him' (3). The Learning Journeys can also provide ideas for activities to try at home. The sharing of development targets, with both the families and

the other settings that the child attends, can also reassure and ensure that everyone is working together. This consistency is very important for the child – it aids learning and also helps to lessen the child’s anxiety and makes them feel safe. This is not the experience of all settings: ‘she has targets at TRACKS autism – which she doesn’t at mainstream’ (5). The targets are specific, developmental, and focussed on the individual needs of the particular child.

While the formal communication is clearly strong, it is in the informal communication that TRACKS autism excels. TRACKS autism presents a welcoming, warm and inclusive environment, where opportunities to speak with the parents are actively sought: ‘being a presence, if they want to talk they can see you’ (T1). There is an open door policy and staff can be approached at any time, which parents strongly value. Parents felt that they could approach staff with ‘silly questions’ rather than phoning the

They speak to you after every session, at [mainstream nursery] I don’t get to speak to them (10).

At every pick up there is time to talk to them and ask about the day (1).

Feedback on the day is great as I can talk to my son knowing what he’s done during the session as this would not be volunteered by him (Q).

professionals, you could ‘ask a question over a cup of tea – it’s like asking a friend’ (6), ‘staff are always happy to give updates on how my child’s day has been and will always answer any questions I may have’ (Q). Questionnaire respondents view drop-off and pick-up as an opportunity to engage with staff (91% (n=10) strongly agreeing and 9% (n=1) agreeing). Staff stay behind at the end of sessions to speak with parents and relate how the child’s day has gone. Parents recounted that in other mainstream settings this is simply not possible because of the numbers of children that each keyworker has.

The individual and tailored support for children, which recognises the specific needs of an individual child, and is developed through the extensive knowledge and expertise in autism, provided by dedicated staff ultimately impacts positively on that child’s learning and development. This is explored further below.

Learning and development

As an early years’ educational setting, the impact on the child’s learning and development is clearly important. TRACKS autism records the progress of children. TRACKS autism is currently using both the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE 2013) and the *Early Years Developmental Journal* (National Children’s Bureau 2013). The Early Years Developmental Journal is closely linked to the EYFS, but is especially designed to support early identification and assessment

for children with special educational needs and disability and early education for all children (Mengoni & Oates, 2014). This data shows that children at TRACKS autism develop holistically, and in line with nationally recognised standards. It is worth, however, looking in more detail at three key areas identified by Perepa (2013) as important areas for development for children on the autistic spectrum: communication; play and flexible thinking; and social interaction. A fourth area, developing independence and self-help, is discussed as it emerged as a theme particularly in the analysis of the Learning Journey documentation. The data from the Early Years Development Journal is interspersed with findings from the interview and questionnaire data.

Communication skills

Many of the parents reported that TRACKS autism had provided opportunities for their children to develop skills in communication and language.

For some of the children, prior to TRACKS autism, there had been a lack of speech development, but that progress had been made. For other children, TRACKS autism was the first place where the child had spoken, or indeed the only place that the child had spoken. The Learning Journeys also make reference to a number of speech-related achievements; e.g. 'when playing football, he said "oal" when he scored a goal. This is the first word said at TRACKS and he said it at least six times' (LJ).

Another parent noted how there was significantly more talking at TRACKS autism than in the other setting her child attended because of the encouragement that the child had been given at TRACKS. The children were also learning to concentrate and listen better (Q).

As TRACKS autism staff noted, there is a lot of good communication support at TRACKS and it is in the area of social and communication skills that the children make most progress. Figure 8 shows a line graph of children's progress over the last academic year in the Early Years Development Journal area of Communication, with six of the seven children making progress.

He chats away a lot more now (1).

Progress is slow – but it is progress.

Edward was not speaking at two.

Now he is speaking, but it is a bit unintelligible (2).

More vocabulary and appropriate use if it (Q).

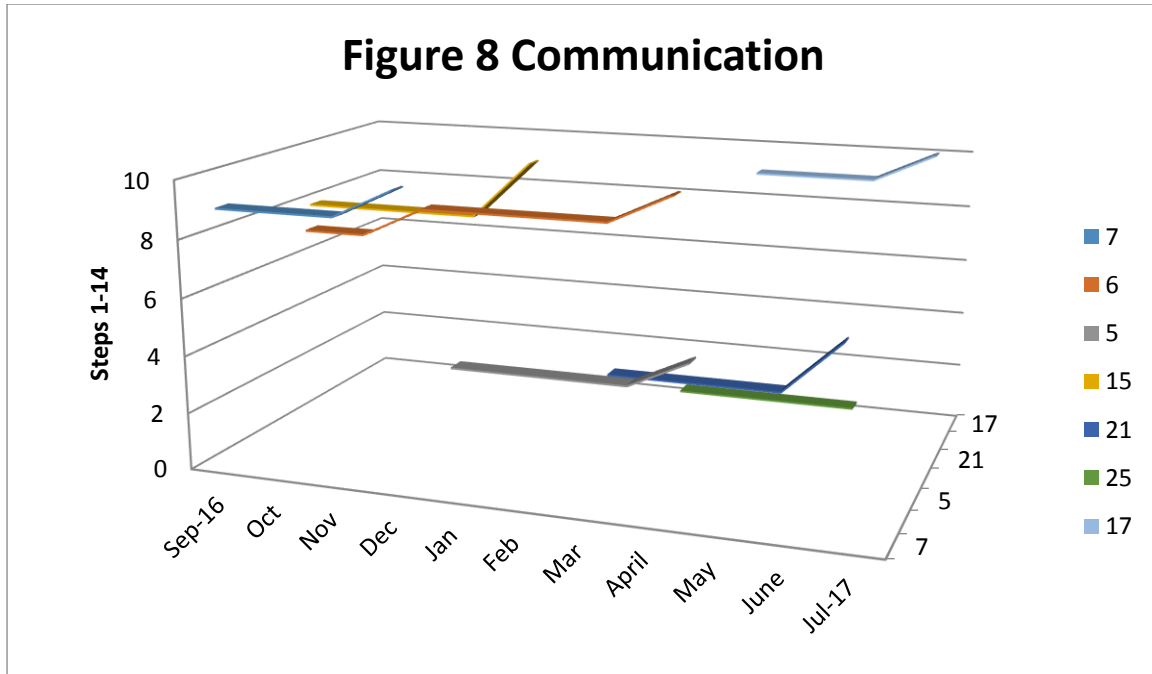
Josh said his first words at TRACKS (4).

TRACKS is the only place Ava has spoken (6).

He's a different child at TRACKS. He talks more. At nursery they say that he doesn't talk at all. (10)

There were many examples of child-initiated language from the talkers (Obs2).

Figure 8 Communication



In the following quote, a member of TRACKS autism staff describes how speaking was developed over time:

He was given a turn with mirror and time to speak / sing like the other children. The TA noticed he was mouthing, encouraged the use of the mirror and he was speaking by the time he left TRACKS. All the words had been in there – he just needed encouragement (FG).

TRACKS autism staff also design in opportunities to link language with movement through songs and rhymes. Parents noted how their children enjoyed singing and dancing while at TRACKS: ‘singing, he learns through it, now he initiates singing’ (3). This was recognised through by the observer:

Through using music and simple movements, children were practising a whole range of social and communication skills that was contextualised through the motivating music (Obs1).

TRACKS uses PECS with him – he sees the picture and then does things (10).

PECS was used and all children made choices by exchanging symbol cards or speaking (Obs1)

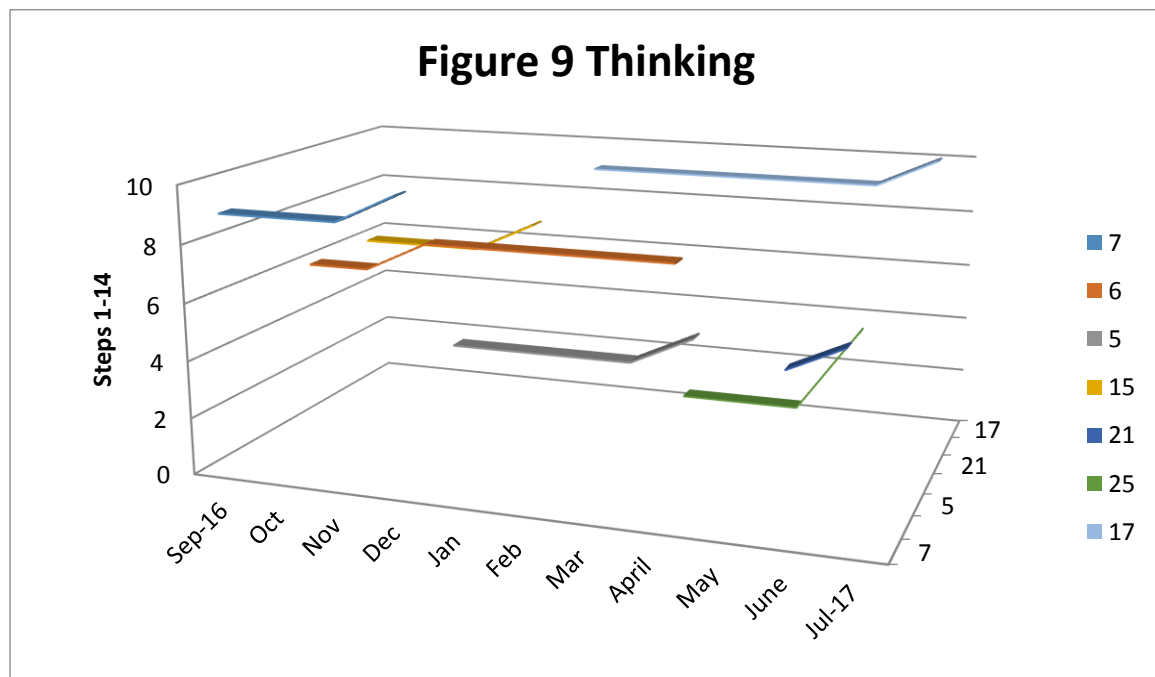
TRACKS uses augmentative communication systems like PECS, which does not necessarily happen in mainstream nurseries (TT-MLD).

Parents also reported the development of non-verbal communication skills; e.g. ‘willing to communicate with others to ask for help with drawing’ (Q). Staff support non-verbal children to communicate using cards and have introduced PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) to help initiate communication, to enable choice-making, and to reduce communication-related frustration.

Overall, TRACKS provides an environment where there are opportunities for ‘a high level of interaction and total communication which included photographs, symbols, signing and speech’ (Obs1).

Play and flexible thinking

TRACKS autism also provides opportunities to develop different kinds of play to support flexible thinking. For many children with autism, thinking can be rigid and TRACKS autism helps support the development of strategies to help them unlock their abilities (T4). They do this by promoting rich and varied play activities, ‘with children having agency to make choices and to initiate play scenarios’ (Obs1). The following line graph (Figure 9) shows all seven children made progress over the last year in the development area of Thinking.



Children have access to sensory play, where they can interact with the sensory environment through the sensory room, outside space, and ball pool. There are different toys that the children can interact with, and parents reported how that exploration of toys had transferred to the home setting (3). Role play was supported and encouraged for all children at TRACKS autism. During an observation of free play, the observer noted how teaching assistants enacted a role play in the garden:

He’s learning those play skills that he doesn’t have (1).

In the ball pool, an adult pretended to feed a caterpillar a ball. A girl picked up two orange balls and said ‘two oranges’ and pretended to feed the caterpillar, then did the same with three balls for blueberries (L).

The children were caught up in the drama of a real life scenario and some watched whilst others took part, but all were included and had a part to play. The teaching assistants were at all times challenging the children to cooperate, join in and be part of the role play, but there were no meltdowns and children clearly felt safe to take small steps forwards in their learning and socialising (Obs1).

This focus on staff 'encouraging the children to extend the way they used the activities' (Obs1) is important. Parents reported that in other settings their children's repetitive and solitary play was either not noticed, or it was not attended to: 'at nursery he was doing his own thing – counting, doing puzzles – they were fine with it because he was safe and happy' (8) and 'at preschool she could have played repetitively, and they'd not really notice (5).

This extension meant that the children were developing. They were engaging in and enjoying: parallel play (Obs1); cooperative play (LJ), showing signs of turn-taking and sharing (Obs2, 8, LJ); copying and imitating (LJ); imaginative and pretend play (5, 7, LJ); messy play (LJ); playing with toys and puzzles (Q, LJ); and adult-led activity (2, LJ). Much of this play is child-initiated, spontaneous, and un-prompted by staff; e.g. when four boys played with a sit-in car and took turns pushing each other around for over ten minutes; a boy fixing a friend's broken car and them both laughing and driving away; or concentrating on activities of their own choosing; or leading the keyworker to the art room or ball pool (LJ).

In fact, the observer noted following her second observation of free play: 'they looked like a group of ordinary children playing outside' (Obs2).

Social interaction

For children with autism, social anxiety, a lack of sense of self, and difficulties with communication can all make social interaction difficult. TRACKS autism works with the children, within a supportive environment, to develop the skills of social interaction (e.g. conversational skills, play skills, understanding emotions, dealing with conflict, and friendships skills (National Autistic Society).

Some children who attend TRACKS autism have spent very little time away from their parents and have strong attachment issues, which can impede progress initially. It is through the development of trust within relationships, particularly with the keyworker, that they start to develop socially.

Parents reported how their children were establishing and maintaining eye contact much more frequently (4, 5, 7, Q). These developments in the establishment and maintenance of eye contact were also recorded in the Learning Journeys. The children were able to both understand and initiate instructions (3; LJ). These skills were enabling the development of cooperative play and, in some cases, the making of friends.

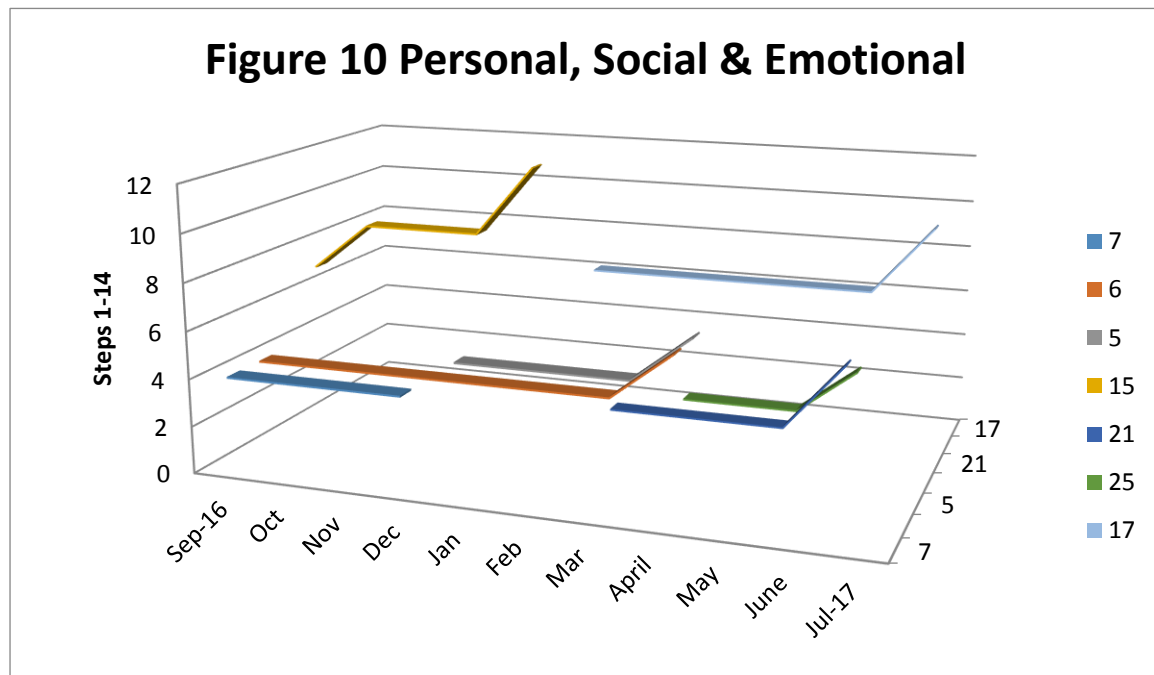
The development of friendships is seen a real positive for parents, who had experienced their children not playing with other children before (4, 5). The development of friendship - holding hands, playing together, initiating play, giving instructions to other children, being less anxious around other children - were all recorded in the Learning Journeys; e.g. 'with adult support, happy to hold hands with other child and rock independently during "row your boat"'; 'she held out her hands to another child and holds their hand. Together they dance to the music, laughing and giggling' (LJ). One parent felt that social interaction was eased because 'these children are similar. They have common ground' (4).

He bonds with adults and now with children. He has a friend. But it is only now that he is making links with other children in his mainstream setting (2).

His confidence grew – until then he did not really interact, he cried when I left the room, there was little eye contact, he was spinning – the child he was then compared to the child that he is now is completely different (7)

He is holding my hand more (Q).

Children’s progress sheets showed that six of the seven children made significant steps forward in Personal, Social and Emotional development, presented in Figure 10



For many children, TRACKS autism was enabling them to develop the skills to engage socially. This was encouraged, particularly through snack time, when the children eat a small portion of food together. The children were learning ‘eating socialisation’ (Younginer 2015): to sit down for snack, take turns, and to not have a teacher by their side all the time (6, T4). Equally, physical contact was being developed through group activities and action songs. The establishment of a routine and repeated encouragement to help develop one child’s use of touch:

One child hates physical contact – she shrinks away from physical contact. She would not sit on a lap, she would stand in the corner [...] She will now hug as part of a song and she also allows other staff members to touch her. She even spontaneously held another child’s hand. It’s about being persistent and letting her do it in her own time. The timeframes are different. She feels safe here. She trusts TRACKS (FG).

Developing independence and self help

The final area of development relates to the development of independence and self-help skills. The Learning Journeys and questionnaire responses demonstrate how the children are developing skills in relation to: toileting (e.g. no longer wearing nappies; using the toilet instead of a potty); eating (e.g. eating things even though they did not like them; feeding themselves; using spoons for eating; sitting down to eat; cooking); and dealing with emotions (e.g. finding ways to express needs; learning to use other activities as a distraction when upset).

The children are also willing to signal when and how they need help through questions or signs; e.g. children asking staff to draw things (LJ). The children seem to enjoy the responsibility of carrying out small tasks, sometimes learnt through imitation of staff, e.g. picking up a broom independently and brushing sand (LJ). Their independence is also shown in their opportunities to choose what they play and what they eat at snack time. TRACKS autism aims to create an environment that 'makes children feel comfortable' (T1) and gives them the 'freedom to explore and learn and be themselves' (T4). Their developing independence is recognised at transition to compulsory education:

I think they generally are more resilient and generally more independent in their learning than children who are coming from other settings. So they're able to engage in activities without necessarily having an adult there to support them (TT-MLD).

Progress in the area of learning and development might be slow and in small steps, but it is tangible and its impact is transferrable to other parts of the child's life. This progress is enabled by the environment that TRACKS autism provides to support learning and development.

Enabling environment

Inclusivity

One key features of provision at TRACKS autism is its inclusivity. The children are able to access all of the sessions and activities that TRACKS autism offers. This is important because it: 'gives a sense of belonging. Some have not fit in elsewhere, gives them real security, routine, and people who understand their condition' (T2).

This sense of integration is not something that all the children have experienced in their other educational settings. In order to manage the condition, in some settings, the child may be given something else to do, or in more extreme cases actually be excluded from activities.

At TRACKS autism, the children are firmly 'part of the group' (2).

Edward must pick up on the fact, but he doesn't talk about it. He's sat in the corner of his mainstream school, doing different work to his peers. At TRACKS they're all doing the same thing (2)

At nursery, don't let her interact with the other children, they worry how she will be with the other children. She's not allowed to go to the school parties. Music and PE, she can't do at school [...] She likes being treated as though she's normal. Just because she has a disability does not mean she can't do things [...] At TRACKS they care and they treat her like she's human rather than a kid with autism (6)

Structure and routine

For children with autism, structure and routine brings comfort. TRACKS autism operates within a structured daily routine.

Edward likes the structure of the session. He can get confused in mainstream. (2)

TRACKS autism uses visual timetables and that timetable is 'used to build in structure and show the children what was happening now and next' (Obs1). While there is structure to the day, the visual timetable helps the

children to change their routine, which is an important aim for TRACKS autism staff: enabling the children to better deal with change (T1).

The children have access to 'Sensory Circuits', which is a series of activities that alert, organise and relax the child. The children then participate in an activity called 'Look', which is adult-led and promotes joint attention. The children then sit down together for snack time, using picture cards to help them choose what they want to eat and drink. They have access to the outdoor space, and all the outdoor play equipment. The Sherbourne Developmental Movement activity follows, which helps develop body and spatial awareness. There is also time for one-to-one work, following the TEACCH approach. The children go on to eat together and this is followed by story and song time.

The transitions between the different activities are successfully managed, meaning that the children can benefit better from them:

Transitions are extremely well organised and short activities such as painting or being outdoors are interspersed with longer activities such as dance, drama and free play. Changes of pace were clearly planned and the hard work of all the staff meant that the children were in a learning environment which allowed them to practice and achieve their individual learning targets in a safe and stimulating environment (Obs 1).

Physical environment and resources

TRACKS autism operates within a specialist setting that has been designed to meet the needs of children on the autistic spectrum. Compared to other mainstream settings, TRACKS autism provides a small, calm, quiet, clean and low-arousal environment, which has fewer distractions and is more comfortable for children on the spectrum, whose sensory processing difficulties may often lead to sensory overload, which may in turn cause anxiety and provoke meltdowns. Parents appreciated this calming environment (see Figure 11).

When I first saw TRACKS, I thought it was a bit white and bland – but I get that now! (1)

Edward is easily distracted, TRACKS keeps things simple and clear, which means he focusses better (2).

Preschool is one big room, with too many distractions (3).

The Centre comprises a number of different spaces. Internally, TRACKS autism has a central area with a number of smaller rooms feeding off it: ‘the nine rooms have different attributes and contribute to the ways we can work with those children’ (FG). The physical space is conducive to learning (see Figure 11). The set-up is much easier for children on the autistic spectrum to access than the open-plan, free-flow environment that reflects most early years’ settings (T1). The spaces also offer ‘somewhere to go if they have a meltdown’ (4). The children also have constant access to the outside. As one of the TRACKS staff notes, the outdoor environment is key: ‘the majority like the different feel – e.g. the wind: feel it on the face, watch the trees – for a sensory child, the outside space gives you something’ (1).

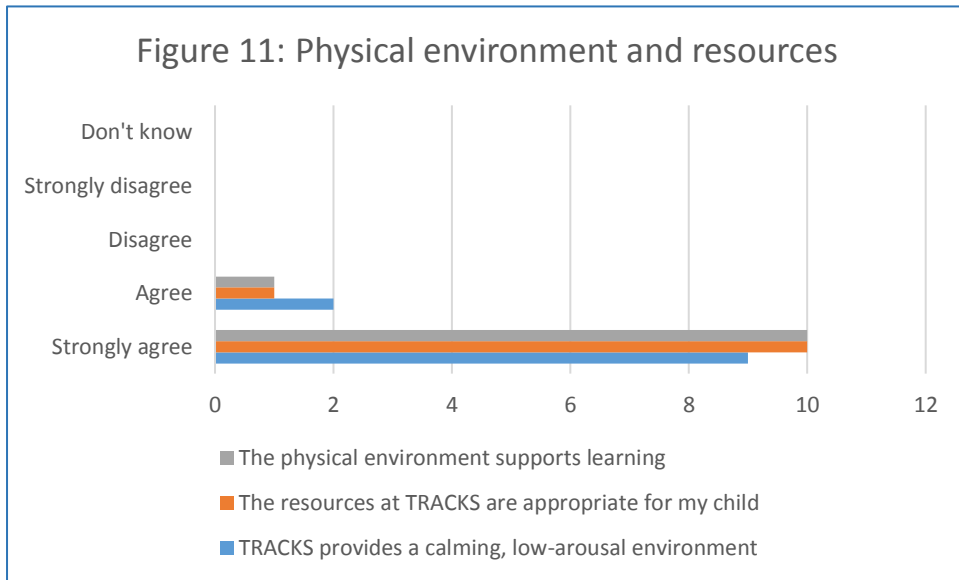
In addition to the all-year round garden (with a canopy that protects against extreme weather), TRACKS autism also provides a sensory room, soft-play, and ball pool. The children benefit greatly from the different experiences that these rooms provide:

She loves the outside space. The garden is a big plus (6).

The sensory room is perfect: lights, colour, sounds (3).

I have an outdoor child – the all year round garden is child-safe. He will not put things in his mouth that will cause him harm (3).

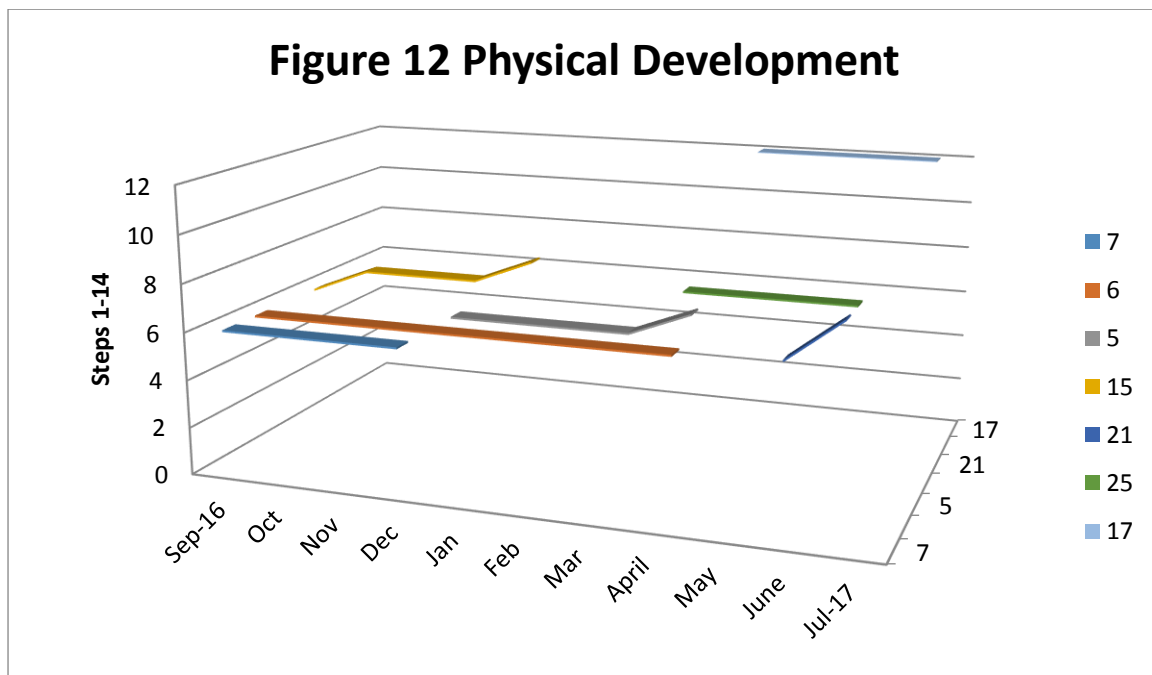
TRACKS autism is also well equipped with resources to support the children’s learning and development; something that was recognised by the parents (see Figure 11).



The resources, and the impact they were having on the children, were also noted on by the observer:

The tables were set out with a wide range of excellent resources and several areas were clearly defined e.g. play people, sensory room, book corner, outdoor area, sand and water play. They provided a rich and engaging environment, with children having agency to make choices and initiate play scenarios. (Obs1)

Analysis of progress sheets shows that in the Early Years area of Physical Development there were the least progression steps made. Figure 12 nevertheless shows that three of the seven children made progress in this area.



Technology

TRACKS autism also has access to cutting-edge technology in the form of the University of Hertfordshire’s Kaspar the Robot: <http://www.herts.ac.uk/kaspar/impact-of-kaspar>

Kaspar has been purposefully designed as an expressive robot offering a more predictable and initially repetitive form of communication, which aims to make social interaction simpler and more comfortable for the child.

And there’s a robot. Josh likes Kaspar the Robot. Normal nurseries won’t do that (4)

Independent research indicates the effectiveness of

Kaspar in supporting children with an autism spectrum condition (Huijnin, Lexis & de Witte 2016).

Kaspar has been available to support learning in TRACKS autism for the past six years and teachers and parents have reported the benefits of engagement in terms of recognising emotions and interacting with others. As the founder of TRACKS autism, Nan Canon Jones outlined in an article appearing in the *Daily Mail*:

We had a child who refused to eat or sit with the other seven children at the school. His mum sent him in with a box of biscuits, and with Kaspar’s encouragement over the course of ten weeks, he eventually got to the state where he would put a biscuit on the robot’s lap and sit with him and the other children at the snack table and eat a biscuit himself (Murfitt 2016).

For some children at TRACKS autism, access to Kaspar is extremely beneficial: ‘Charlie was learning to take his jacket off with Kaspar – he loved the robot’ (10).

The structure and routine of the sessions within this specially designed and inclusive setting combined with supportive physical spaces, appropriate resources and cutting-edge technology all contribute to an environment conducive to supporting and progressing the individual child. It is not only the child that benefits from the support of TRACKS autism, however, TRACKS autism is has an impact on the child’s family.

Impact on the family

The support that TRACKS autism provides extends beyond the children in their care and

They are about the family – not just the child (7)

TRACKS saved the family (8)

encompasses the wider family. All respondents to the questionnaire reported that they strongly agreed that TRACKS autism had a good relationship with their family. Such a family focus recognises the important role that families play in supporting children with autism and also

the need to adequately support those families as they come to terms with their child’s diagnosis and deal with the challenges that the condition brings. As the TRACKS autism *Working with Families Policy* states:

At TRACKS autism we believe it is essential to work in partnership with families by providing each child with continuity of care and a consistent approach so (s)he will not become confused with different approaches to learning, standards of behaviour and boundaries and by ensuring that each child’s special educational needs are met effectively.

This holistic, whole-family approach to support was something that parents felt they were not getting anywhere else. There are three main areas in which TRACKS autism supports families:

- Providing respite care to parents and the wider family;
- Accessing supportive networks;
- Making sense of autism, and associated procedures and organisations.

This section will then go on to examine how the staff themselves develop partnerships with families that results in such supportive relationships.

Providing respite care to parents and the wider family

Regular sessions

Parents spoke particularly highly about the respite care that the sessions at TRACKS autism offered; for some parents, they had never had 3.5 hours away from their own child before. Being able to leave their child somewhere where they knew the child would be understood and looked after by specialists was extremely reassuring for parents. This relief was in contrast to other settings, where they were often anxious that they would be called to collect their child.

These small periods of time offered the parents opportunities to 'be normal': going to the supermarket, attending a doctor's appointment, having their hair cut. For those parents who travel longer distances to sessions, the parent room is appreciated as a space to sit, relax and enjoy moments alone. Recently a volunteer has been providing free reflexology and massage sessions to the parents: 'while Charlie is there, I can relax!' (10).

This regular respite care should not be underestimated; it has significant impact on emotional wellbeing:

If it wasn't for them, I would have gone mad by now (6).

I felt like a new person for those two days (8)

I wonder now how I coped [before TRACKS] (7)

It gets the best out of the child and gives hope to parents (Q).

At TRACKS they take her. When you have a child like Ava and you don't have respite, to get this is a really big thing (6).

At nursery, I worry all the time as they can't deal with Charlie. They ring me to take him, as they can't deal with him (10).

Knowing I could drop Sam somewhere for two mornings a week, where I knew he would be happy was truly a godsend (8).

Holiday cover

TRACKS autism is open for 48 weeks of the year. While many private day nurseries stay open for

Summer holidays can feel really long, having a setting you can leave your child in comfortably is really useful (2).

Parents can dread the unstructured time (T1)

most of the year, state-funded nurseries and preschools do not, operating instead to state school term times. The fact that TRACKS autism is open during state school holidays is of great support to parents. This holiday support extends beyond the time that the child is enrolled at TRACKS autism; children come back to TRACKS autism for the holidays, even when they have moved on.

The holiday cover means that parents can have much-needed time with their other children doing activities that they are particularly interested in. This is very important because ‘siblings can be pushed to the side a bit’ (3).

Sibling support

In addition to enabling time individual time with their parents, TRACKS autism also provides other support for the siblings of their preschool children. For some parents, explaining autism to the siblings is difficult, TRACKS autism provides advice on how to explain why their brother or sister is different. Siblings can come into the centre and play with their brother or sister, thus reassuring the

It can be very isolating to be a special needs parent, very limited where you can take the children, if there’s a meltdown, people are quick to judge [...] at the soft-play, everyone is in the same situation (7).

sibling that that their brother or sister is in a good space. This also allows TRACKS autism staff to see the siblings playing together and to give tips on how to develop those relationships, again something that the parents valued. Finally, the social events that TRACKS autism organises support the whole family, including siblings. Recently, TRACKS autism hired a soft-play centre and invited the extended family to have a day out – this resulted in a

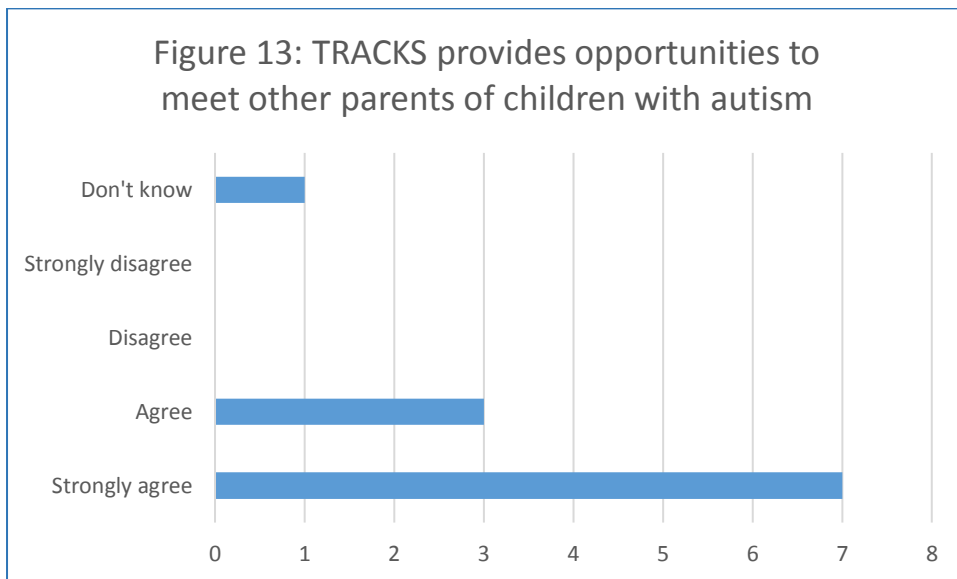
more relaxing experience for the parents, where children can ‘be themselves’ (1) and where, for parents, it’s ‘lovely to feel that you’re not the only one with a strange child’ (2). These events, as well as the fundraising events, are also an opportunity for parents to get to know each other better.

Accessing supportive networks

Families with a child on the autistic spectrum can often feel quite alone and isolated, TRACKS autism facilitates access to networks of support that help families to feel less alone.

Access to other parents of autistic children

Through social events, fundraising activities, organised courses, and regular pick-ups and drop-offs, parents have access to other parents (see Figure 13).



While they may not become 'bosom buddies' (2), the access allows parents to:

- Ask for advice (about compulsory schooling; specialist equipment, medication);
- Share coping strategies, experiences and success stories;

- Talk to someone who 'understands where you're coming from' (3).

The parents' room, recognised by parents as a supportive place for them (72% (n=8) strongly agreeing and 9% (n=1) agreeing with the statement in the questionnaire), is a hub for parents where they can wait for their children and have a chat: 'it gives them the space to feel that they can cope again'.

Access to other professionals

In addition to the network of parental support, TRACKS autism also enables access to networks of other professionals, who can provide additional support to the child. While TRACKS autism does not provide as much external professional support as it would like (T1), what is provided is rated highly by parents and recognised as important; 64% (n=7) strongly agreed, 27% (n=3) agreed that TRACKS supported links with other professionals who could help their child. Professional support comes in the form of weekly on-site sessions with Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists. For some children this means that they get far more specialised support than they were getting before.

Facilitating this access is key because parents are often ill-equipped to find the most appropriate support for their child in the very early stages of diagnosis, and even pre-diagnosis, nor do they yet sufficiently understand what the condition involves nor what support they are entitled to. Here TRACKS autism provides further support.

At his previous school, Josh had Speech and Language Therapy every six weeks, for 30mins (4).

Ava sees an Occupational Therapist at TRACKS; she has been on the NHS waiting list for over a year (6).

Charlie has not has Speech and Language Therapy, except what has been done at TRACKS (10).

There was no sensory input from the NHS – or only very little (9).

It's been a fighting battle getting any support for Ash from the NHS (3).

The OT has given us such an insight into other problems health wise that our child experiences and this will help us to approach the services involved with the information given.

Making sense of autism, and associated procedures and organisations

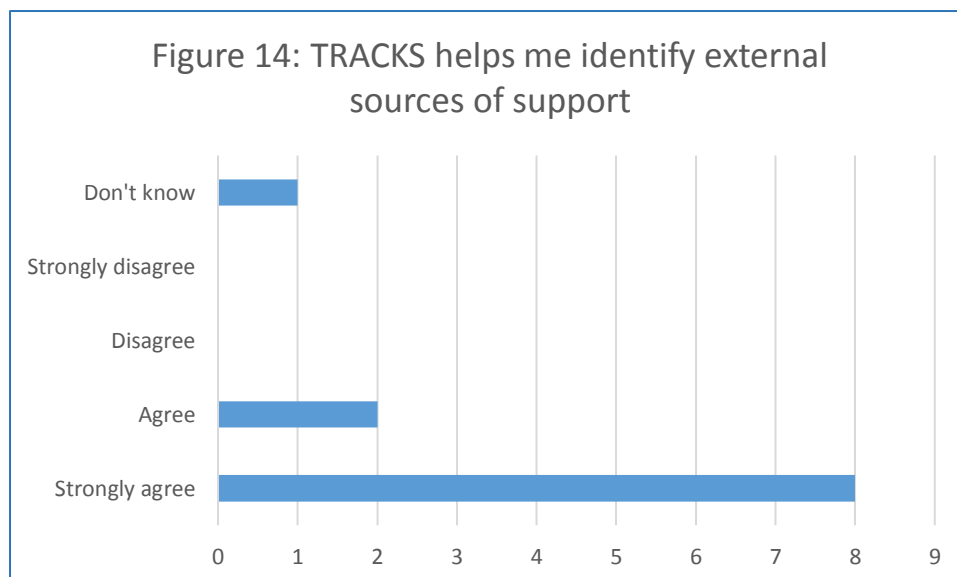
When parents initially realise that their child has autism, or they are given a formal diagnosis, it can be a very difficult time. There is a 'lot of information that you don't know about' (3) and you can 'get bamboozled by all the experts around' (2). TRACKS autism acts as a guide through this new world. They do this by:

- Providing information on what autism is;
- Sharing tools and strategies to help cope with the child's behaviour;
- Organising courses on specific topics (e.g. managing behaviour, toilet training, sleep);
- Explaining technical language in lay person's terms;
- Supporting families' post-diagnosis.

They don't judge you as parents if you walk in and you're having a bad day, or you're just bombarded with information, been to a meeting and you feel your head's spinning a little bit, they give you time to talk about things (3)

TRACKS is a sounding board – parents can tell us everything that is stressing them. They go to meetings and there are lots of professionals. You have someone to talk to, to ask what it means (FG)

Questionnaire respondents recognised this facet of TRACKS autism's work, see Figure 14.



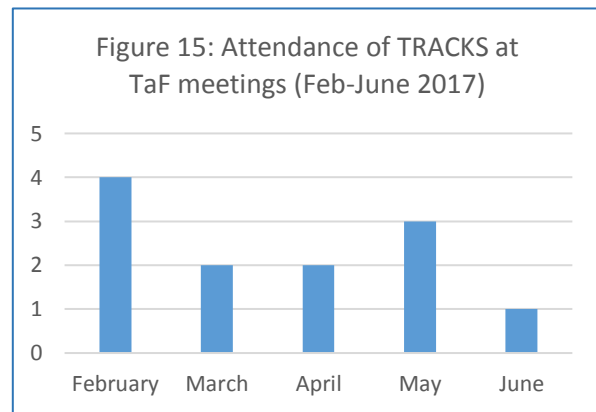
TRACKS autism also offers parents opportunities to participate in training workshops. The workshops are practical in nature and provide parents with strategies to cope with challenges at home. Parents reported that the strategies were useful and had had a positive impact on life at home (4). The workshops also enable the parents to meet and to share experiences, which is extremely beneficial.

With hindsight, the things were simple, but hugely helpful (2)

The evaluations of the workshops are positive. In a recent evaluation of a workshop on ‘challenging behaviour’, all participants rated the workshop as ‘excellent’, five of the six participants felt that the workshop was very appropriate in relation to understanding how autism affects their child, and all six participants believed the workshop met their expectations. The free comments from the evaluation show that participants valued learning about different approaches to supporting behaviour and meeting other people.

TRACKS autism also provides formalised support around the procedures surrounding a diagnosis of autism, including:

- Facilitating Team around the Family meetings (TAF), often at TRACKS autism meaning that childcare was in place. Between February and June 2017, TRACKS autism staff attended twelve TAF meetings (see Figure 15);
- Putting together the EHCP;
- Applying for Disability Living Allowance (DLA);
- Attending the Diagnosis and Communication Disorder and Assessment Clinic appointments.



This support was welcomed because the procedures are complicated and often bewildering for parents coming to terms with a world that is potentially very different to that which they had envisaged.

The EHCP is so complicated. These parents have enough on their plate with their child and the siblings (T3).

They helped with the EHCP, and reports on that, meeting with County. They were willing and helpful. You need to feel that people are on your side (2).

When we got the diagnosis, the first thing the keyworker asked us was ‘how are you and your husband dealing with it, how do you feel about it?’ (3).

They support the parents' decision. They don't try to tell you what to do. They want parents to make their own decision (8).

For many parents, the idea of transition into compulsory school is a worrying one. The parents spoke of the support that TRACKS autism had given them in identifying the next steps. As an independent organisation (i.e. not attached to the local authority),

parents valued and trusted their opinion. Ultimately, it is the parents' decision where the child should transition to, but TRACKS autism aims to ensure that it is an informed decision.

Staff from TRACKS autism visited the feeder school to talk about the child and welcomed staff from other settings to see the child in situ.

I have contact with TRACKS and we set up a transition plan. Staff from TRACKS will support the children here for the first couple of visits and then we reduce the amount of support TRACKS give and increase what we do, and then the child starts (TT-SLD).

Parents noted the importance of the SENCO at the other setting and how good relationships with TRACKS autism both eased transition to compulsory education and also supported those pre-schoolers who were in dual settings.

TRACKS autism provides whole-family support that helps families navigate the world of autism. They also have impact on the wider community through the specialised work that they do.

Impact on the community

TRACKS autism's impact on the children and the families that it supports directly has been shown above. Yet TRACKS autism plays a strong role within the local community as a provider of early intervention to support children with autism, as there is a lack of equivalent alternative support locally and even nationally; through raising awareness of autism within the local community and the sharing of experience with other educational establishments, professionals, and carers; and finally by preparing children to progress into compulsory education. These features will be explored below and this section will end with two contrasting scenarios of children with and without access to TRACKS autism.

Early intervention and alternative equivalent support

We know that early intervention is key. If they've had this early support, their further education, going on from TRACKS, is likely to be very enhanced by going through that process. (T2).

Without them at the start, I don't think he would be where he is now, even at a MLD [moderate learning difficulties] school – I think he would be in severe [severe learning difficulties school] (7).

Early detection and intervention for children with autism and their families is critical (Corsello, 2005) and has been shown to reduce the severity of the autism diagnosis, improve cognitive and adaptive behaviour (Dawson et al, 2010), and alleviate later difficulties (Evans et al, 2001)

TRACK autism provides this early intervention for preschool children and this is something that both parents and staff recognised as being important, and also relatively unique within the local community.

Autism is all about early intervention (8).

There are so many children with additional needs, and there are not enough places for them. We're lucky to be in Stevenage (3).

It is the early intervention that is key. Even at 5-6, lots of things are ingrained and you've missed a lot of opportunities (T1).

There is so much research to support early intervention, yet there is no provision. I don't understand it. (T3).

There is nowhere else that offers this type of support for children on the spectrum. As a parent, I want to do what I can to give my child the opportunity to develop the skills needed to fulfil his potential. Sadly, there is little offered on the NHS and I feel TRACKS provides the early intervention that you always hear is important (Q).

A survey of the services available for children with autism in the local area shows that there are currently a number of different options; there is nothing, however, that offers what TRACKS autism does: autism specific, early intervention in a specialist setting.

Figure 16 gives an overview of the areas of support available locally.

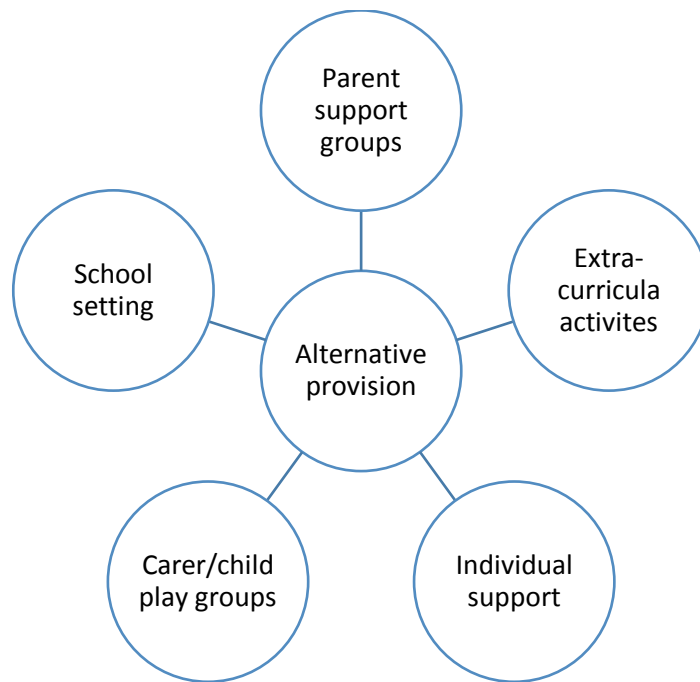


Figure 16: Available local support

Parent support groups

In the local area, there are a number of groups that meet regularly to support parents and carers of children with an autism spectrum condition. Hope for Autism, Families in Focus, Angels, Pact for Autism, National Autistic Society’s (NAS) Early Bird programme and the NAS regional branch are all examples. Angels Support Group, for example, meets weekly and on alternate weeks there is an external speaker or a workshop focussing on an aspect of ADHD or the autistic spectrum.

Extra-curricular activities

It is also possible to find clubs, sessions and activities that are specially designed to meet the needs of autistic children. Some of these are targeted at much older children, e.g. Autism Football, Essex Outdoors ABC, and Florence Hayes Adventure Playground. One parent noted that many of the activities were for older children ‘Kids Hub [an information and support service parents and carers of disabled children and young people aged 0-19 in Hertfordshire], all their groups are for the over fives’ (6). Others are less age specific, for example: Pact for Autism (which offers swimming, trampolining, ball sports amongst others); autism friendly sessions at Gambado soft-play in Watford and sensory sensitive cinema at Cineworld, Stevenage, Vue, Watford and Odeon, Hatfield; the Hitchin Lego club; and the Engine Club, a monthly train club for children with autism. The focus here is predominantly on social activities.

Individual support

There are individuals and organisations that can offer tailored, individual support for children and their families in relation to the assessment and ongoing development of children through therapy, counselling and targeted interventions; e.g. Counselling4Herts; Butterfly Room, Owl Centre, PALMS. Childminders with experience of supporting children with autism are also available.

Carer / child playgroups

There are some groups where carers can attend with their children. SPACE is a parent support group, but preschool children can attend some sessions. The Early Years Autism Group meets weekly, but it is invitation only and you need to be referred to the Autism and Communication Team. Grace's Space provides a monthly 90-minute session for children 3-14 run by Grace Community Church in Stevenage.

School setting

In terms of more formal school-like provision, the National Autistic School Radlett Lodge takes children with autism from the age of four, while Doucecroft School in East Anglia, which also specialises in autism, takes children (who have an EHCP and a primary diagnosis of autism) from the age of three and offers day school or residential boarding. Oakleigh Early Years Centre and the Oakleigh Opportunities Play Scheme in Barnet offers preschool provision and holiday cover, which is similar to the TRACKS autism offer; however, Oakleigh is geared towards special educational needs more generally and is not specific to autism.

In summary, TRACKS autism provides, through one setting, a unique mix of support that, if TRACKS autism were not there, parents would have to access through many different sources. These include:

- Early intervention (preschool support);
- Autism specific focus;
- A specialist setting, with autism-specific resources and an autism-sensitive environment;
- Pre-diagnosis and non-referral admission;
- Term and holiday sessions;
- Access and advice from autism specialists and external professionals.

Looking further afield, there does seem to be two other centres in the UK that operate like TRACKS autism. The Puzzle Centre in Buckingham (45 miles from TRACKS autism) provides education and support for young children with autism or similar communication difficulties and training and outreach to families and other practitioners. The Caithness Early Years Autism Centre in Wick (631

miles from TRACKS autism) has a specialist centre for educating and supporting pre-school and primary aged pupils with autism (aged 3-12) and their families.

TRACKS autism provides a unique offer in the local area, and is one of a very small number of similar centres nationally.

Raising awareness of autism

TRACKS autism has a national presence through its engagement with the University of Hertfordshire's Kaspar the Robot, and has been featured in a number of newspaper articles, television programmes, and radio shows.

TRACKS autism has a strong local presence and a high local profile within Stevenage. This has been achieved by being awarded Charity of the Year on two occasions, engagement with local businesses, leaflet drops, local fundraising and involvement in the Stevenage Day. There is also frequent and positive representation in the local media. *The Comet*, in Stevenage, has been publishing articles on TRACKS autism for over ten years, including coverage of fundraising events. Recent examples include: the sponsored 12-hour cycle challenge at a Stevenage hotel in October 2016; the sponsored cycle ride for Sports Relief, reported in 2016, for which TRACKS autism was one of four nominated charities. TRACKS autism was also a recipient of a *Comet Community Award*, which was reported in articles published in January and February 2017. Fund-raising events taking place at TRACKS autism receive coverage in *The Comet* (e.g. coffee mornings) and additional significant events are reported in the newspaper, including the move to the new premises and official opening in May 2015. *The Comet* articles often include a link to the TRACKS autism website for readers interested in contacting the centre and finding out more about its work.

Such local community engagement is important for TRACKS autism, not just in terms of raising awareness of TRACKS autism as an organisation, but also for raising awareness of autism as a

Examples of TRACKS autism in the national press (clickable-links):

Article in the [Daily Mail](#) in 2011: 'Think robot companions are the stuff of sci-fi fantasy? Well, for autistic children... they're already here'

Feature on [BBC's](#) local news for Beds, Herts and Bucks in 2011, when Kaspar was a prototype.

Interview on [Channel 4's](#) Fern Britton show in 2011.

[BBC](#) film showing how Kaspar interacts with children at TRACKS from 2014

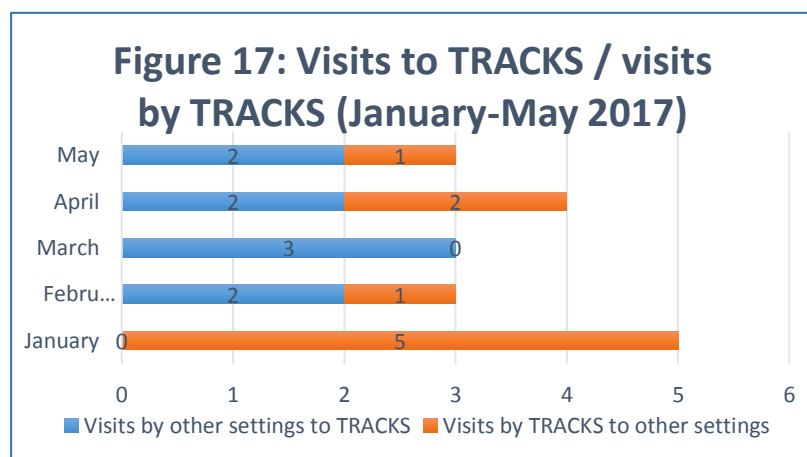
[Radio 4](#) Today programme interview in 2016, around Kaspar's support for development and communication.

condition more broadly. TRACKS autism also has links with the local nurseries, preschools and schools that its children attend or will transition to.

Sharing TRACKS autism’s experience and expertise

TRACKS autism plays a significant role in the community through the sharing of its experience and expertise. TRACKS autism routinely visits the other settings that its children attend and invites teachers to visit the centre to see how TRACKS autism staff work with individual children: ‘they are trying to use the things done at TRACKS at nursery’ (10); ‘they helped the school with ideas of how to work with Ava’ (6); ‘I would say from my meetings with the mainstream schools who have children who are also at TRACKS, it seems like they have got good liaison policies and shared working practices’ (TT-MLD); ‘we’ve had several members of staff that have gone to visit and were very impressed by the work they’re doing there’ (TT-mainstream) (see Figure 17).

The communication with the other settings is recognised by parents; 55% (n=6) strongly agreed, 18% (n=2) agreed that TRACKS communicates well with the other settings their child attends. TRACKS autism also communicates well with transition schools:



It’s much better contact with TRACKS because we’ve worked together for a long time than, say, if a child came from a mainstream school – often you just get to speak to the secretary at the mainstream and they don’t really know the child. But if it’s TRAKCS, I can phone and speak to the Principal or even the keyworker for the child and just clarify any points that I’ve got. If there are any difficulties, I can iron them out directly, which is a real strength of the partnership (TT-SLD).

This communication and support also extends to others who care for children within the setting. One parent recounted how their childminder had also been to see their child at TRACKS autism and that they had greatly welcomed that because ‘the more continuity that Ash has, the better’ (3).

Some schools will come and ask for support and TRACKS autism will provide ‘resources, laminated symbols and will go to meetings’ (FG). When the school is not proactive in this way, TRACKS autism will support the parents to ensure that the children receive the support they need. There is a danger,

however, in believing that it is possible to replicate the whole TRACKS autism experience, which includes: high staff ratios, lower noise levels, supportive environment, resources and safe spaces. What TRACKS autism offers is 'holistic, the coming together of different things' (T3). While schools can learn, for example, to use visual tools that will benefit the children, it will only ever be 'bits and bobs' (T3) and not the whole experience 'because it's unique' (FG).

Yet there is still great benefit in sharing from experience and trying to implement some of the facilitators within the other educational settings. This can help the child to cope in a different setting and make it easier for the school to manage.

Preparing children to progress to other stages

We did not think that Sam would get into preschool [...] the keyworker made a big difference. She worked just with him, learnt PECS, saw him at TRACKS – implemented it all. Sam was in mainstream and was able to cope, follow the visual timetable, learnt to put shoes on. Without TRACKS he would not have got there (8).

TRACKS autism is 'a stepping stone' (T4), helping children to progress into compulsory stages of education. The experience at TRACKS autism gives the children a good starting point for whatever educational setting they access (mainstream, moderate learning difficult or severe learning difficulty). TRACKS autism recognises that the children are going to have go to school, and their aim is to 'give them the strategies to help them cope in a world that they don't and maybe won't ever

understand' (T3).

This preparedness for school is recognised by the feeder schools that the children transition to. Preparation is particularly noticeable in terms of the children's communication and independence. One teacher in a mainstream school recounted how they had a child who was non-verbal when he started at school, but is now communicating verbally through key words and PECS. This has been achieved via a combined effort between the mainstream school, the Speech and Language Therapist and TRACKS autism.

A teacher in a MLD school that TRACKS autism children transition to noted that TRACKS children are able to listen and follow basic instructions and they are more independent than children transitioning from mainstream nurseries:

At TRACKS Ethan would sit with other children, so he did that school as well. The story time, he did at TRACKS, so he did it at school as well. He got used to it over a year. It prepared him. Painting and arts, he did lots of things like that at TRACKS [...] TRACKS got him used to things that he use at preschool and at school (7).

They settle well, I would say *better* than children who've been in mainstream settings (TT-MLD).

A lot of children I visit in mainstream have what I call the 'velcroed TA', who is a lovely person who does everything for the children. Whereas in TRACKS there are smaller groups so there is the expectation that they will join in with the other children. So when they move to us, I have same expectation and therefore it's not a shock [...] That's why I think children cope so much better transitioning from TRACKS to us rather than from a mainstream school where they've had someone who does everything for them and allowed them to be moved away from part of a group because they're not necessarily coping (TT-MLD).

This support for transition was also apparent in the parents' comments (see box) and also through the observation of the children in situ:

The early intervention from TRACKS and the well-planned transition process had clearly ensured that these children were 'school ready' (Obs2).

This section ends with two contrasting case studies. The first reflects the experiences of a child who has had access to support from TRACKS autism and the second where a child has not. These case studies do not reflect the experiences of a single child, but are composites drawn from the range of data collected. They are written from the parent's perspective.

Case studies

<i>Child with access to TRACKS autism support</i>	<i>Child with no access to TRACKS autism</i>
<p>We always suspected that there was something not quite right with Jamie’s development and this was picked up by our Health Visitor when he was around two. She recommended that we try TRACKS autism. I did some Internet searching about TRACKS and found some really positive reviews of the Centre. I arranged a visit and was really impressed by the environment and also the warm welcome that the staff gave us. Jamie now comes to TRACKS three times a week. This has had a major impact on us. We know that he is in a safe place and it was amazing to have those three and half hours three times a week. I have even been able to get a part-time job! Jamie loves being at TRACKS – he is progressing well. He really engages with the resources that TRACKS has to offer – even the robot Kaspar. I love seeing all his progress in the Learning Journeys – amazing! I’m pleased to say that he has even made a little friend. Jamie benefits from a weekly session with a speech and language therapist and we have seen real improvement there. We often sign Jamie up for sessions during the school holidays, which means we can spend a bit of time with our other child and do the things that she likes to do. The staff at TRACKS have been so helpful. They will answer any question we have, no matter how silly and they’ve really helped us make sense of all the forms that we’ve had to fill in for the DLA and the EHCP. I don’t think I could have done that</p>	<p>We always suspected that there was something not quite right with Rory’s development and this was picked up by our Health Visitor when he was around two. She provided us with lots and lots of information. The information was overwhelming. We didn’t know anything about autism and it was such a shock and really difficult for us to come to terms with the implications for the future. We needed a bit of time to take it all in. In order to access some of the support available we needed to have a formal diagnosis for Rory. This was quite complicated to sort out. But when we got that, we were able to get into a weekly group for young children on the spectrum. I also took him along to another monthly playgroup, where there were more children like him. It has been a bit up and down with our mainstream preschool. He has not really spent much time away from me and it is very difficult when I leave him. The staff at the preschool are all lovely – but they don’t have a lot of experience of autism and they tend to let him do what he wants. He can spend the whole session doing jigsaw puzzles on his own. He frequently sits on his own away from the rest of the class and there’s some things they don’t like him to do, like music. I have to admit that I always have my phone handy when he’s there because they frequently have to phone me if he doesn’t settle. This means I can’t really use that time effectively – I couldn’t have a job, for example!</p>

without them. TRACKS also put on some workshops for parents where we learnt some really practical strategies for dealing with some of the challenging behaviour that Jamie can sometimes show these strategies have really helped. We also got to get to know some other parents better there – it makes a difference to be able to share experiences. We are nervous about transition to school – but, with the support of TRACKS, we’ve been able to manage Jamie’s integration into nursery. TRACKS have been really generous sharing their expertise with the nursery and also discussing Jamie’s targets. I’m sure that they will continue with that support as he leaves TRACKS – that will be a sad day – but I really feel that they have prepared him so well for the next stage in his education.

I really dread the holidays – there is such a lot of time to fill and Rory really misses the structure (even though it does not always suit him). Holiday time can impact negatively on his big brother as there’s lots of things we can’t do with Rory – even taking him to the park, we get a lot of judgemental stares from other parents when he gets upset if someone else is on the roundabout. It’s hard. Rory’s speech is not really coming on – in fact he doesn’t speak at all at preschool. We have some limited access to a speech and language therapist through the NHS – but it’s not nearly enough, so we are currently paying privately. I’ve heard that occupational therapists can help as well, but I don’t really know how. It’s hard to know who to ask for help. I look at some online forums – but it’s not the same as talking to someone face-to-face. I sometimes feel very lost and alone. We’re all dreading the move to compulsory education – we really hope we can find a school where they know what they are doing. We don’t really know what we are entitled to. It is quite a worrying time – we just want our son to be happy.

Concluding comments

TRACKS autism is a small, specialist centre situated in Stevenage. It can support up to nine children in each session and TRACKS autism currently offers six sessions over five days for forty-eight weeks of the year. While the numbers of children accessing the service is small, the impact that the centre has on those children, their families and the wider community is large. This impact, which reflects what makes TRACKS autism unique, is summarised below.

In terms of the [impact on the individual child](#):

- Tailored and personalised support that focusses on the specific needs of the child.
- The high staff to child ratios, with frequent 1:1 teaching, enable keyworkers to fully understand and respond to the child's needs.
- Supportive challenge to enable children to achieve things at TRACKS autism that they have not done in other settings and sometimes not even at home.
- TRACKS autism staff's autism-specific experience and expertise.
- The close working relationship of the TRACKS team, and the on-site support by external Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists.
- TRACKS autism staff's warm, passionate and unfailing dedicated approach to their work with the children they support.
- The effective and supportive communication with parents, whether informal or formal.
- The children's development across all areas of the EYFS, and particularly in the areas of thinking; communication; and personal, social and emotional development.
- Development in areas deemed important for children on the autistic spectrum: communication (speaking, listening, non-verbal communication); play and flexible thinking (playing with range of toys, initiating and joining in play with adults and children, engaging in a range of play activities, extending and developing play); social interaction (eye contact, conversation, physical contact, and developing friendships); and independence and self-help (toileting, eating, dealing with emotions, questioning and choice-making).
- Targets that reflect children's individual needs and are communicated to parents and often to the other settings that the child attends, to foster consistency and enhance development.
- The all-round enabling and inclusive environment, the daily routine, and the learning activities, designed to provide opportunities for children to learn and develop.
- The effective use of new technology, including the University of Hertfordshire's cutting-edge Kaspar the Robot.

In terms of the [impact on the family](#):

- The respite care that TRACKS autism provides through its regular and reliable sessions.
- The access to holiday cover, enabling the child to continue with their routine and families to have time with other siblings.
- The support provided to siblings to help them better understand their brother or sister's condition.
- Access to a supportive network of parents, who share similar experiences.
- Access to a range of professionals who provide additional support to their child.

- Help in making sense of autism and the associated procedures to access ongoing support.

In terms of the [impact on the community](#):

- Provision of early years' intervention for young children with autism in a specialised setting, with no equivalent settings in the immediate locality, and one of a very small number nationally.
- The raising of awareness of autism through local community engagement, and a local and national media presence.
- The sharing of expertise and experience with other educational settings and educational professionals.
- The preparation of children for the next stage of their educational journey.

TRACKS autism provides a holistic experience for preschool children with autism which impacts positively on their learning and development. TRACKS autism's impact extends beyond the individual child and contributes beneficially to the child's family and to the wider community. All the data sources drawn on for this evaluation offered a universally positive view of TRACKS autism, and this positivity has been echoed in the recent Ofsted inspection report (Ofsted 2017).

Future development of TRACKS autism

There were a number of areas, however, where contributors to the evaluation felt that TRACKS autism could develop and build on their already exemplary practice. These focus on: cost, visibility, diversification, provision of additional support, professional development, and enhanced communication.

Reducing costs to parents of sessions

The main concern that came through all the data collected for this evaluation was the cost of sessions at TRACKS autism for the parents. While heavily subsidised through the extensive fundraising that TRACKS autism does, each session at TRACKS autism costs parents £45.00 and this a hefty financial burden for many trying to access the service. It means that some children are not able to attend as many sessions as their parents would like, and some have to drop sessions when they are clearly having an impact on the child. Throughout the data there were calls to: 'reduce the price' (Q) and 'keep the costs down' (FG). This also impacted on those who were in positions to recommend the service. As one teacher in a mainstream school noted: 'I'm mindful of the fact that it's something that parents have to pay for, so we wouldn't be able to suggest it to some of our families because it wouldn't be something they would be able to facilitate' (TT-mainstream).

TRACKS autism staff and trustees also reflected in having to fundraise, and living with the worry of not being able to pay their staff (FG).

In terms of future development, there were calls for self-sustaining and self-financing models, involving full-capacity usage of the TRACKS autism space and also effective use of staff expertise and time, and also receipt of regular, reliable funding.

In order to directly support the parents, hardship funds could be put in place to make TRACKS autism 'more accessible for people who are in hardship or when circumstances change' (T2). For more routine support for sessions, staff and trustees spoke of closer engagement with Hertfordshire County Council, whereby when a child gets a diagnosis and the EHCP recognises that there is a benefit in coming to TRACKS autism, that County would support them to do so. There is an opportunity to input into the development of the EHCP for the younger children at TRACKS autism and ideally to be named on their plans.

Enhancing the visibility of TRACKS autism

While it was felt that generally TRACKS autism was well known in the immediately local area, it was recognised that more could be done to enhance visibility, as 'a lot of people don't know they are there, or what they do, or that they are charity funded (6)'.

One key strategy is to advertise the centre better. Information about TRACKS needs to be routinely available in the packs given to parents when a child is believed to have an autistic spectrum condition or has already received a diagnosis and at relevant groups, clinics, nurseries, schools and GP surgeries (FG). It is worth investing time for TRACKS autism staff to visit some of these settings and talk about the work that TRACKS autism does. Staff and trustees also recognised the value of being known to relevant professionals across Hertfordshire: 'if all the professionals said this was the place to go, we would get more children' (FG).

As the postcode mapping shows, TRACKS autism currently largely recruits from quite a small geographical area, located around Stevenage. There would be merit in targeting marketing to outlying areas: North Hertfordshire, East Hertfordshire and St Albans.

Equally important is the embracing of online marketing and social media as a means of spreading the word about TRACKS autism and drawing on trustee expertise in order to do this (FG). Greater visibility would enable TRACKS autism to fulfil its aim to become the 'charity of choice for children with autism' (FG).

Extending and diversifying the TRACKS autism service

It is clear from this report that parents are extremely satisfied with what TRACKS autism offers; one consideration for future development is the extension of that service.

Initially, this could mean offering more sessions, so that more children are touched by the service. During the lifetime of this project, TRACKS autism has extended its sessions into a fifth day – it is worth evaluating the impact of this extension of provision. It is also possible to offer longer sessions (including lunch, for example) or offering full days. TRACKS autism staff could also be paid work extended days, enabling them to plan and develop resources as part of their working day (T3). Not all sessions currently run at full capacity (i.e. ten children); one area of development could be in ensuring that all sessions are full (as a result of more targeted marketing).

TRACKS autism could also look at how the space is used when the TRACKS children are not having their sessions. The resources and building could be used by other professional services; e.g. occupational therapy sessions, speech and language therapy, messy play, home start and children's centres (FG). The letting out of the space could provide an additional funding stream to TRACKS autism and also provide much needed space to other providers.

TRACKS autism could extend its provision outside of the TRACKS setting through, for example, home visits (FG) or outreach activities. Staff at TRACKS autism could help others develop their own provision, providing consultancy and resource support: 'it's a way to show that you are benefitting more people. Outreach could be the way forward!' (8). TRACKS autism could become a resource hub for early year's autism and a base for support for the area. TRACKS autism could also connect with other centres doing similar things and help to foster the network of early years' practitioners in the area of autism.

Finally, given the lack of similar settings nationally, TRACKS autism could consider opening more TRACKS autism centres across the country through a franchise model (FG). This could be considered as a long term goal.

Providing additional support to children

Although TRACKS autism already provides access to much-valued external professional support, it was in the provision of further support where parents, staff and trustees recognised a need. This could be by having more therapists more regularly on site (e.g. a Speech and Language Therapist in every session, or more occupational therapists) or by inviting different types of support (e.g. sensory integration therapy; arts-based therapy; LEGO therapy; Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) therapy; challenging behaviour support).

Existing specialist provision (e.g. Sherbourne Sensory Circuits and Kaspar the Robot) and the outside environment (with a water run, trampoline and a roundabout) would also be further developed.

Providing additional support to parents

As with the provision for the children, potential developments relate to extending existing provision. This support could come in the format of parent workshops, courses, and training; e.g. in the areas of transition to school and behaviour management (T2, T3, FG). One area where it was deemed particularly important to support parents was around understanding what help and support was available for them: 'help with completing all the forms. There are so many forms and some don't know about the DLA [Disability Living Allowance]. Some parents don't know what they can have (FG). This kind of support could be offered through surgery and drop-in sessions for parents (FG).

The parents also noted that they would like more opportunities to meet other parents and to have more social events (Q, 7). One easy to implement way to do this is to offer 'an early pick-up session for parents and get them to meet and have a cup of coffee' (FG).

Providing continuing professional development for TRACKS autism staff

While everyone working for TRACKS autism has an interest in and practical experience and expertise of autism, not everyone has had training. TRACKS autism staff and trustees indicated that they would like to offer autism training to everybody and continuing professional development for staff (FG). Additionally, TRACKS autism staff would like to be able to support staff financially to study for higher education degrees and to engage in other opportunities to enhance professional learning.

TRACKS autism staff recognised the importance of working with other professionals and would like opportunities to be able participate in multi-professional team teaching. TRACKS autism would then be able to learn from the different perspectives of these professionals.

Enhancing communication

Communication between TRACKS autism staff and parents is generally very good and well received (especially the informal discussions and the Learning Journeys). One practical example offered by one parent to further enhance communication is through the simple recognition of daily achievements via a celebration board that all parents can see. This aligns with TRACKS autism's approach to celebrating progress (whether large or small).

Finally, communication between TRACKS staff and trustees could also be enhanced through more joint events allowing staff to get to know the trustees who are responsible for making decisions regarding the future development of TRACKS autism as an organisation.

Developing a culture of ongoing formative evaluation and impact measurement

While the findings from this evaluation were extremely positive, there is merit in creating a culture of ongoing formative evaluation and impact measurement, with the routine collection and consideration of data to inform decision making. Indeed, the National Philanthropic Capital reports that: 'the most effective organisations use data and the views of those affected to remain informed about the issue or issues they are seeking to address' (Gripper & Joy 2016: 14). Below are questions to consider when developing a culture that uses data to support development and enhancement at TRACKS autism:

- What are the priorities for development in the short, medium and long term? What is TRACKS autism seeking to change?
- Are there priorities for development, highlighted in this report and in the business plan, which can be implemented as discrete projects and their impact evaluated?
- How are staff/others' development needs identified and addressed to enable them to contribute to the evaluation and development process?
- What procedures are in place to ensure that the findings from data collection and scrutiny activities inform decision making processes?
- Is the data that is routinely collected as part of the normal running of TRACKS autism being looked at routinely and systematically for evaluation purposes?
- Can some data be collected year on year to build the dataset and to indicate trends across time?
- Are the systems in place to manage routine data collection effective and understood by the team (e.g. is the Parenta system being used to its full capacity)?
- Is there a member of TRACKS staff (teacher, trustee or volunteer) who could take responsibility for the oversight of the routine data that is collected so that is reviewed and communicated to inform decision-making?
- What additional expertise might the TRACKS autism team need periodically to make sense of the data that they collect or to collect different kinds of data? Who could provide that support (e.g. University of Hertfordshire; National Philanthropic Capital)?
- How can TRACKS identify parents and others who have the skills to contribute to (specific aspects of?) an evaluation and development process?
- How can the whole TRACKS autism community (staff, volunteers, trustees, parents of former and current TRACKS children and the children themselves) contribute to the ongoing evaluation of TRACKS autism and the service it provides to children, families and the wider community?

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