The NAS EarlyBird Programme
A three-month parent support programme for families of young children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

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Aims
This three month autism-specific parenting programme aims to reduce stress and isolation by enabling parents to learn with and from other parents, sharing ideas and experiences together whilst establishing an ongoing support network.

Objectives
On completion of the programme families will have:
> a better understanding of the way young children with autism think, learn and experience the world
> a toolkit of practical strategies to interact and communicate more effectively with their child
> confidence, knowledge and skills to pre-empt and manage any behaviour issues more positively.

2011 Efficacy study
In 2011, 136 families completed an identical questionnaire before and after attending an EarlyBird programme.
The questionnaire comprised 16 questions which focused on their knowledge, confidence, use of strategies and daily life.

Licensed user training
In 1999, a three-day training course was developed in order to train local authority teams of autism experienced professionals to offer the programme to local families, under license to The National Autistic Society (NAS).

Professional licensed training courses have been offered regularly at the NAS EarlyBird Centre in Barnsley since January 2000.

312 licensed teams, comprising individuals since 2000, offer the EarlyBird programme regularly to local families.

In September 2013, 2,208 local programmes had been delivered to 12,094 families with only 480 not completing the full three-month programme.

In order to ensure the quality and integrity of the EarlyBird Programme local teams are required to return evaluations from all attending families to the NAS on completion of each programme.

Feedback from families attending the programme, not only provides information on the continuing integrity of programme delivery but has informed regular amendments to the programme.

In 2006 the original 3.5 hour programme was adjusted to 2.5 hour sessions in response to parent and trainer feedback which has enabled greater accessibility for families and enables some local teams to offer the programme more frequently.

Programme framework
The EarlyBird Programme framework uses an eclectic mix of evidence based good practice including principles from Portage, Division TEACCH and The Pyramid Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).

EarlyBird helps families to understand why their child may act, react and respond differently, so that they can learn how best to help their child.

The programme combines the benefits of a supportive group dynamic, which develops within each participating group of six families, eight 2.5 hour sessions, and the one-to-one support of an EarlyBird trainer during four individual home visits, which are interspersed between group sessions.

The EarlyBird approach is built on three interlocking content strands:
> Parents learn to understand autism: how their child experiences the world differently and what underlies behaviour and development.
> Parents are helped to improve communication with their child, by modifying their own communication and allowing for the underlying differences of ASD.
> Parents learn how to analyse and understand their child’s behaviour using visual structure and a range of practical strategies to prevent problems, and encourage appropriate behaviour.

Feedback from attending families is overwhelmingly positive, with parents reporting an increased understanding of how autism affects their child, greater confidence in their use of strategies to help interaction, communication, learning and behaviour, and a general improvement in family life.

“EarlyBird explains everything about autism: how to deal with it, how to live with it, you get practical advice to help live day by day. It can and will change your life.” EarlyBird parent

Accept difference. Not indifference.