Using the SPELL Framework to support best practice and partnership when working with children with autism

In this article, Geoff Evans, Head of Autism Practice at The Options Group and Nneamaka Ekebuisi, Assistant Psychologist, Kinsale School, describe how they implement the SPELL framework to forge a partnership between parents and staff in order to best support the children in Kinsale School. They wish to thank all the parents and staff who took part in the project.

Introduction

Kinsale School, part of the Options Group, offers education and care to children with a diagnosis of autism and, in some cases, associated complex learning disabilities and difficulties (CLDD). For the past four years, staff have benefited from training based on the National Autistic Society’s SPELL framework, which stands for:

- Structure
- Positive approaches and expectations
- Empathy
- Low arousal
- Links.

The framework was developed over many years at the NAS schools and services for children and adults. The NAS states that the framework helps to understand and respond to the needs of children and adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), as well as to identify underlying issues, reduce the disabling effects of the condition and provide a cornerstone for communication. NAS (2014) 

All staff at Kinsale received SPELL training as part of their induction with updated training as part of their Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Similar training was also offered to all parents and carers, so that they could develop a better understanding of how the service sets

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out to meet their child’s needs and to facilitate sharing of information concerning their child. The following key professionals in the child’s life were also invited to share their experiences, views and learning:

- the child’s key-worker
- members of the night staff
- the home’s Registered Manager
- other senior managers
- members of the clinical team.

Each session lasted about four hours including lunch which allowed parents and carers to meet staff who may not always be around when they visit the school.

**Outline and discussion of the sessions**

The training sessions began with a quick review of our understanding of autism with reference to SPELL 1, as outlined in *Understanding and Supporting Children and Adults on the Autism Spectrum*, Beadle-Brown and R (2010). The majority of parents and carers had developed a sound understanding of autism based upon their experiences, their own research and attendance on courses. This was particularly evident when discussing communication and interaction, but parents generally required more support with understanding flexibility of thought, social imagination and the cognitive explanations of autism.

**The importance of the SPELL values**

In order to guide thinking, planning and actions, we started by discussing the values that underpin SPELL and how they applied to the child and those who supported him or her. The areas most widely discussed were recognising the individuality of each child in terms of:

- individual needs
- learning styles and personality
- how autism impacts the individual.

Emphasis was placed on being hopeful and positive about the child whilst still being realistic. During this stage, parents and staff were mindful of getting this balance right and were aware of its impact in the child’s home and in the service. Parents and staff were encouraged to do some ‘blue sky’ thinking, such as having dreams and high expectations. This is something that many parents of children with autism are not encouraged to do and are fearful of. As can be seen from the results of the exercise, the majority of parents’ hopes for their child were around personal skills and independence. One parent summed it up by saying “you just hope that he has more control over his life”.
In child care and education there is seldom time to discuss values, and it is even rarer to have the opportunity for all involved to establish a set of values that are owned, shared and that influence both planning and practice. This is an area that we wish to explore more in the future and provide training in.

The SPELL Framework

Structure

This part of the training began by defining what we mean by ‘structure’ and its benefits for a child with autism. We asked the parents and staff to identify the structures currently in place in both settings and point out and discuss their similarities and differences. The focus was placed on understanding what the structures achieve for the person with autism and what is needed to ensure consistent implementation. The outcome of these sessions was clear: a feeling of having to get it right all the time. As one parent said: “getting the smallest detail wrong can be devastating”. Everyone agreed that children with autism require high levels of visual structuring in all areas of their life.

Structure was looked at under the following headings:

1. **Structuring our communication and interaction.**

A wide range of issues and approaches relevant to each child were discussed including important non-verbal aspects of communication. For example: whether to approach the child straight on or at an angle, whether to encourage eye contact or just get the child to look in your general direction.

This stage included discussion on levels of understanding and processing in verbal communication. This is a crucial area as it is easy to over- or underestimate a child’s levels of understanding and how long he or she takes to process information. A number of participants said that processing time depended upon the child’s ‘mood’ or level of arousal and that one has to pay more attention to structuring communication by using key words and allowing extra processing time when the child was tired, hungry or anxious. One parent commented that at such times, you had to “use the right words” or “not use certain words” or the child would become upset. It is also key to share the use of visual supports across the child’s life. One carer said: “you have to know how to use them, it’s not good enough to be given a load of symbols and be left thinking what do I do with these.”

2. **Structuring the environment**

One parent commented: “structuring his environment means knowing what things cause him anxiety and removing them.” Another carer for the same child expanded upon this by describing how “you are constantly distracting and redirecting him away from things in the environment that cause him problems.”
Staff and parents agreed on the importance of managing the environment in terms of possible sensory overload from colours, textures, sounds and even smells. All parents and staff emphasised the importance of being aware of the child’s preferred structures and how the child seeks to impose them on the environment. We explored practical ways of helping carers achieve consistency when structuring the child’s environment, for example taking a photograph showing how the child preferred the environment to be set up and writing an explanation of why this is important and what you can and definitely not change on the back.

Discussing the preferred structures across a wide range of environments helped establish what the child required from them, where variations could take place and where there was little scope for negotiation.

### 3. Structuring programmes and activities

In this stage we discussed the key principles of structuring programmes and activities. These included:

- establishing supportive routines and “ways of doing things”
- providing visual structures - particularly for personal skills such as washing or brushing teeth
- developing independence
- providing a clear beginning, middle and end to activities
- structuring tasks and activities by working top to bottom and left to right
- communicating in ways meaningful to the child.

A number of parents talked about how discovering the ‘right ‘ structure was often about trial and error and learning the child’s way of doing things.

Using the SPELL Framework was most useful to iron out misunderstandings and achieve consensus on best practice in terms of providing structures.

### Positive Expectations and Approaches

This stage identified what approaches are currently in place in the child’s home and within the service, before discussing how these are implemented and how successful they are. The importance of consistency across home and service and getting the details right when implementing an approach were emphasised in each session.

It also became apparent that some parents have very successful approaches developed out of necessity over time which could be adopted for use by professionals. This was particularly true of support with behaviour that challenges. These approaches were often described in a dismissive way by parents, with comments such as “oh, it’s just something we do” when referring to a strategy that was quite complex.

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All sessions included a short formal review of the strengths and weaknesses of differing approaches currently available to support children with autism. A number of these were known to many participants and had been tried with various degrees of success. These included:

- Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
- Social Stories
- Backward chaining
- The Incredible 5-point Scale.

Approaches such as the below were less known and used:

- Power Cards
- Cognitive Picture Rehearsal
- Mindfulness
- using the Autism Apps Circle

The participants were then asked to generate as many activities and ideas for developing and supporting the child as possible. Below is a typical example. These will be used when planning future programmes or interventions.

### Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills area</th>
<th>Now</th>
<th>Possible future development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life skills</td>
<td>Can make a diluted orange drink for self.</td>
<td>Eventually make a range of cold drinks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Skills</td>
<td>Enjoys playing indoor games with staff</td>
<td>Introduce playing a game with another child for a short period of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEISURE SKILLS</td>
<td>Climbs on indoor walls Enjoys drawing Uses golf driving range</td>
<td>Climb outdoors in different environments. Explore different mediums for arts and crafts. Try pitch and put game</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Empathy

Under ‘Empathy’ we identified what we needed to understand about how the child sees and
experiences their world. This was where involving the parents and enabling them to tell their own and their child’s story was not only enlightening, but at times very moving.

In seeking to understand the child, their world and autism we looked at the following:

*Strengths and abilities*

- Laughing
- Balance (jumping/bouncing/climbing)
- Spinning objects (fine motor skills)
- Interaction with other people (may have no fear of strangers)
- Physically strong
- Sense of Humour
- Cheeky
- Can follow a structured routine with visual cues
- Can get dressed/undressed independently
- Visual Learner
- Quick learner
- Learns *incidentally*
- Learns through observation

*What motivates the child?*

- Messy play
- Trampoline
- Gym ball
- Climbing
- Food
- Pebbles / beach
- Brother/Sister
- Windy weather
- Sensory toys (twirlies/spinny things/soft)
- Interactive books/toys
- DVD’s
- Hand/foot rubs
- Deep pressure
- Twirlies
- Swimming
- Playfulness
- Different environments
- Outdoor activities
- Windy weather

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**What are the child’s needs?**

One of the key areas we looked at was identifying how the child experiences the world through their senses and how this impacts upon their functioning on a daily basis, including behaviour and carrying out daily tasks such as preparing snacks and meeting their own personal hygiene needs.

This is yet another area where having input from the wider group supporting the child had major advantages, as most had slightly differing views of the child based upon their perceptions, roles and interaction with them. This helped provide a fuller and accurate picture of the child. This was particularly true with regard to sensory issues, where one parent or carer had noticed a child’s response to certain colours or textures that had been overlooked by others, but once pointed out there was agreement that these areas required further investigation and assessment.

**Low Arousal**

In all these sessions both parents and professionals made the point that it was important to concentrate on providing appropriate levels of arousal and look at what this means on an individual basis for the child. We discussed times and periods the child experienced different levels of arousal. For example, times of the day, days of the week, times of the year when the child experiences higher levels of arousal and is less likely to cope with the demands placed upon him or her. The groups were guided to discuss the environmental factors that can make it difficult for the child to concentrate and learn, and therefore require managing.

Under the heading ‘What does appropriate levels of arousal look like for the child with autism in
terms of our interaction?, we discussed how our interaction is perceived by the child and how we can modify it to enable them to communicate, interact and function to their highest ability. Often, topics previously identified in structuring our interaction and environments were picked out and developed further here.

Links

Using methods such as circles of support, we determined who the significant people in the child's life were, including families and friends, staff, professionals and people in the community. This enabled wider issues to be discussed such as relationships with siblings or how different carers’ expectations of the child impacts on them.

Circles of support
In most sessions, we discussed the importance of expanding the child’s world, particularly for those in their teenage years. Parents talked about the difficulties of working with some outside agencies or the general public when there was not a shared understanding of autism and the challenges this poses.

Putting it all together

As can be seen from the above brief overview, a lot of information and practical approaches are generated in the training sessions. This can then be put together in a SPELL Profile that can be shared with a wider group of family and those supporting the child.

Short example of areas covered in a SPELL Profile:

Page 1 of profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What we know about autism and the child</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Positive Approaches and Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What we need to understand about the child’s communication.</td>
<td>What environmental structures are in place/needed?</td>
<td>Approaches we use to support the child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How we support communication.</td>
<td>How do we structure our interaction?</td>
<td>Advice on implementing approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What supports we put in place.</td>
<td>How do we structure activities?</td>
<td>What are our shared and agreed expectations?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Page 2 of profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Low arousal</th>
<th>Links</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do we need to understand about the child? Their strengths and abilities</td>
<td>What causes or contributes to unacceptable levels of arousal?</td>
<td>What are the important links in the child’s life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>What does appropriate levels of arousal look like? For example: demands of programmes, interaction and environments.</td>
<td>How are these promoted and maintained?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory processing</td>
<td>What causes stress and anxiety?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Benefits of using the SPELL framework in this way

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From our early work using the SPELL framework with parents, carers and professionals in the way outlined, we have been able to identify a number of benefits for the families, the child and staff which include:

1. The SPELL Framework training package helps provide a structured framework for delivering autism training, whilst being flexible enough to make it relevant to an individual child.

2. Having an autism specific framework to guide and structure discussions about the child helps provide a clear focus for discussions and avoids going over the same issues every time we meet.

3. Being able to share different perspectives of the child, his or her needs, behaviour and abilities with reference to relevant theory leads to a more consensual approach that is more likely to be implemented consistently across the child’s life.

4. Being able to look in detail at how the child functions across different environments provides new insight into behaviours that people may have found challenging.

5. Tapping into the parents’ extensive knowledge of their child in a structured yet dynamic way enables knowledge and understanding that they may have forgotten, or were unaware of, to be discussed and inform future planning and practice.

6. Helping to secure agreement on both short and long term goals, based on what’s important to all parties representing the child.

7. Providing parents and professionals an opportunity to share experiences in a relaxed and informal way that is seldom available in meetings about the child.

8. Help build relationships between parents and professionals.

9. As well as identifying areas for development the sessions, helped affirmed what is being done well across the child’s life.

Future Developments

1. Time was an issue and we will offer second sessions to all parents in order for key areas to be discussed in greater depth.

2. Discussion is taking place regarding how we can implement this approach for all children new to the service.

3. We need to consider opening up these sessions to a wider group around the child including social workers, those providing short breaks etc.

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References

2 Beadle-Brown, J and Mills, R (2010), Understanding and Supporting Children and Adults on the Autism Spectrum, Brighton: Pavilion publishing