Action Briefing:
Strengths-based Approaches

Curtin University
AUTISM RESEARCH GROUP (CARG)

KIND
CENTER OF NEURODEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS AT KAROLINSKA INSTITUTET

AUTISTICA
Building brighter futures through autism research

Huntley MK, Black MH, Jones M, Falkmer M, Lee EAL, Tan T, Picen T, Thompson M, New M, Heasman B, Smith E, Bölte S, Girdler S

Autistica is the UK's autism research charity. **CARG** undertakes research addressing the needs of autistic individuals and the autistic community. **KIND** focuses on research, development and education about neurodevelopmental conditions. This briefing summarises the emerging science for strengths-based approaches to supporting autistic people and was developed as an international collaboration between leading researchers and autistic people. **Autistic people are much more than the challenges that are too often used to define them. Public services and policies should support people's individual profiles of difficulties <u>and</u> strengths.**

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> "It is a serious problem that many individuals on the spectrum grow up regularly hearing about what their problems are. It can have a detrimental effect on how they see themselves. Using a strengths-based approach from the outset, so they also understand that they have amazing strengths, would help to give them a much more balanced outlook."

What we know

> "In high school, if my educational assistant was absent, I was not allowed to partake in woodwork or Home Economics, as the school thought it was too high of a risk and they were wrapped up in red tape."

- **Autistic people have strengths, abilities and interests** that often exceed their more neurotypical peers.[1,2] Common autistic-related strengths include, but are not limited to; attention to detail, visual perception, creative and artistic talents, mathematical and technical abilities (like programming and robotics).[1,3,4] Autistic people may also have particular interests or expertise in 'niche' areas,[1] and other desirable character strengths, such as honesty and loyalty.[1,3,5]

- **Despite these strengths, autistic individuals often experience poor outcomes** in education, employment, community engagement, independence, and interpersonal relationships.[6,7] On average, autistic people currently have a lower quality of life than non-autistic people and are more likely to experience mental health problems.[8,9]

- **Societies are neurodiverse**. No two brains are identical. Although the way some people's brains develop can be disabling, particularly when public spaces and services are not prepared for them, development can also enable different cognitive strengths and advantages.[10,11] Teams, businesses and societies can benefit from embracing the diversity of abilities that autistic and other neurodivergent people have.

- **Service models focus too much on 'impairment'**. Internationally, the way services diagnose, assess and support autistic people tends to focus exclusively on impairment and functional deficits.[12,13] Most autistic people will face difficulties, but these difficulties should not define them or be the sole focus of the support available to them. Neglecting autistic strengths and abilities can inadvertently perpetuate stigma around autism and limit people's potential.[14,15]

- **Strengths-based approaches focus on harnessing a person's strengths, abilities and interests**. Initial research suggests that strengths-based interventions could help autistic people improve their self-esteem, confidence, social engagement, relationships and life skills, in particular when focusing on activities aligning with autistic people's interests and encouraging personal autonomy.[16,17,18,19] For example, designing and running coding clubs with autistic people who have an affinity for ICT has been explored as a way to support autistic people into employment and further education.[16]

> "Every individual has things they are good at and not so good at. Some are better communicators, while others are better at tasks requiring lots of complicated steps. We're all different and it's this diversity that helps businesses and organisations grow."

What we need to find out

> "Change in routine can cause stress and anxiety to autistic individuals. We can help reduce this with tasks that these autistic people are not only comfortable in but excel at."

The benefits of neurodiversity are increasingly being recognised. However, we need to accelerate the development of specific interventions and service models which embrace a strengths-based approach. The next steps for research include:

- **Develop and validate outcome measures for strengths more common among autistic people**. Validated outcome measures would enable higher quality research into which strengths-based interventions are effective.

- **Develop and validate assessments for identifying individual autistic children's aptitudes** at preschool and school-age years. These assessments could be integrated with the existing needs assessment that children receive after diagnosis and during childhood. These could help education, health and care services to plan support for autistic children as they develop.

- **Develop and validate assessments for identifying autistic adults' skills and experiences**. These could be applied alongside needs assessments at key points in autistic people's lives. This would particularly helpful in preparing autistic people for transition points (e.g. job seeking or moving to further education) when they may face increased stresses and uncertainty.

- **Trial the feasibility, acceptability and effectiveness of manualised strengths-based interventions for autistic people**. A range of strengths-based interventions could be developed for application within education, occupational health, social care and employment. For example, preliminary evidence suggests that types of peer mentoring could help autistic students improve their academic performance.[20] These interventions should be tested against outcome measures for common autistic strengths, as well as measures of autistic people's quality of life.

- **Analyse the longitudinal outcomes of autistic people who are supported with strength-based interventions**. Tracking autistic people who were supported to enhance their strengths and attributes from an early age could help us understand the impact that strengths-based approaches have on autistic people's trajectories in life.

What we should do now

"When we put people to their strengths and give them the right environment to do so, they excel and flourish. It just makes sense."

- Some countries have already begun introducing strengths-based approaches into public policy. The new Australian diagnostic guidelines for autism recommend identifying an autistic person's complete profile of strengths, skills, interests and difficulties to inform how best to support and enable them. [21]

> **National health bodies in other countries (like NICE in the UK) should review the evidence behind the new Australian diagnostic guidelines[22] and consider whether their own clinical guidelines include appropriate recommendations for diagnostic assessments of autistic people's strengths as well as support needs.**

- Researchers across the world have collaborated to create a standardised framework for considering disability and ability in the autistic community.[23,24,1] Those measures are based on a bio-psycho-social model, which means they account for the impact that biological, psychological and societal factors can have on enabling or disabling people. Unlike other frameworks, the ICF core-sets for autism identify a large number of societal factors (including services, system and policies) as determinants of autistic people's outcomes and quality of life.

> **The ICF core-sets for autism provide more holistic and comprehensive frameworks for considering the abilities and disabilities autistic people are most likely to experience at different ages.[23,24] Internationally, some services have begun using the core-sets as the basis for how they support autistic people. Service providers and funders should consider planning and evaluating services by how they improve autistic people's outcomes in the ability/disability categories listed in the ICF core-sets of autism.**

- Strengths-based approaches are relatively new to autism research and policy. Most public services supporting autistic people were designed to deliver interventions responding to difficulties rather than building and leveraging strengths. The way services are currently planned and funded may inadvertently discourage strength-based approaches.

> **The planners and commissioners of public services for autistic people should review their objectives, policies and funding to ensure they enable the introduction of evidenced strengths-based assessments and interventions. National decision makers should consider whether historic clinical guidelines and strategies provide any barriers or disincentives.**

- The training that most health, education or employment-support professionals would have received about autism would have included an almost exclusively deficit-led account of autistic people.

> **Professional and public sector bodies – for example, Health Education England, the British Medical Association, the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation, Royal Colleges of General Practitioners and Psychiatrists – should ensure their professional training curriculums on autism reflect the latest evidence about strengths-based approaches.**

- Like non-autistic people, autistic people may struggle to utilise their strengths and abilities when experiencing stresses. Transition points, like starting a new job, are particularly likely to bring new stresses that autistic people may find difficult.

> **Employers should consider how to pro-actively reduce stresses that are likely to reduce neurodivergent employees' performance and comfort. Developing processes for documenting what adjustments have been tried at the company previously can be particularly useful for planning how to onboard future staff more effectively.[25]**

- Historically, autistic people have not been meaningfully involved in decision-making about the research, services and policies that seeks to affect their lives. This culture has fed distrust between the scientific, professional and autistic communities, and in turn deprived policy makers and service providers of valuable insights from people with lived experience. This briefing and Autistica's other Action Briefings[26] have benefited hugely from autistic people's personal and professional expertise.

> **Researchers, professionals and policy makers working on autism initiatives should, wherever possible, co-develop those projects with autistic people with personal experience of the issues involved. There is now a variety of infrastructures, resources and examples across the scientific, policy development and service design fields to draw on.[26,27,28,29,30,31]**

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