

Autism Community Research Network @ Sussex

ACoRNS Newsletter

A warm welcome to the very first ACoRNS newsletter Autumn 2020! This is the first of our planned termly bulletins. In this issue:

- Logo competition results
- Official launch for ACoRNS
- Events & research update
- Upcoming events

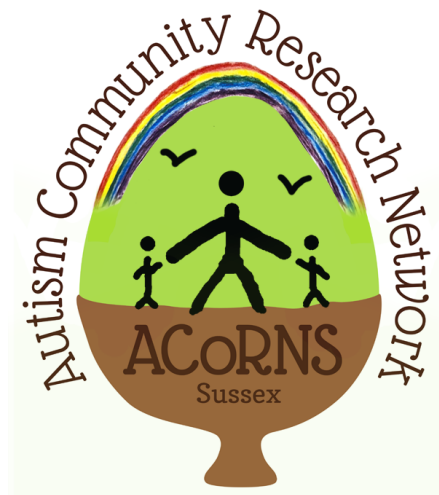
Logo competition results!

The competition for designing a logo for our newly established Autism Community Research Network @ Sussex (ACoRNS) has now ended. Thank you to all who participated. We had some really great entries and it was very hard to choose.

It was so difficult that we decided to share the prize over three different entries. We are combining elements from each entry. We will be using this co-created logo on our website, future newsletters and other events, so it will be seen and appreciated by many.

This logo incorporates:

- Kieran's image that shows people helping and connecting with each other, which is what we are aiming to do with ACoRNS



- Sophie's beautiful seagulls to remind us of our coastal location
- Maolissa's glorious rainbow, which made us think of the diversity of the spectrum of autism, and including everyone, as well as the links to other ways rainbows are used, especially with health. Health is a theme we are bringing to our ACoRNS network

Congratulations to the winners, who get a special certificate and a £25 voucher each, and to two local schools, Woodlands Mead in Burgess Hill and Stanford Junior in Brighton, each getting a £50 voucher.

ACoRNSussex Official Launch: Re-thinking Education in Autism

Our official launch took place on 21st October online via Zoom with over 80 attending. We had speakers representing autistic youth, parents, researchers and advisory services. We've had great feedback: thanks to all who participated. Special thanks also to ACoRNSouthampton, Ethan, our placement student for 2020-21, and Devyn Glass and the ACoRNS social media team for facilitating the event. Some of the materials shown at the event are now available on our website.

We haven't got room here for all the great points made in discussion, which we will be writing up more formally, but here are some highlights:

Autistic learners seem to be struggling with

- Anxiety around COVID-19 and hygiene, for themselves and others
- Learning at home as schools are generally considered 'the' place for learning
- Missing social cues during online classes
- Limited access to technology e.g. sharing a pc with siblings and parents
- Limited access to spaces around the school, to the outside and safe spaces e.g. sensory gardens
- Some children thrived by being able to set their own routine, by not having to wear school uniform and doing their learning online
- Some children are coping well with return to school and the new structures in place e.g. desks in rows, fewer people in bubbles, etc



Parents

- Struggle to balance work and home life when schools closed, especially key workers
- Diverse form of communication should be recognized e.g. talk via video gaming
- Struggle to teach children at home – challenges of learning in a different context

Schools

- Saw an increase in need for flexibility around pupils and use of facilities
- The newer arrangement in schools seems to be easier for autistic students as it encourages individuality
- Senior leaders are now prioritising pupils' well-being after lockdown, teachers felt 'permission given' to spend teaching time to promote well-being
- Special schools seem to be more flexible and able to adapt
- 'Quick wins': practices that can be retained and implemented relatively easily
- "Change the environment, not the child", "plan for the child, not the label", "if you want to know about a student, ask the student"
- One school has gone 'shoeless', proved less noisy and distracting when people walk down the corridor
- Debate on provision in special vs mainstream school, depends on environment and the child
- Need more pre-emptive measures for SEND children, not waiting until crisis point

Hopes for the future

What adaptations could be made more permanent?

- Pupils come into school in their PE kits for the whole day, no changing throughout the day
- Not switching classrooms
- Consistent TA or learning support assistant for student's comfort and better knowledge of the student's specific needs
- Year / class bubbles for better familiarity
- Staggered timings throughout the school day e.g. lunch & end of day
- More flexible & child-focused timetables with regular reviews
- Shorter school days, need to ensure full education entitlement

- Further experimenting with new or alternative practices
- Slowing down the pace for learning: shown with online teaching
- More flexibility in schools and personalised tailoring of interventions and support
- More focus on pupils' well-being beneficial for all
- Increase acknowledgement for pupils' individual differences
- Share practices and experiences across schools
- For all voices to be heard and included (verbal, non-verbal, AAC ,etc), needing creative participatory methods (e.g., Digital Stories, see [Autism Transitions](#))

Events update

Friday 13th November ACoRNSouthampton webinar Digital Transitions: Learning from lockdown for the future

Our sister network, ACoRNSoton held this as part of the [Festival of Social Science](#). Researchers and teachers shared their experiences of using [Digital Stories](#) to aid the Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) assessments and transition planning for autistic students from a nursery and also moving on from a residential school. Digital Stories are videos co-created with autistic children / young people and their support staff that focus on the child's perspectives. They use "I am..." statements and video clips of children doing things they enjoy (e.g. picking flowers), and how they interact and communicate with others (e.g. playing in the sandpit with others).

Under national COVID-19 restrictions, teachers and educational psychologists are unable to visit children in person to get to know what they are like and how their new school can best support them. Digital Stories have been immensely helpful in this process, as professionals are able to see the child in their own environment instead of just reading plain words on paper. Parents have also expressed that they feel some pressure lifted off their shoulders now that professionals have another way to know and assess the child.

The production process, costs and potential uses of the videos were discussed. Professor Parsons also announced a new research project (see news and updates).



Thursday 19th November Autism Reading Group

We have restarted our monthly Autism Reading Group online for people to share their ideas on different topics related autism.

Our first meeting was held on the 19th November and was about the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on children with autism in schools and what we can learn from the experience to further improve their education. We discussed how restrictions brought some challenges to schools such as less space, lower staff numbers and greater anxiety in children particularly those with autism. Some positives we can take from the experience are that schools have

become more creative and flexible. We also highlighted the importance of focusing on mental health and wellbeing before starting the academic curriculum as that seems to have been very helpful for all children.

A blog will be up on our website recapping this meeting. Please email us at acorns@sussex.ac.uk to be added to our Autism reading group mailing list. Our next one will be Thursday 17th December from 5-6pm.



News and updates

Zoom or Room

This project run by Nicola Yuill with Devyn Glass and Zubeida Dasgupta is comparing how connected people feel when involved in therapy online compared to having a face-to-face meeting. It is funded by the National Institute of Health Research through the local Applied Research Consortium for Kent, Surrey and Sussex. The results will feed into guidelines for practitioners. This is relevant for many services during COVID-19 that have moved to online methods in education and in health provision. Results will be out in the new year.

Education and COVID-19: Perspectives from parent carers of children with SEND

Dr Jacqui Shepherd and Dr Christina Hancock in the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sussex worked with parents across the country to get their views about the experience of lockdown for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). They had over 500 survey responses. Their brief [report](#) summarises the key findings and recommendations. Further research with some of the participants is continuing, to see how the transition back into school is going.

New research grant with ACoRNSoton

Sarah Parsons and Hanna Kovshoff from ACoRNSoton, and Nicola Yuill from ACoRNSussex, have been granted funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to run a 12-month project developing the Digital Stories method created in Southampton. The two ACoRNS, together with a technology company, will work on four linked projects with health and education practitioners to find new ways of supporting and developing the Digital Stories method.

ACoRNS Steering Group

The ACoRNSussex Steering Group next meet on 15th December 2020. We will be planning our next online open event, which will focus on what we can learn about health provision given the changes brought about during COVID-19 restrictions.

Get in touch

ACoRNS Autism Community Research Network
Sussex: www.acorns-sussex.org.uk

Email: acorns@sussex.ac.uk

Twitter: [@ACoRNSussex](https://twitter.com/ACoRNSussex)