



# Helping Hands Autism Support Speak Up

May 2026



# Helping Hands Autism Support: Speak Up

## What is Speak Up?

Speak Up is Healthwatch Sheffield's micro grants programme, offering funding of £1000-1500 to not-for-profit, voluntary, and community sector groups. The purpose is to run a project which will reach out to people across Sheffield, and hear what matters to them in relation to health and social care.

By working with groups which are already trusted partners in their communities, we can make sure we're hearing from even more people, including those whose voices aren't often heard by decision makers. This year's projects all have a focus on the voices and experiences of children and young people.



## Helping Hands Autism

We're a non-profit project dedicated to supporting children and their parents, especially those who feel overwhelmed, isolated, or stuck in daily challenges. We provide practical advice, information, and hands-on help to manage everyday life. Our goal is to help families move from surviving to thriving, together. Our support includes:

- Activities for children to build confidence and social skills
- Guidance and advice for parents navigating daily struggles
- Outings and group events to help families connect, reducing isolation
- A safe, understanding community where families can find support and belonging



## Healthwatch Sheffield

Healthwatch Sheffield Healthwatch Sheffield helps adults, children and young people influence and improve how NHS and Social Care services are designed and run. We're completely independent and not part of the NHS or Sheffield City Council. We want to understand your experiences, and help your views to influence decision-makers in the city.



# Background

## Why did we carry out this project?

We run a regular parent carer peer support group for the families we work with, who have children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), including autism. Most of the parents who attend are women from a Somali background; many of them speak limited English.

We have seen how challenging and isolating daily life can be, and many families have complex situations which make it hard for them to access help. Many parents tell us they feel exhausted, alone, and unsure where to find the right support. Children often struggle with confidence, social skills, and feeling isolated.

There is also a lack of strong connections between service providers and the families we work with. Many families don't know what services are available for them and their children or how to access them. The professionals often don't fully understand the daily struggles our families face. This gap can leave families feeling unsupported.

For these reasons, we used the Speak Up grant to run a special series of information sessions for parent carers. Knowledge is key for improving families' ability to access support. We hope the outcome of this information project will be stronger, more connected families who feel supported and empowered. We want to see children growing in confidence and social skills, and parents feeling less isolated and more equipped to handle daily struggles.

## What we did

We held 4 sessions between September and December 2025, attended by approximately 60 people altogether.

The information sessions covered a range of topics from adjustments that can be made at Sheffield Children's Hospitals to support families to attend and have positive appointments, the importance of parent carer mental health and the risks of burnout, and awareness of stigma that might make people hesitant to reach out for support. We also held a children's activity session to provide a fun day out for families in a supportive and inclusive space.

# Our information sessions

## Session 1: Children's Hospital support and carer burnout

In September, we were joined by professionals from Sheffield Children's Hospital, and a psychologist and wellbeing coach from Worksop.

Part one of this session involved Children's Hospital staff sharing practical advice and information about how families could make the most of their appointments at hospital services, and the range of adjustments they could make to help families attend. A volunteer interpreter helped to share this information in Somali with the parents attending.

Supportive measures to help families facing language or financial barriers included:

- Reclaiming travel costs
- Booking interpreters
- How to access information on the Hospital's website in other languages
- Free or reduced cost meals at the Hospital site

Adjustments that could be made to make it easier to book or attend appointments included:

- Rearranging appointments for more flexible times or booking double appointments
- Sending extra appointment reminders
- Requesting a quiet room instead of sitting in the main waiting room
- Sending accessible information about what to expect from the visit and the appointment

Finally, Children's Hospital staff told parents about ways they could support SEND families in other parts of the service – for example the Ear, Nose, and Throat Clinic – rather than just autism and learning disability services. This included:



**SEN INFORMATION SESSION**  
DELIVERED BY  
**Sara/Joanne**  
Children Hospital  
**Dr. Naciima**  
Psychologist and Wellbeing Coach

**IF YOU HAVE A CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS INCLUDING AUTISM, COME AND JOIN US!**

**24 SEPTEMBER 2025**  
**START 11:00AM TILL 1:30PM**  
**MAIN HALL**  
**ISRAAC COMMUNITY CENTRE**  
**54 CEMETERY ROAD SHEFFIELD S118FP**

 Sheffield Children's Hospital  healthwatch Sheffield

- Liaising with the Learning Disability and Autism ambassadors who are based in different teams at the Hospital
- Using a Hospital Passport, a document where you can write down things that are important for staff to know, for example allergies and medications, communication needs and preferences, sensory needs, and more.

There was a lot of interest in the Hospital Passports in particular, and several parents said they would be interested in using one. We wrote up the above advice in more detail and provided it to parents who attended the group, so they could refer back to it when they next needed to take their child to an appointment.

Parents also had the chance to ask questions, and got information about specific issues they were facing like how to help children with additional needs who need blood tests, as well as a discussion dispelling myths about an increase in autism among children and misconceptions about its causes.

Part two of this session involved a psychologist and wellbeing coach talking about carer burnout. Dr Naciima delivered this session in Somali.

Her key points for people to remember were about:

- Prioritising and balancing your time and your own needs with everything else that needs to be done
- Acknowledging your feelings and watching out for signs of low mood or stress, and speaking to your doctor if you are worried
- Looking out for your health, and the impact of iron and vitamin deficiencies, as well as hormone changes, on your mood and wellbeing



## Session 2: Children's activity day

In October, we held a SEND activity day at ISRAAC Community Centre.

We invited children and families for an afternoon of fun activities including a bouncy castle, ball pool, and crafts including painting.

We also provided sensory tools which allowed children to explore and play freely.

This session engaged both children and parents in inclusive activities. Parents expressed great satisfaction, observing their children interacting with their peers and enjoying a safe, stimulating environment.



### SEN Activity Day

Join us for a fun, sensory-friendly afternoon!

- Dinosaur Foam Ball Pool
- Finding Nemo Bouncy Castle
- Painting & Creative Fun
- Other Sensory Activities

**Saturday 25th October**  
1:00 PM – 4:00 PM

ISRAAC Community Centre  
54 Cemetery Road, Sheffield, S11 8FP  
Contact Layla: 0114 278 7662  
Places are limited

Organised by   
**Helping Hands**  
Autism

Supported by   
**healthwatch**  
SHEFFIELD



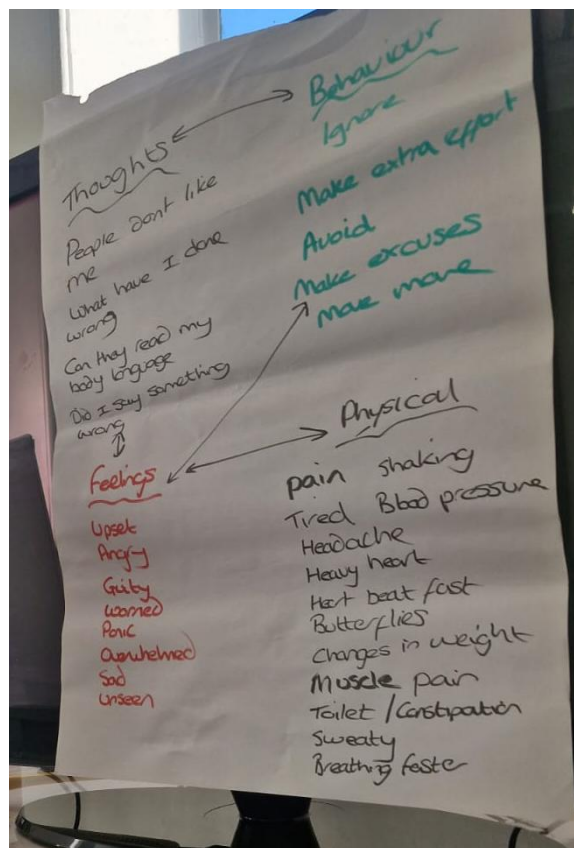
## Session 3: Parent Mental health session

In November, we ran a session focusing on emotional wellbeing for parent carers of children with SEND.

This session focused on the important of maintaining good mental health and wellbeing. Parents reflected on their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, sharing experiences that had impacted these negatively including stigma and negative labelling.

We talked about the negative cycle that can take place, with negative thoughts turning into negative emotions, showing up in the body in physical ways, and affecting our behaviours in ways that might make us feel more isolated. The discussion provided strategies for coping with these negative cycles, and for self-care.

Parents gave positive feedback, reporting that they felt supported and more confident in managing their mental health.

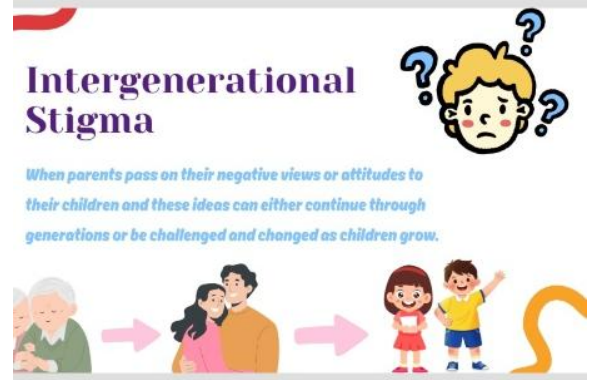


## Session 4: Stigma awareness

In December, we worked with Dr Nafisa Abdil who joined us from Nottingham to deliver a session about the impact of stigma on families with SEND.

Through real-life scenarios, parents discussed their experiences with stigma, including cultural and community challenges. We talked about the intergenerational aspect of stigma and how we can challenge and change that to create a more positive and inclusive environment for our own children.

The session helped participants gain a better understanding of how to address stigma and seek support without fear of what people might think. Parents told us they found the session really useful and gave positive feedback.



**Break the Chain**

Negative	Positive
"My child will never be independent."	my child will be independent
"It's my fault that my child has autism."	it wasn't my fault my child is at autism
"My child will never make friends."	my child takes making friends
"There's no hope for my child to improve or learn new skills."	there's hope for my child to improve or learn new skills.
"I can't handle the challenges of parenting a child with autism."	I can handle a child with autism
"My child's siblings will be negatively affected."	my child's siblings always help
"I can't talk openly about my child's autism."	I can talk openly about my child's autism
"My child will never have a normal life."	my child will have a normal life
"I need to hide my child's autism from others."	I don't need to hide my child's autism from others



# Impact on parents and families

The Speak Up funding enabled the delivery of professional-led information sessions for parents alongside the activity session for children.

These sessions supported parents to better understand how to access services, including special health services and other organisations working with SEND families, as well as available support pathways and ways to look after their own wellbeing. Children benefited from safe, structured activities that supported their wellbeing.

Parents reported increased confidence, improved understanding of available support, and greater clarity on where to seek help. Families also valued the peer support and reported reduced feelings of isolation.

Overall, the project had a positive impact on families by improving access to information, strengthening confidence, and enabling parents to speak up.