# How tailored support transformed education for autistic teenager Grace Prest



In 2020, Grace Prest experienced a profound shift in her life. At just 14 years old, she was forced to leave school due to a debilitating decline in her mental health. Her struggle with attendance had become increasingly severe; some days she couldn’t muster the energy to leave her bed, while on others, the mere act of stepping into the school building triggered panic attacks, leaving her pleading with her mother to take her home. The sheer physical and mental toll of these experiences was immense, ultimately leading to 18 months of isolation and depression that would take years to overcome.

In 2023, this challenging chapter took a pivotal turn when Grace received a diagnosis of autism. This diagnosis provided an essential lens through which she could finally understand her previous experiences. According to Beyond Autism, approximately 700,000 individuals in the UK are autistic, translating to about 1 in every 100 people. This figure, however, may be an underrepresentation, as recent research from University College London suggests that the number of undiagnosed autistic individuals in England could be as high as 1.2 million, nearly double previous estimates.

Many individuals, like Grace, navigate life without a diagnosis, which can further complicate their experiences. The societal misunderstanding surrounding autism often leads to mischaracterisations of autistic behaviours. Grace recalled being perceived as rude or disrespectful in school, attributes that painted her as a problem rather than someone in need of support. Her experiences align with broader findings that show children with additional support needs are four times more likely to face severe absence from school compared to their peers.

Grace found hope and support at Panbride, an extended support service funded by Angus Council. This facility offered her a tranquil alternative to the mainstream educational environment that had felt overwhelmingly hostile. With smaller class sizes and dedicated teaching staff, Panbride provided a crucial stepping-stone for her reintegration into education. Within five months, she achieved significant academic milestones, passing essential exams that previously felt out of reach.

This narrative of resilience is bolstered by the wider context of the educational landscape for autistic children. A lack of awareness about autism in schools contributes significantly to the challenges faced by many autistic pupils. Fewer than 40% of teachers have received training in autism, with the figure dropping to just 14% in secondary schools. This gap in teacher training often results in autistic students being misunderstood, leading to disciplinary actions and a greater likelihood of suspension, as highlighted by the Autism Education Trust.

Grace’s story showcases the transformative impact of tailored educational support. Her achievements at Panbride allowed her to pursue higher education, culminating in her acceptance to study journalism at university—a goal she once deemed impossible. “Before Panbride, I would have never dreamed of going to university,” Grace reflected, acknowledging that the support she received laid the foundations for her success.

Her journey underscores a critical question about the inclusivity of our educational systems: how can we expect autistic children to thrive in environments that often overlook their unique needs? Autism is not a condition with a one-size-fits-all solution; it varies widely among individuals. The nuances of autistic experiences must be better understood and accommodated in educational frameworks. As Grace eloquently states, "I am not these things despite my autism. I am these things because of it."

This perspective highlights the potential for neurodivergent individuals to succeed when given the right tools and understanding, and it calls for a societal shift towards both better diagnosis and enhanced educational support for autistic children. With the number of autistic children in schools steadily increasing, reaching over 205,000 in 2023, the demand for inclusive education practices and adequate support is more pressing than ever. The urgency for reform is clear, as Grace’s story exemplifies that the right environment can lead to not just academic success, but a fulfilling life filled with opportunities.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/5245219/autism-diagnosis-grace-prest/), [[2]](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/jun/number-autistic-people-england-may-be-twice-high-previously-thought)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/5245219/autism-diagnosis-grace-prest/), [[4]](https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/autism-assessment-waiting-times-2), [[6]](https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/under-diagnosis-of-autism-in-england-a-population)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/5245219/autism-diagnosis-grace-prest/), [[3]](https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/autism-assessment-waiting-times-3), [[5]](https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-campaigns/position-statements)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/5245219/autism-diagnosis-grace-prest/), [[2]](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/jun/number-autistic-people-england-may-be-twice-high-previously-thought), [[5]](https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-campaigns/position-statements)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/5245219/autism-diagnosis-grace-prest/), [[3]](https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/autism-assessment-waiting-times-3), [[6]](https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/under-diagnosis-of-autism-in-england-a-population)
* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-campaigns/position-statements), [[7]](https://www.learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk/news/143000-people-currently-waiting-for-autism-assessments/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/5245219/autism-diagnosis-grace-prest/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/jun/number-autistic-people-england-may-be-twice-high-previously-thought> - A study by University College London suggests that the number of autistic individuals in England may be over 1.2 million, nearly double the previously cited figure of 700,000. The research estimates that between 150,000 and 500,000 adults aged 20 to 49, and between 250,000 and 600,000 individuals over 50, are undiagnosed. This underscores the need for improved diagnostic services and societal acceptance of neurodiversity.
3. <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/autism-assessment-waiting-times-3> - As of June 2023, over 143,000 people in England were waiting for an autism assessment, marking a 47% increase from the previous year. The National Autistic Society calls for urgent government action to address the growing diagnosis crisis and invest in diagnostic services, as prolonged waits can lead to unmet support needs and mental health issues.
4. <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/autism-assessment-waiting-times-2> - In March 2023, 157,579 individuals in England were awaiting an autism assessment, a 35% rise from the previous year. The National Autistic Society urges the government to urgently address the growing autism diagnosis crisis and invest in diagnostic services, as prolonged waits can lead to unmet support needs and mental health issues.
5. <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-campaigns/position-statements> - Ambitious about Autism highlights that the number of autistic children in schools has been increasing annually, reaching 205,251 in 2023. Despite this, the proportion in mainstream schools has remained around 70% for the last decade. The organisation advocates for inclusive education and adequate support to ensure autistic children thrive.
6. <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/under-diagnosis-of-autism-in-england-a-population> - Research indicates that a significant number of adults in England remain undiagnosed with autism. The study estimates that between 150,000 and 500,000 adults aged 20 to 49, and between 250,000 and 600,000 individuals over 50, are undiagnosed. This highlights the need for improved diagnostic services and societal acceptance of neurodiversity.
7. <https://www.learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk/news/143000-people-currently-waiting-for-autism-assessments/> - As of September 2023, over 143,000 individuals in England were waiting for an autism assessment, a 47% increase from the previous year. The National Autistic Society calls for urgent government action to address the growing diagnosis crisis and invest in diagnostic services, as prolonged waits can lead to unmet support needs and mental health issues.