



**INCREASING  
PROFESSIONAL  
UNDERSTANDING OF  
THE SIGNS OF AUTISM:**

**EVALUATION OF A  
TRAINING FILM IN FIVE  
EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**

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# SUMMARY

- Governments and charities systematically highlight the problems of delayed diagnosis, lack of educational support, and stigmatisation due to poor understanding of autism.
- We formed a partnership across five European countries to develop a **training film** for use in each country.
- The film, based on research from Cardiff University, describes the SIGNS of autism and the varied way in which these signs present themselves.
- Here we share an evaluation of how the film is working to help improve understanding of autism signs and reduce stigma, not only in professionals but in students, parents and others.

# OUR PARTNERSHIPS



## United Kingdom

**University:** Cardiff University, Aston University  
**Government** Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)



## Italy

**University:** Vita-Salute San Raffaele University  
**Charity:** Associazione Autismo Pavia Onlus



## Latvia

**University:** University of Latvia  
**Charity:** Autism Society of Latvia



## Lithuania

**University:** Siauliai University  
**Charity:** Lithuanian Autism Association



## Spain

**University:** Universidad Autónoma de Madrid  
**Charity:** Autismo España

Thank you to Johanna Condon and the film production team, *Injan Ltd*, actors, translators, and narrators.

Thank you to National Autism Team (*ASDinfo Wales*), WLGA, (Sara Harvey, Tracy Hinton Wendy Thomas) for hosting and promoting the film.

## THANKS TO OUR FUNDERS



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government



# OUR THANKS

Thank you to parents, autistic people and professionals in each country who developed the film with us.

# INTRODUCTION

In front-line professionals, poor understanding of autism is linked to lack of knowledge of:

The **signs** to look for

The **varied** way in which these signs show themselves in different individuals



# A NEW TRAINING FILM

We designed the BIRTHDAY PARTY film to describe the SIGNS of autism in three different fictitious characters.



**AMY**



**JACK**



**RHYS**



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government



CLILC • WLGA



Watch the film at:  
[www.autismchildsigns.com](http://www.autismchildsigns.com)



# THE BIRTHDAY PARTY: A TRAINING FILM ABOUT THE SIGNS OF AUTISM

## What the film shows:

- When particular behaviours are found together, they form a distinctive and enduring pattern of SIGNS (**S**ocial interaction, **I**magination, **G**estures, **N**arrow interests, **S**ensory responses).
- There is variation in the way that the SIGNS present in different children and sometimes they can be missed.
- It is vital to understand the SIGNS as all children with these SIGNS require support at school and home.



# BACKGROUND: HOW WE DEVELOPED THE FILM

FUNDERS:



2015

- The Cardiff team, Sue Leekam and Sarah Carrington, worked with clinician Judith Gould and colleagues.
- They identified and published a set of essential signposting items for autism.

2016

- Johanna Condon, Welsh Local Government Association, created the SIGNS acronym for a public health campaign and integrated the signposting items into materials for the Welsh national health and education services.

2017

- The film script was written, led by the Cardiff University team.
- The film was produced, led by Johanna Condon, Welsh Local Government Association team.

Note: Johanna Condon (formerly Manikiza) is now at Healios Ltd.;  
Sarah Carrington is now at Aston University

# THE BIRTHDAY PARTY FILM: FIRST EDITION

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In 2017, the first edition was available in the UK and made available in English and in Welsh.

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At the end of 2017 interest from Latvia led to first edition being adapted and translated.

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This gave the opportunity to evaluate the first edition in two European countries.

# EVALUATION OF BIRTHDAY PARTY: FIRST EDITION

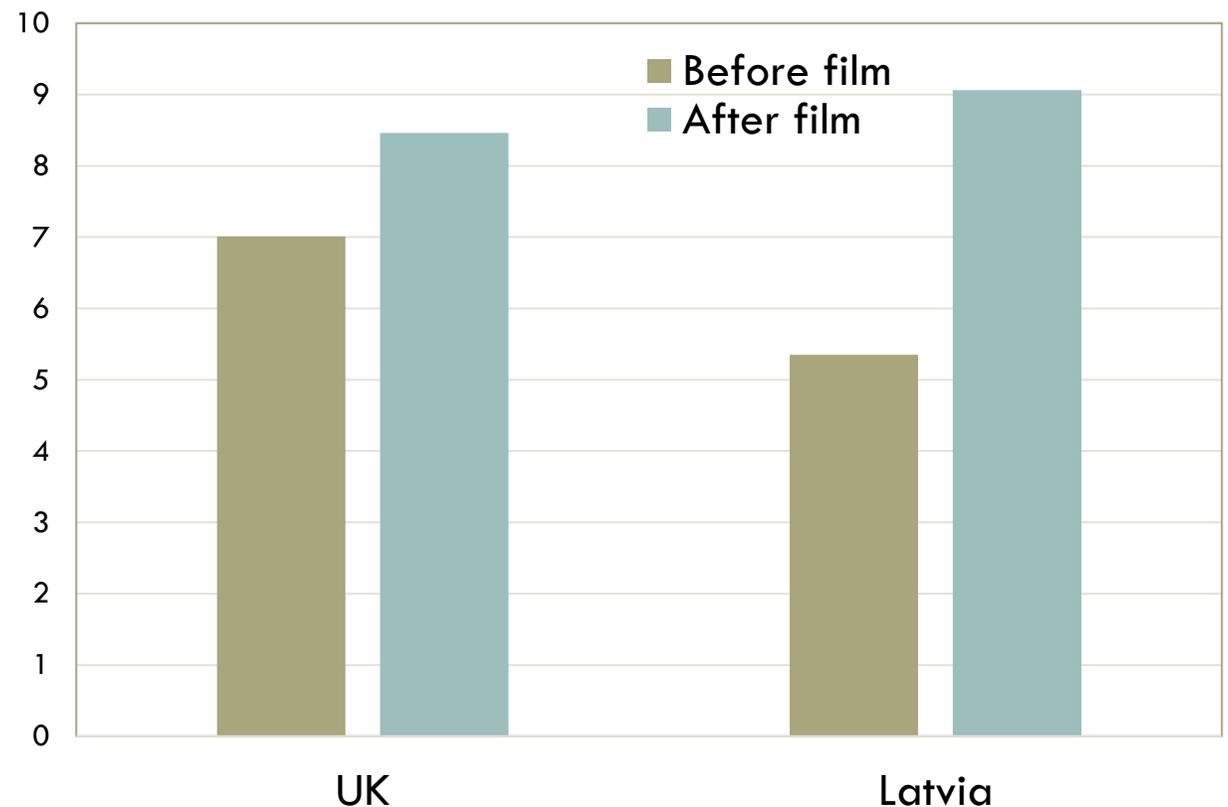
731 people evaluated the film: 69% professionals, 23% parents, 8% students. There were 390 in UK and 338 in Latvia.

Before viewing, they rated their current understanding of the signs of autism (1-10 scale).

After viewing, they rated if the film improved understanding of the signs (1-10 scale).

**Results:** A significant **improvement in understanding the signs** of autism was reported in both countries after watching, with a larger improvement in the Latvian group.

Understanding of autism signs before and after watching film (mean rating)



# EVALUATION OF BIRTHDAY PARTY: FIRST EDITION

## Comments about the film

Thank you for raising awareness of autistic girls. (UK)

Concisely named signs that are visually recognizable. (Latvia)

[The film] could be useful for educating society [and] improving acceptance of autism. (Latvia)

Excellent job in explaining complexity and showing one size does not fit all. (UK)

Shows that each child is different and signs are different. (Latvia)

# A MESSAGE FROM A PARENT (UK)

I would just like to say that I found your video wonderful. This is the first time in 2 1/2 years that I have come across something which is finally 'current' and open about possible behaviours, and most importantly comes away from the stereotypical. My son ticks a lot of those shown in your video, yet I have been met many times by different therapists and psychologists that have said, “Oh he looked at me and made eye contact, he's fine. I can take him off the waiting list if you like”, or, “He just doesn't like sharing, its behavioural issues because he does interact with me” (and so on).

I sincerely hope that your brilliant video is sent to all professionals that have anything to do with dealing with children that could be or are on the spectrum. A simple, well thought out, and respectful film like yours can be emailed easily with no cost to councils and government, but could well help a child who deserves to get the help they need, as early as possible.

# MESSAGES FROM PROFESSIONALS (LATVIA)

- Expanded my world view a lot. I recognised several cases that I had not noticed before. I understood how far we are in Latvia yet from understanding that everyone is different. I liked the positive and light tone of the film.
- Would be good to show it to wider public to change the stereotypical thinking of what a child with autism looks like.
- Well-structured movie allows you to create an awareness scheme that lets you spot signs and connect to support staff on a daily basis.
- Very, very useful. A material that is simple and easy to understand.

# EVALUATION OF FIRST EDITION: FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Professionals, parents and autistic people in the UK and other countries advised us on how the film could be improved.

1) Make language and description of autism more positive

2) Improve explanation of the 'imagination' sign

3) Be clear about the purpose of the film (about recognition of behaviour, not about cause)

The second edition addressed these issues.

# THE BIRTHDAY PARTY FILM: SECOND EDITION

- Researchers and clinicians from other countries showed an interest in the film and a coordinated project began.
- Universities, charities, autistic people and their families worked together to create culturally adapted versions/translations.
- In 2018, the new film was recorded in Italian, Lithuanian and Spanish as well as English, Welsh and Latvian.
- The new film was supported and promoted by Welsh Local Government Association.





# La festa di compleanno



Un cortometraggio per aiutare chi lavora  
in prima linea ad identificare segni di  
autismo nei bambini

# La fiesta de cumpleaños



Un vídeo para ayudar a los profesionales  
de atención directa a identificar los  
signos del autismo en niños

# Gimtadienio šventė



Filmas skirtas padėti profesionalams pastebėti  
vaikų autizmo spektro sutrikimo požymius

# Dzimšanas diena svinības

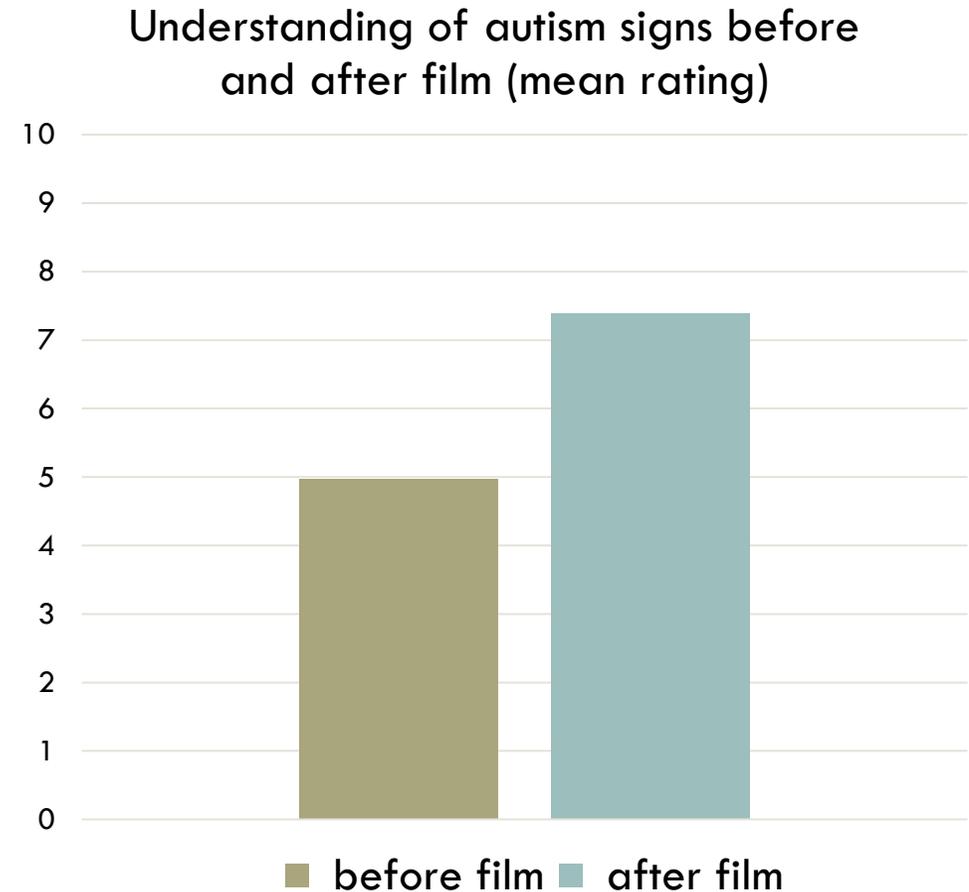


# EVALUATION OF BIRTHDAY PARTY: SECOND EDITION

910 people evaluated the film including: 62% students, 32% professionals, 6% parents/autistic people.

537 in Italy, 255 in Lithuania, 118 in Spain.

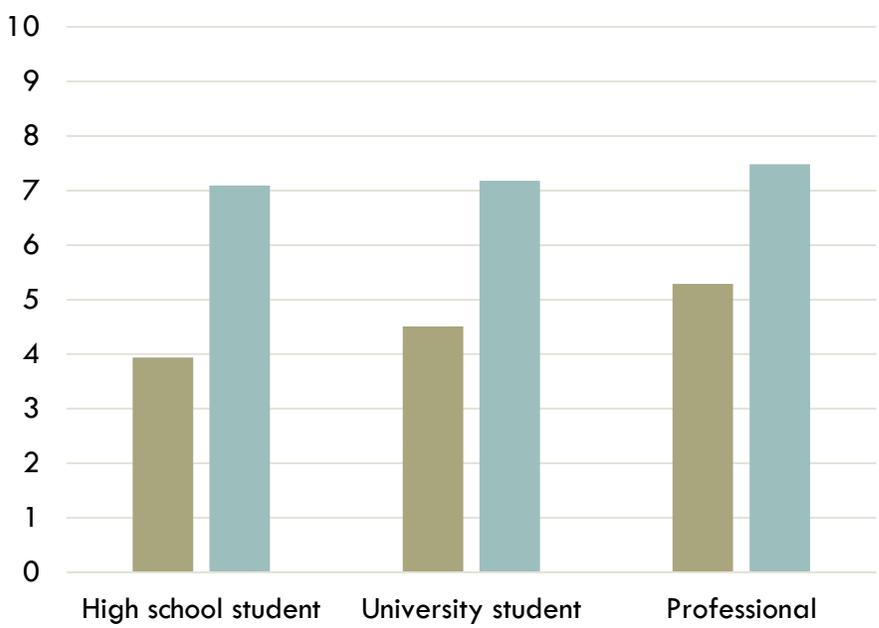
**Results:** A significant **improvement in understanding** in all countries after watching. Largest improvements were for the **student group**, which made up 100% of the Spain and 82.5% of the Italian samples.



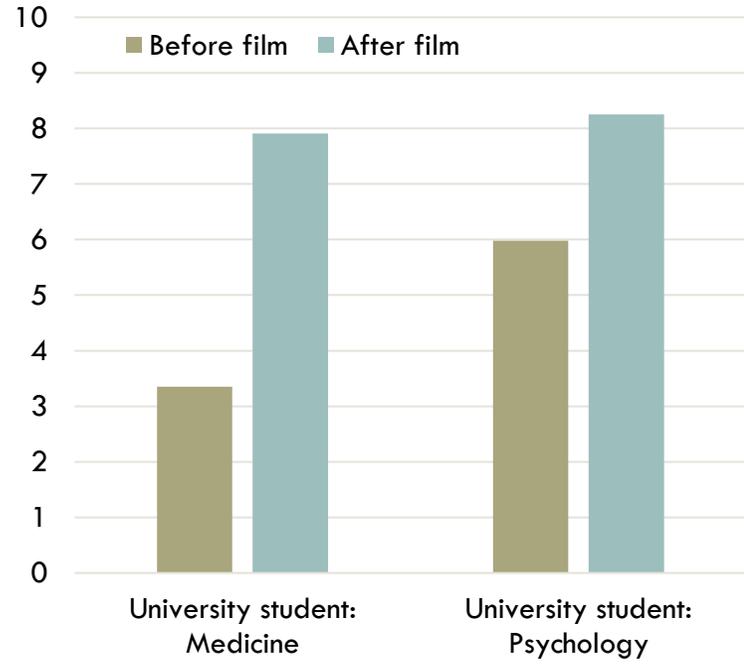
# LEARNING THE SIGNS OF AUTISM :

## UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM BEFORE AND AFTER FILM, SPLIT BY COUNTRY

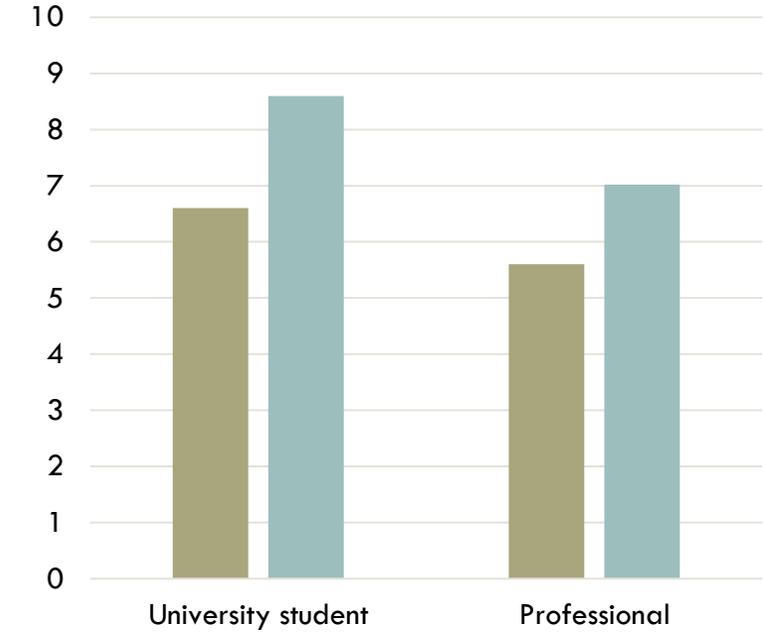
### ITALY



### SPAIN



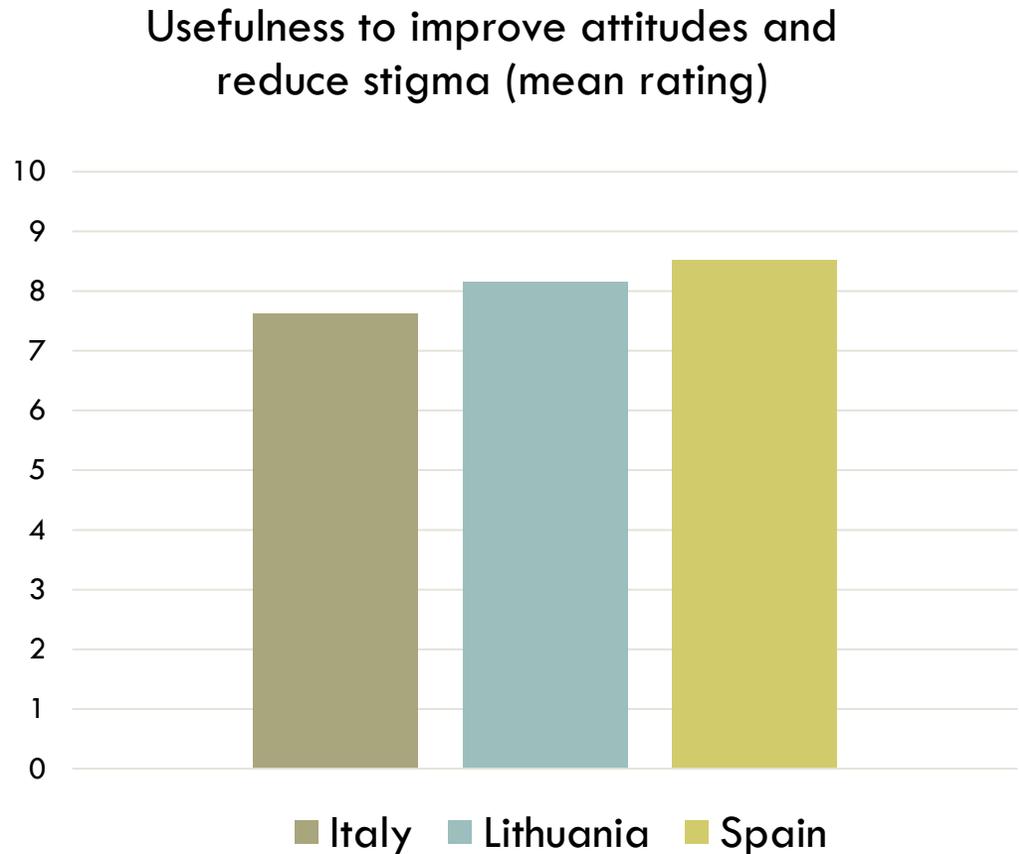
### LITHUANIA



# IS THE FILM A USEFUL TOOL TO IMPROVE ATTITUDES AND REDUCE STIGMA?

We asked this question to professionals, students and others in Italy (537), Spain (118) and Lithuania (255).

**Results:** A high rating was given with mean score of 7.9/10 across all countries.



# RESULTS OF EVALUATION: FINAL EDITION

The film evaluation shows a significant **improvement in understanding of the signs of autism**.

The largest improvement in self-rated understanding was in high school students and in university medical students. However, professionals also reported significant improvement.

Across all groups, increases in understanding were also significantly higher for those who had no previous training in autism.

Most participants considered the film to be a **useful tool for reducing stigma** associated with autism.

These results help us target early-stage training for both professionals and for young people in schools/colleges, both to improve understanding and attitudes.

# IMPACT

- The film has been adopted for national **practitioner training courses** in special education, and speech/ language therapy.
- It is now used in a number of **university courses** in Europe to train teachers, professionals and medicine/psychology students.
- It is part of **national clinical toolkits** for medical staff and part of the **national training resources** for schools in the United Kingdom.
- 145 requests\* for permission to use the film for educational purposes have been received from **15 different countries** across the world including Venezuela, Kenya and Vietnam. \*April 2020

# IMPACT



Language	Number of plays*
English	23,740
Italian	18,470
Latvian	2,923
Lithuanian	10,194
Spanish	16,159
Welsh	457

\*April 2020

**Total number of plays: ~ 72,000**

# CONCLUSION

The second evaluation confirmed the usefulness of the Birthday Party for flagging up signs of concern for future referral and for changing attitudes and reducing stigma.

Notably, the film is effective in improving understanding of autism signs, not only in front-line professionals but also in skilled professionals and even in high-school students.

[www.autismchildsigns.com](http://www.autismchildsigns.com)

# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Opportunities for:

- 1) Developing training packages to be used with the film
- 2) Working with policy developers of different countries to make sure that the film is part of the training of education/medicine/psychology students.



# ACHIEVEMENTS AND AWARDS



## UK

Sue, Catherine and Sarah win a 2019 Innovation and Impact Award from Cardiff University with UK partners the National Autism Team, WLGA (Sara, Wendy, Tracy).

## Italy

Marcella wins an award from Fondazione Banca del Monte di Lombardia to present at the Autism Europe conference and visit Cardiff University.

## Latvia

Liga and Ieva launch conferences for professionals, as well as new research and training collaborations with the Birthday Party film partners in the UK.

## Lithuania

Kristina, Valdonas and Renata celebrate the film as the first Lithuanian training for special education teachers and speech and language therapists.

## Spain

Carmen and Ruth celebrate the introduction of the film into medical and psychology training at Autónoma University of Madrid.