Hello. My name is Dr Karen Guldberg, and I'm director of the Autism Centre for Education and Research at the University of Birmingham in the UK. In this short presentation, I'm going to say a few words about evidence-based practice.

Now, when people talk about evidence-based practice, they usually talk about scientifically based research and the evidence for interventions and teaching approaches. There's lots of discussion internationally about the importance of EBP, or evidence-based practice, in education and also specifically in the field of autism.

What we need to recognise is that much of the research in autism has focused on outcomes that have been set by researchers. And there is, as recent research has shown, quite a mismatch between what individuals with autism say they need in terms of positive outcomes and what researchers actually focus on. So we need to think carefully about what are meaningful outcomes for people with autism, and then we need to make sure that research focuses on those meaningful outcomes, and that means finding ways to conduct research where we also look at outcomes that might not be quite so easy to measure.

So, take the example of emotional wellbeing. That's an aspect, an outcome, which people with autism have told us quite clearly is important to them. And it involves aspects such as being able to understand and control anger, have better self-esteem, be less anxious or depressed. Now, a study which looks at that needs to look very, very different and be designed very differently to a study which might be examining how a child might be acquiring a particular social skill - skills such as greeting, for example. The two need very different types of studies. So that means we need different types of studies according to what we're looking at and which outcomes we're trying to measure, but we do need to make sure that research does focus on meaningful outcomes.

Now, my real concern about the way that evidence-based practice is being discussed at the moment, though, relates to the way that it does privilege scientific evidence over evidence from practice. And we shouldn't be privileging research evidence over evidence from other sources, especially
professional experience. I think we should be looking much more carefully at how practice can contribute to the scientific knowledge base, and that we need to recognise that research findings and professional expertise are both important in that endeavour. And I think we need to start talking about a new type of evidence-based practice. It needs to be practice which is informed by evidence based about interventions or teaching approaches - yes, that is important - but it also needs to be informed by the needs of pupils and families, by their values and by their preferences, and pupils and families should be integrated in decision-making both in relation to research and in relation to practice.

And both in relation to practice and research, I think we really should be rephrasing our research questions, if you like. So, rather than ask the question, "Does X intervention work better than Y intervention for this particular person?" or a variation on that might be, "Does X intervention work for this particular group of children?" Rather than ask that question, we should be asking questions such as, "What do we know about this person, and the context in which he or she is learning, and what does that allow us? How does that allow us to achieve the best outcomes for him or her?" So we need a new kind of evidence base or a new kind of evidence-based practice which involves teachers, school staff, other professionals, in theory, in reflection on practice, in training in methodology - allowing empirical research to guide and influence applied work whilst at the same time allowing experience from practice to shape research questions and to shape studies.

I think, in that endeavour, practitioners need support to develop their skills as scientific practitioners, and that means developing an ability to interpret and evaluate evidence, whilst researchers need to learn to work more closely with individuals with autism, in the context in which they exist - such as schools, for example - and they need to work much more closely with practitioners and with families.

So what I'm saying in summary, then, is that the research evidence should influence rather than determine decisions, because the evidence alone can't tell us what to do. We need more studies that see practice and knowledge from practitioners as equally as important as the scientific research evidence. And we need to make absolutely sure that the perspective of people with autism and families should inform research agendas and they should be part of our research.

Thank you very much.