

Autism Preparation Kit

for teachers



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Autism Preparation Kit

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Welcome!

Teaching an autistic student for the first time can be a little daunting, but with the right preparation everyone can get off to a smooth start. This guide will help you understand what to expect, and show you how to turn your classroom into an effective learning space for them. The kit has five sections:

Getting Ready

Things you can do before your student arrives

What To Expect

Explaining behaviours that you might see in the classroom

The First Days

Ideas to help your student to settle in

What Next

Where to go from here

Resources

Checklists and printables

You can move around this pdf file just like you would on a website - all the links and buttons are clickable. To jump ahead to any section, simply click on the chapter title in the menu bar up the top.

Getting Ready



Setting up the classroom

Visual supports

Transitioning the student

Preparing other staff members

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Setting Up The Classroom

The physical layout of the room can have a huge impact on autistic students. A classroom that is visually structured and organised, with minimal distractions and a place for sensory breaks can provide wonderful opportunities for learning success.

Structuring the room

Autistic kids can find open spaces disorienting or confusing, with no clear place to walk or boundaries to tell them where they should be. This can make it hard for them to sit still and concentrate, or move between activities.

Give the room structure by organising the furniture to mark out designated work areas. Use bookshelves and your desk as room dividers to create separate zones, or set up activity stations around the room. Make sure that it's clear where each space begins and ends.

Label the works areas with pictures to show students what the space is for, and what they should be doing while they're in it. You can colour-code the area to the classroom schedule to reinforce this idea.



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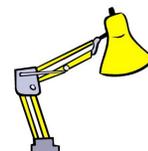
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Minimising distractions

Sensory issues and a focus on details can make it easy for autistic kids to be distracted in the classroom. They notice (and can be bothered by) things that other kids tune out - artwork around the room, the sound of a lawnmower outside the window, the smell of carpet cleaner, the titles of the books on the shelf behind you.

Here are some tips to help them keep focus:

- * Stand in front of neutral backgrounds when teaching
- * Remove colourful posters from around the room
- * Check for flickering light bulbs
- * Swap fluorescent lights for lamps or natural light
- * Place dividers between desks and work spaces
- * Cover up shelves and computers
- * Store equipment inside cupboards
- * Avoid air fresheners and chemical smells
- * Choose low-odour craft supplies
- * Cover tiled floors with carpet squares
- * Put foam or rubber soles on the chair and desk legs
- * Use headphones at computer and multimedia stations
- * Cover windows to remove outside distractions



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Making a chill-out zone

Create a space where students can go when things get overwhelming. There might be times when you'll need to keep them safe during a meltdown, reduce distractions for the rest of the class, give them a break from sensory input or just find a spot for some quiet 1:1 time.

Section off a corner of the room with dividers or bookshelves and add a large beanbag or some cushions. It doesn't have to be expensive or take up a lot of space - an old refrigerator box or small tent can work well too. If space is really tight then bring the respite area to them in the form of noise-cancelling headphones or ear plugs.



Make up a 'fiddle basket' of things for kids who need to fidget or move - stress balls, squeeze toys (without the squeaker), things to chew on, play dough or putty, small bean bags, plush toys... anything that provides tactile sensory input that will help them to calm down and focus.



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Choosing where to sit

Finding the best spot for autistic students to sit in the classroom will depend on their individual strengths and challenges.

If their main challenge is:

They will cope better:

Distracted easily

Away from windows and doors

Away from the class pet

Where they can't see toys and computers

Out of classroom traffic zones

Auditory processing delays

Close to you to minimise sounds in between

Sensory integration

Where nobody has to walk behind them

Away from the PA system,
class sharpener, stapler or hole punch

Where their body won't touch classmates

With room to fidget or move around as they think

Near open windows in smelly rooms (art, science)

Sitting on something other than a chair
(physio ball, beanbag, the floor)

Everyone

Next to a patient and helpful classmate

Sitting in a designated seat

Having a defined spot at mat time

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Helping them to get organised

Organisational tasks can be overwhelming for most students with autism, regardless of how intelligent they are. Combining information can be tricky for them, and a focus on details can make it hard to see the overall picture. Missed deadlines and lost homework are common, and they might struggle to find the right supplies in their bag or remember to bring them to class.

Give them a clear spot to hang their bag in the morning, and stick a visual schedule nearby that shows what they need to unpack.

Mark out spaces on the desk where their things should go - their pencil case, workbook and water bottle.



Help them to visualise what they will need for a task by making checklists with pictures of the materials, or put the supplies into a basket on their desk. A picture of a pencil glued onto the cover of their workbook will act as a reminder before they start work.

Make a folder for any work or notes that need to go home at the end of the day. Paste a photo of their schoolbag on the front of the folder as a reminder that it needs to be packed away. Include a checklist for homework which shows the due date, the materials that they'll need and the steps involved.

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Tips for getting ready on a budget

Organising the classroom to accommodate autistic students doesn't have to be expensive or time-consuming. Here are some tips for making an effective learning environment without spending a lot of money:



- * Re-use scraps of card to make signs, communication cards or labels
- * Use clear tape to laminate schedules
- * Use furniture you already have as room dividers to separate work areas
- * Cut up large boxes to make study corrals or desk dividers
- * Use empty takeout containers to store task materials or fidget toys
- * Clip photos from magazines for matching tasks or communication cards
- * Use the reverse side of old file dividers for schedules
- * Collect the free toys that come with fast food as fidget toys or rewards
- * Egg cartons make great storage containers for craft supplies
- * Collect paint sample cards to use as flashcards or in matching tasks
- * Make sensory fidget toys from deflated balloons filled with rice or play dough

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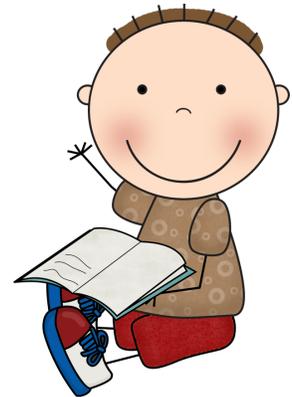
Visual Supports

The use of visual aides is one of the easiest ways to help autistic students adjust to life in the classroom. Signs, social stories, schedules and choice boards give information in a way that uses their strengths - a love of details and repetition, literal and concrete thinking, reading and visual learning - and helps with skills they might struggle with, like sequencing (what comes next) and organisation (by providing structure).

Social stories

Social stories are short narratives about situations that a student might find hard or confusing. They can be used to learn new routines, adjust to change, modify behaviour, develop social understanding or to reduce anxiety about new situations.

Your new student will benefit from social stories about the daily routine, lining up for assembly, asking questions in class, who they can go to for help and having substitute teachers.



Social story DO's:

- * Keep the stories short and simple, and personal to the student
- * Write in the first person and talk about what they should do, not what they shouldn't (I will try to raise my hand when I have a question)
- * Leave room for flexibility - use words like 'sometimes' and 'usually'
- * Use pictures to make the story visual, relevant and easy to understand
- * Stick to one social story at a time to avoid information overload
- * Make it interesting - use video, Powerpoint, photo flip-books or cartoons

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Making social stories

Social stories aren't difficult to make, and with a bit of planning and practice you'll soon find many ways to use them.

Step 1: Decide what the story is about

Figure out your goal - what do you want to develop, change or prepare for?

Then work out what the student needs to know to be able to reach that goal.

Example: If your goal is for the student to walk in the hallway instead of running, tell them that (a) people walk in the hallways because (b) running isn't safe.

Step 2: Write the story

Using language aimed at the student's reading or receptive comprehension level, describe the situation - what, when, who, where and why.

Example: On Wednesdays, our class lines up outside for assembly.

Then describe what you want the student to do in that situation. You can also describe things that they can't see, like other people's feelings.

Example: If I don't know what to do I will ask Mrs Gruber or another student.

Example: People like it when you say hello back to them.



Step 3: Read the story

Find a quiet space away from distractions, and choose a time when the student is calm. Using a friendly and positive tone, read the story to them or have them read it aloud to you. Much of the benefit from social stories comes with repetition, so read it often until the student understands what is expected or is no longer distressed.

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Schedules

Autistic kids cope better when they know what to expect, and schedules are an effective way of providing that information for them. A schedule is simply a list of events or activities, in the order in which they will happen.

Even if you have a classroom schedule posted for everyone in your class, it's worthwhile making a separate one for your autistic students. They often require more steps than other students, and you might find that they work better with the schedule on their desk or close by rather than at the front of the class or around the walls.

Planning the schedule

Break the school day down into chunks of time, subject areas or activities. Make sure you include every part of the day, even breaks and free time. If there are too many items to fit on one schedule, break it down even further into sub-schedules - one for the overall day, with separate smaller schedules for tasks like unpacking the school bag and getting ready for the day or getting lunch at the cafeteria.

Making the schedule

Decisions about what the schedule will look like and how it will be constructed depend on the way you're going to use it. So before you get out the glue stick and scissors, have a think about these questions:

- * How will you show which tasks have been completed, and those still to do?
- * How and when will you incorporate rewards or choices?
- * Where will the schedule be located?
- * How will the student move to and from the schedule?
- * How will you prompt the student to check the schedule?

Let's take a look at some different types of schedules.

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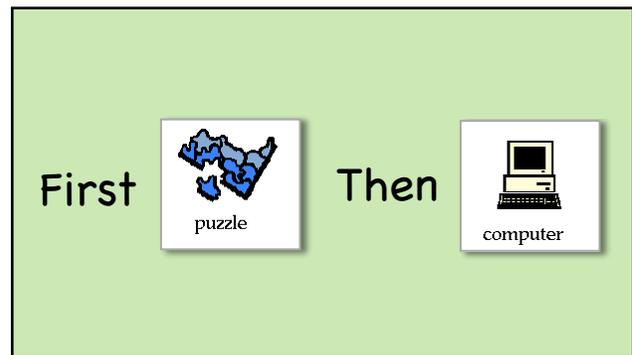
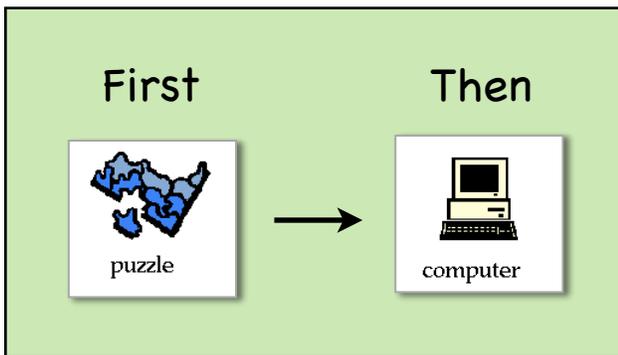
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Making a schedule

Simple 'First - Then' schedules



The most simple kind of schedule is a First-Then board. It's made up of only two activities, one following the other with the second being contingent upon the completion of the first.

Examples:

First wash hands, then eat snack

First work, then computer

First mat time, then free play

You can use alternate words:

First -- now, if

Then -- later, next, after, second

For pre-readers it might be better to use the numbers 1 and 2 than words.

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Making a schedule

Pre-printed checklists

<input type="checkbox"/>	Puzzle
<input type="checkbox"/>	Circle time
<input type="checkbox"/>	Computer
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lunch

<input type="checkbox"/>	 puzzle
<input type="checkbox"/>	 circle time
<input type="checkbox"/>	 computer

This kind of schedule is easy to create, with tasks that can be ticked off as they're completed. It's particularly well suited to older students or those that have to move between classes often (with no loose pieces to hang on to).

The schedule can simply be printed onto paper each day, or written up on a whiteboard. The drawbacks are a lack of flexibility and needing to print it ahead of time or whenever the schedule changes.

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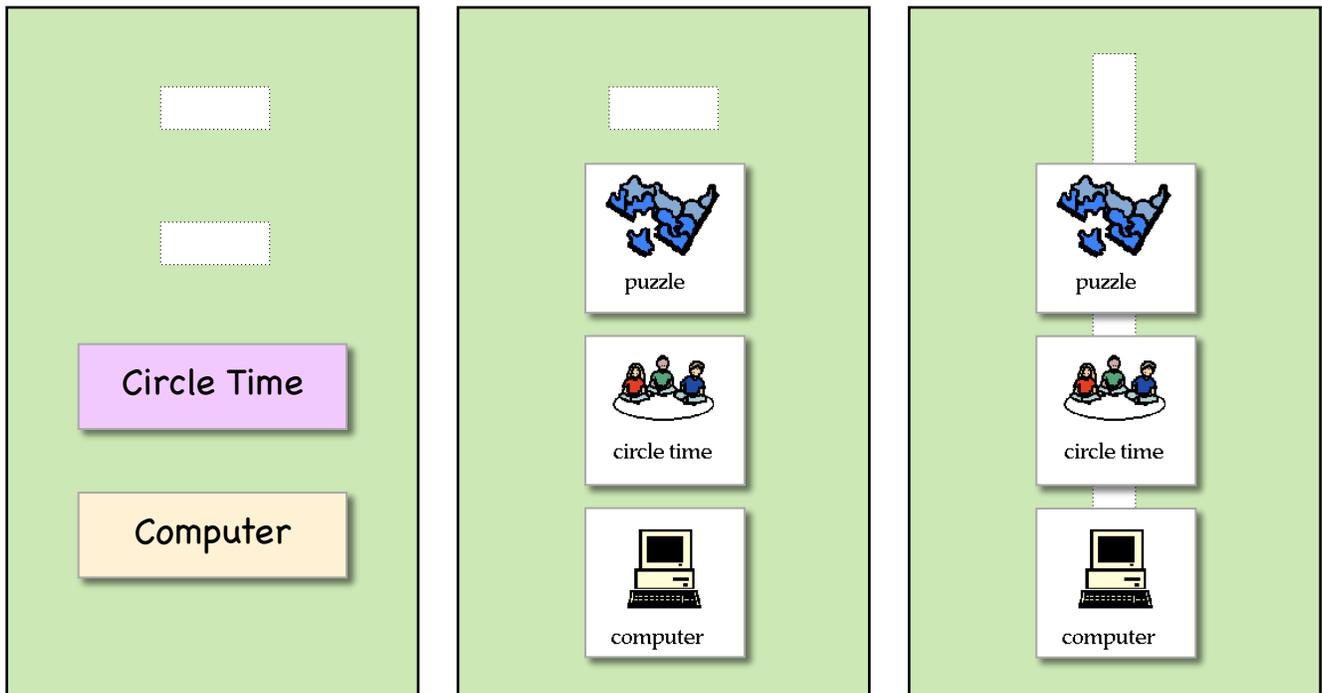
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Making a schedule

Velcro strip with removable cards



This is the most commonly used type of schedule because it's easy to make, allows for lots of choice and can accommodate changes easily. It also makes completing the tasks tangible for students, because they have to physically remove it from the schedule.

A strip of card with velcro acts as the base for the schedule, with the tasks made up of removable picture or word cards. Velcro squares or dots help to visually separate the tasks, but a continuous strip allows for a variable number.

TIP: Using a large envelope as the base for the schedule will give you a handy place to store unused task cards.

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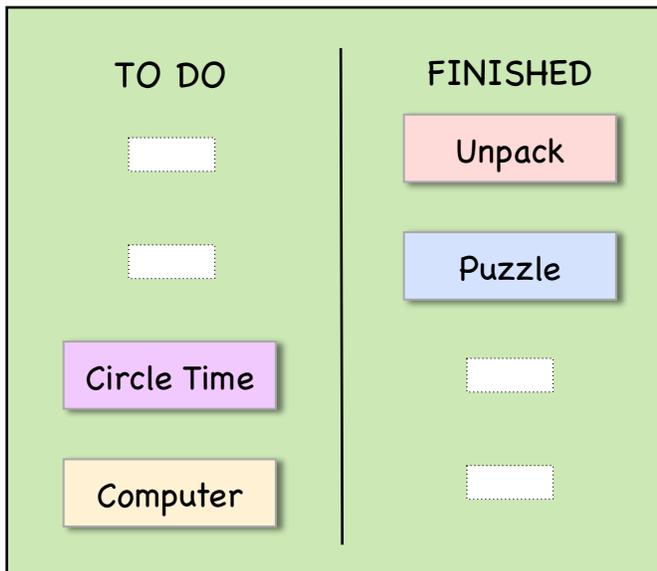
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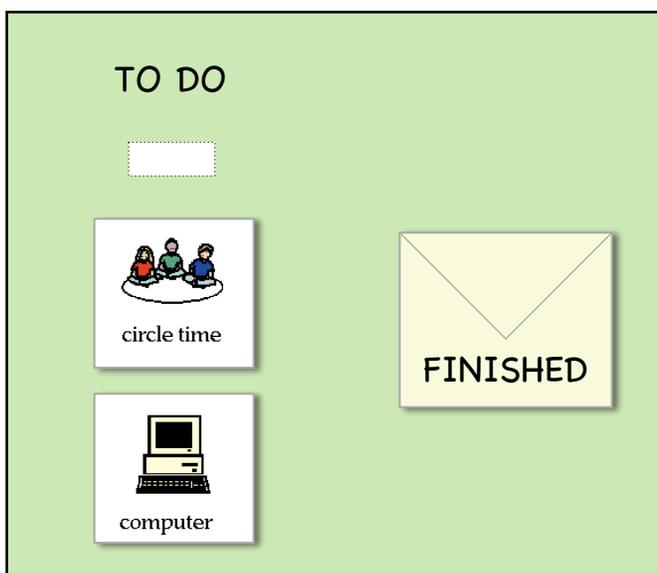
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Making a schedule

Velcro strip with removable cards



To show tasks that are completed, split the schedule into two columns. Move tasks from one side to the other as they're done.



Or you can attach an envelope to the schedule and place task cards inside as they're finished.

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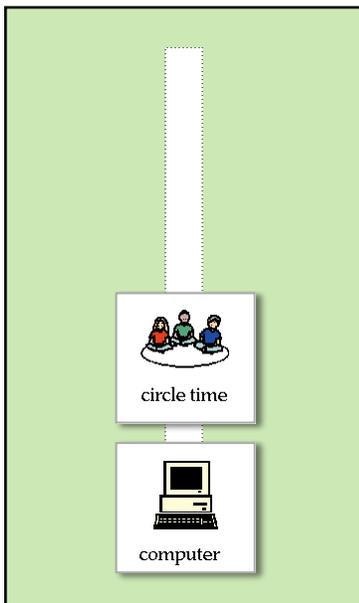
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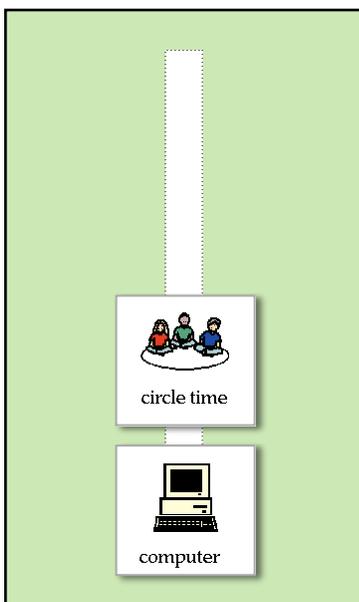
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Making a schedule

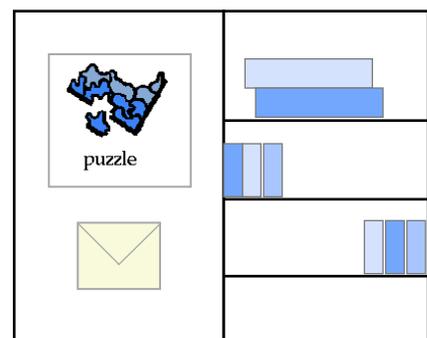
Velcro strip with removable cards



Another way to show completion is to remove task cards as they're finished and put them into a basket on the student's desk.



Or get the student to take the task card and match it to a corresponding label in the work area. After the activity is completed, the card is put away in an envelope next to the label.



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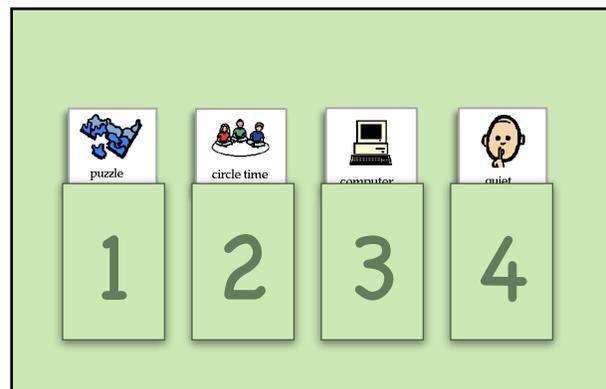
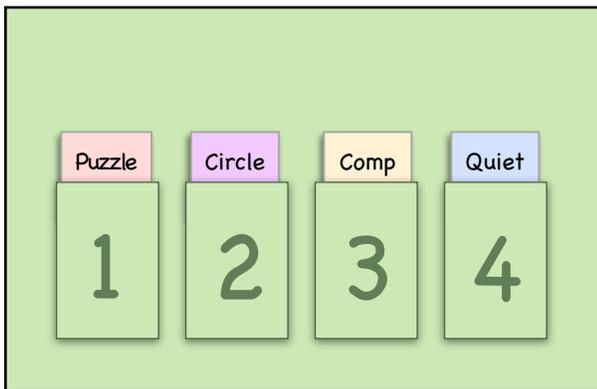
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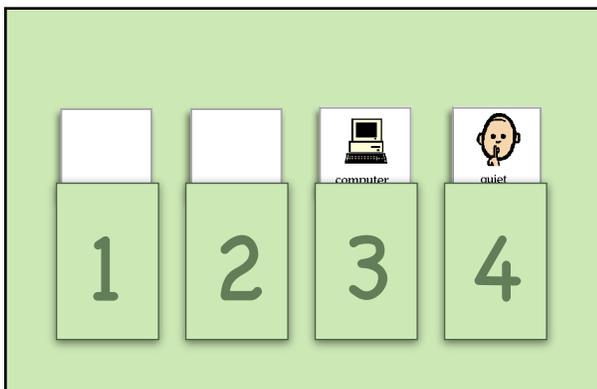
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Making a schedule

Pocket strip with removable cards



An alternative to velcro is to create pockets (or attach ziplock bags) in which to store the task cards. The task itself is slightly less visible, but the steps can be numbered to help reinforce the sequence in which they need to be completed.



When tasks are completed, the cards are simply turned over, or removed from their pocket - as with the velcro schedules, they can then be placed into a Finished basket, stored in an envelope or taken to the corresponding work area.

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Making a schedule

Schedule making DO's:

- * Laminate both the schedule base and the task cards to prolong their use
- * Add pictures to appeal to visual strengths
- * Colour code the tasks to the work area in which they'll be done
- * Try using horizontal schedules for readers, vertical for pre-readers
- * Store the schedule where it's easy to access
- * Make the schedule easy and enjoyable to use
- * Take care when selecting pictures - make sure they're easy to understand
- * Use the same side of the velcro on all task cards!

Learning to use the schedule

If your new student has never used a schedule before, you'll need to first teach it as a separate skill. You could start with a simplified version that only has two or three items at a time, with rewards after each step.

Gradually add more items to the schedule and increase the breaks between rewards, until you're covering the entire block of time or day in one list. This usually takes some time, so expect that it might be several weeks before everyone is comfortable with it.



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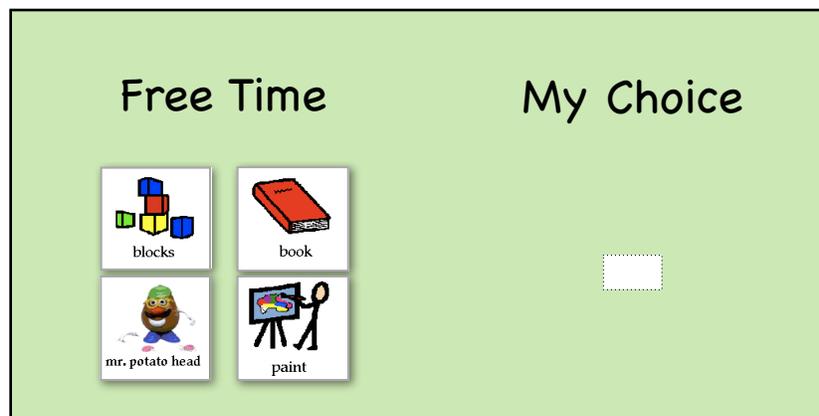
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Choice boards

Choice boards are a way of visually showing students the options they can choose from - for snack time, free play or as a reward.



This is an important tool because making choices is often tricky for autistic kids. Each of the steps can be difficult for them - listening to the whole list of options, remembering what those choices were so they can pick one, and then communicating that choice back to you.

A choice board uses their strengths with visual thinking to help make choices easier. They can see all of the options, have time to think about each one and recheck the options before choosing. Communicating that choice is easier too - they can simply hand you the matching card.

Be careful not to arrange the cards in a line or the student might confuse it with a schedule and think they have to choose each item in turn. Also make sure to use a random arrangement each time as they might tend to pick only the first or last item, regardless of whether it's the one that they want.

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Tips for taking good photos to use in the classroom

The pictures that you use in your visual supports have to be relevant, clear and uncluttered. Look online for free graphics and clipart, or make your own - it's often quicker and easier than spending hours searching websites for something appropriate.



If you want to take your own photos, here's how to do it right!

- * Get in close - fill the frame with the object that you want the student to notice
- * Remove distractions - cut out backgrounds, hands and other objects
- * Be careful - autistic kids can be literal, so pick a generic object if you want to re-use the picture (don't use a single picture of an apple to represent all fruit)
- * Be prepared - have a camera handy around the classroom and on excursions
- * Be prolific - take photos of everything in the classroom to give the student plenty of ways to express ideas and communicate choices
- * Be organised - create folders and rename photos as soon as you download them
- * Try black and white - colour can be a distraction and lock you into specific details (the student sees 'blue shoe' instead of just shoe)
- * Make it stand out - place dark objects on a white background (and vice versa)
- * Use good lighting - shadows can obscure important details and a flash can wash everything out, so take photos by a window with natural sunlight
- * Don't be fancy - this isn't the time for cool effects, you want to aim for plain "here is an apple" type of shots
- * Imagine you're selling the object on eBay - you want the photo to be large, clear, well-lit and only containing the thing that you're selling

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Transitioning The Student

All students cope better when they know what to expect, and change is particularly tough for autistic kids to cope with. You can make the move less stressful by giving them a chance to get to know you and the classroom before their first day.

Invite your new student and their parents to come and meet you. It's important to make this first meeting as stress-free and enjoyable as possible, so set aside time after school or in the holiday break when it's quiet. Show them around the classroom, pointing out where they'll put their bag or sit to have their lunch.

[Click on Resources on the menu bar to see a classroom tour invitation you can send to your new student](#)

If a visit in person isn't possible, email or post photos of yourself and the classroom home to the parents.

A social story can also help your student prepare for the changes. Use photos to show important spots around the school, introduce staff members or explain what to expect on their first day.

Transitions can be made easier by using objects to bridge the gap between the old classroom and the new one. Ask the student to bring in a favourite pencil case to leave on their new desk, or put a piece of their artwork up on the bulletin board.



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Preparing Other Staff Members

It's important that you pass along information about your new student's needs to any staff members who might come in contact with him.



It's not just other teachers who need to know - the librarian, bus driver, custodian, cafeteria servers and staff in the administration office all might find themselves interacting with the student at times of stress. So they need to know how best to communicate with him, and when or how to intervene if something goes wrong.

Lunch and break times can be particularly stressful for autistic kids. There's less structure, an overload of sensory input and complex social situations to navigate. This can also be the time when they're most vulnerable to bullying behaviour, so any staff on supervision during breaks will need to be kept up to speed and pay particular attention for signs of distress.

Prepare a one-sheet summary that you can hand out to other staff, outlining your student's needs and explaining what to do if the student is having trouble or needs help. You might also want to organise an autism information session, where you can share what you know and hear what's worked for other teachers who have had autistic students in their classrooms.

[Click on Resources on the menu bar](#)
[for a checklist, autism information sheet,](#)
[sample needs summary and action plan](#)

What To Expect



Adjusting
Recognising people
Sensory challenges
Stimming
Meltdowns
Coping with change
Hard parts of the day
Uneven skill levels
Eye contact
Friendships
Emotions

Group work
Rules
Following instructions
Expressing themselves
Thinking literally
Paying attention
Play skills
Transitions
Handwriting
Monitoring volume

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Adjusting

A new classroom isn't the only thing autistic students have to adjust to when changing schools or at the start of each term.

There's a new daily routine to get used to, both at school and at home. They might have new clothes, which feel rough against their skin or have a strange smell and labels that scratch. The weather might be changing or they might have to eat new foods now that they're back at school. And of course there's all the unfamiliar faces, smells and voices of their new classmates.

Each of these changes takes time to get used to, but when they come all at once it can be an overwhelming drain on their resources. So for many autistic kids the first week in a new classroom can be exhausting, which can lead to meltdowns and even a temporary regression in skills like toileting or language. Others welcome the return to a more structured environment after the break at home, and may settle in quickly.



Give them space to adjust at their own pace. Go slowly and keep things to a minimum in the first week, with a focus on learning the ropes before jumping into anything too taxing.

Remember that their behaviour during this time might not be a true reflection of their capabilities, so hold off on any assessments or curriculum adjustments until they've had a chance to settle in.

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Recognising People

It's common for autistic kids to have trouble recognising the people around them, even those they see every day. Face blindness, avoidance of eye contact, sensory overload and hyperfocus can all contribute.

So it might take time for your new student to recognise both you and his classmates, and to feel comfortable around everyone. This can make it appear to the other kids as if he's being unsociable or rude, when really he's just understandably anxious being in a room full of strangers.

You can help by using assigned seats (at least for the first month) and posting a seating chart (with photos) on the noticeboard or directly on the student's desk. Using name badges is also a good idea, as is greeting the student by name and reminding him who you are ("Good morning John, I'm your teacher Mrs Gruber").

It's also important to remember that they might not be able to recognise you when they need help, especially if you're sitting down on the mat or outside with a group of other adults. They need a way to find you that doesn't involve the way you look - perhaps you (or any of the people who can assist) can wear a bright orange badge. Make sure the student feels that it's okay if he doesn't recognise someone, and teach him how to let you know if that's the case - teach him to say "I'm sorry but I don't know who you are" or make a card that he can hand to you or stick on his communication board.

Click [here](#) to learn more
about face blindness

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Sensory Challenges

Many autistic kids have trouble putting together all of the sensory information they receive from the world around them - not only sights, sounds, tastes, smells and the things they touch, but also input about balance, movement, gravity and where their body is in space.

Their systems can be over or under reactive to these sensations. Hypersensitive kids will avoid sensory activities while hyposensitive kids will seek them out. A student can be under sensitive with one sense and over sensitive with another, or even switch back and forth between the two over the day.

Sense	Hypersensitive	Hyposensitive
Touch	Hates finger painting	Pushes up against people
Sight	Covers eyes in sunshine	Stares into the sun
Sound	Blocks ears during music class	Likes to bang hands on desk
Taste	Prefers bland food	Eats packets of salt
Smell	Avoids people wearing perfume	Sniffs people
Vestibular	Prefers to sit still	Loves swinging

The difficulties are not just with receiving and filtering sensory input, but in processing that information. Sensations can easily be confused or misinterpreted, such as the feeling of hunger or knowing when they need to use the bathroom. The senses also have trouble communicating with each other, so they might need to compensate for that by looking at the ground as they walk so they can stay balanced for example (matching the visual input with the information about where their body is).

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Hypersensitivity

Kids who are overly sensitive to sensory input can quickly reach the point of overload, which is distressing and even painful for them. By the time they reach this point the system starts to block out new input, which makes learning almost impossible.

If you can recognise the signs that the student is beginning to struggle, you can intervene to prevent this shutdown from happening by reducing sensory input.

Take her out of the noisy music lesson for some 1:1 time back in the classroom, swap finger paints for a paintbrush, use headphones, let her have a break in the chill-out zone or send her on an errand to deliver a note to the administration office.



Signs that a student is reaching sensory overload can include:

- * Avoiding a task or trying to leave an area
- * Loss of concentration
- * Moving around, unable to sit still
- * Using their hands to block their ears or eyes
- * Panicking
- * Being irritable and agitated
- * Physical reactions - crying, upset stomach, sweating, flushed or pale skin
- * Echolalia or stimming
- * Sudden loss of skills, particularly communication

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Hyposensitivity

Being under-sensitive can also have an impact on learning, as the student seeks out activities which provide the extra sensory input that their body is craving. This can be a source of distraction for both the student and the class, as it takes them away from what they should be doing and is often noisy or disruptive.



Watch for the signs that your student is seeking out sensory input, and redirect him to a more appropriate source of sensory stimulation.

Give him a fidget toy or something to chew on, take a break to roll some play dough or pour water from one jug to another, let him move around while he thinks or go outside for a few minutes on the swing. He might also benefit from sitting on a wiggle cushion on his chair or wearing a weighted vest.

Signs that a student might be seeking sensory input include:

- * Echolalia or stimming
- * Banging on the desk or floor
- * Repeatedly touching things
- * Playing roughly with toys or other kids
- * Tasting or chewing on things
- * Spinning, jumping or rocking
- * Stomping on the floor with feet
- * Biting or sucking on fingers

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Stimming

Stimming is short for self-stimulatory behaviour, and it's exactly what it sounds like - doing stuff to stimulate or excite your own nervous system. Autistic kids sometimes do this to calm themselves down or as a way of getting the extra sensory input that their bodies might be craving.

Stimming can involve any of the senses:

Sense	Stimming behaviour
Touch	Rubbing objects, hitting self
Sight	Blinking, flicking fingers in front of eyes
Sound	Echolalia, banging toys
Taste	Licking toys, putting stuff in their mouth
Smell	Sniffing toys or people
Vestibular	Spinning, rocking

The first few weeks in a new classroom can be overwhelming, so stimming behaviours usually happen more often during this time. They play an important role in helping the student to cope, so there's no need to intervene unless the stimming is causing a distraction or putting him or other classmates in danger.

If your new student is stimming, use it as a signal that she's finding it hard to cope. Reduce sensory input or give it to her in a more acceptable way, such as taking a break in the chill-out zone with something cuddly or a fidget toy.

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Meltdowns

It's important to understand that a meltdown isn't a tantrum, so you need a different approach to handling them. A tantrum is an act of defiance that can be controlled or stopped - which is why things like discipline, reasoning, rules and bribes can all be effective ways of dealing with them.

A meltdown is triggered by an overwhelming situation from which the student can't easily escape, like a confusing social encounter or the anxiety caused by a sudden change of plans. It's an overload of the sensory system that the child can't control or stop, no matter what the consequence.

During a meltdown, sensory input is shut out so talking, reasoning, discipline, teaching or bribing won't help. In fact they make things worse, creating even more input for the overloaded system to deal with.

With practice it becomes easier to tell meltdowns from tantrums...

Is the student...	Tantrum	Meltdown
Watching for your reaction?	✓	✗
Mindful of their own safety?	✓	✗
In control of their behaviour?	✓	✗
Trying to communicate their needs?	✓	✗
Calming down once the situation is resolved?	✓	✗

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Managing meltdowns

Autistic meltdowns can be intense. They can start suddenly and literally last for hours at a time. Even if you can work out what started it, it's usually difficult (if not impossible) to fix once it's in full swing so often you just have to ride it out.

The key to managing meltdowns is to understand what triggers them so you can take action ahead of time and prevent them from happening. That's not always possible, so if you find yourself faced with a meltdown try these tips:

Don't get angry

It just adds to the noise and doesn't solve anything. Your student isn't trying to be naughty, stubborn or get his own way so being angry at him won't solve anything. Take a deep breath instead and rally your resources... and remember, no matter how hard it is for you, it's umpteen times harder on him.

Take control

Remove him from the situation or change the thing that's bothering him. If you don't know what that is, take him somewhere safe where he can't hurt himself or anyone else.

Don't try reason

He isn't in control of himself in a meltdown, the system has overloaded and is shutting down. Trying to reason, reprimand or even ask what's wrong will only give him more sensory input to deal with and make things worse.

Accept it

Meltdowns are part of his way of communicating with you, and you'll cope better if you can jump into control mode instead of wasting time and energy trying to fight it.

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Coping With Change

Life can feel chaotic and confusing to many autistic kids. They find comfort in structure, order and routine - so much so that they often create and enforce their own routines, and any changes to these can be extremely upsetting for them.

Sometimes these changes might seem trivial, like rearranging the furniture in the room or classmates being absent when they're sick. But for the autistic student these changes can mean a loss of predictability and control over their environment, which understandably makes them feel insecure and anxious.

During times of upheaval the need for structure is increased, so it's important to keep life as consistent as possible for your new student during her first week. Create as much structure and routine as you can, stick to it and make sure there's plenty of advance warning about any changes.

Be aware that the need for routine can be very strong - autistic students are great at noticing patterns and can latch onto them easily. So be careful that you don't inadvertently create a routine that you didn't want, such as pairing her with the same student twice in a row.

They can also create routines for themselves which aren't apparent to anyone else - arranging their pencils on the desk in the same order, counting the steps to the playground before they eat lunch, doing the same three puzzles in a row during free play time. It can be easy for you or a classmate to accidentally disrupt these kinds of routines, which only creates more unpredictability and anxiety. As she relaxes over time and settle into life in the new classroom, the less she will feel the need for the control that routines can bring.

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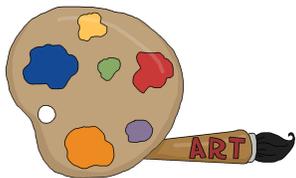
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Hardest Parts Of The Day

The parts of the school day that most kids look forward to - lunch break, art class, free play - can be really difficult for autistic students. It's the same things that make these times so enjoyable for others that make them a nightmare for these kids - a break from the routine, freedom to choose an activity, time to socialise with friends.



Lessons outside the classroom require students to adjust to a different teacher, new rules and unfamiliar surroundings.

These classes often come with unwanted additional sensory input - the noise of twenty different instruments in music class, the smell of turpentine in art or the coach's whistle during sports.



Lunch time gives most students a much-needed mental break, but for autistic students it can be anything but restful. There's confusing social situations to navigate, food anxieties and a lack of structure which can be stressful for them. Meltdowns in the afternoon are a common occurrence as tired and emotional bodies start to overload.

Free play can also be a difficult time. Choices aren't easy for them to make, there's usually a lot of noise and classmates might act less predictably, sit closer or bump into each other. And these are also reasons why school assemblies can be very difficult times for autistic students.

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Tips for coping with the hardest parts of the day

- * Make sure that every one of his teachers understands your student's needs and how to accommodate them
- * If you only have the use of an assistant or aide for part of the day, arrange to have them around during these times
- * Get assistants and aides to take their lunch break a little earlier, so that they're available during the break to supervise, help with ordering food at the cafeteria or opening lunch boxes and food containers
- * Create a lunch routine, with a visual schedule or choice board
- * Give the student a designated place to sit at lunch time
- * Take him to the cafeteria before lunch to make his choice
- * Allow students to use a quiet area during free play or break times
- * Set up a lunch club in the library for kids who like to play cards or boardgames
- * Add structure to free play time with a mini schedule and choice board
- * Take earplugs to noisy classes
- * Make the first activity after breaks something predictable and quiet
- * Use social stories to give him ideas for games to play at break times
- * Take him to get changed for gym class early, away from the noisy locker room
- * Explain that the rules may be different in other classes (usually you're not allowed to play ball inside, but in the gym it's okay)

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Uneven Skill Levels

It's common for autistic kids to excel in one area only to perform below average in another, even within the same subject. They might be great at spelling but struggle with simple comprehension tasks, or be a whiz with a paintbrush but not able to tie their shoelaces. And just because they can recite the name of every person who ever played for the Yankees doesn't mean they can remember multiplication tables.



These skill levels can also vary from day to day, or even within a single day depending on external demands and how they're coping with them.

It also means that even very intelligent students can struggle with following simple instructions, especially if they're given verbally or contain multiple steps.

This can make it difficult to place students in classes which are split according to ability. The discrepancy is also often misunderstood, with the student mistakenly thought to be lazy, stubborn or not performing to their potential.

Eye Contact

Not all autistic kids have trouble making eye contact. For those that do, the flood of information that comes from looking at faces can be an overwhelming experience. So never force them to look at you, turn their chin or say 'Look at me when I'm talking to you'. They can pay attention without needing to look at you - in fact they might focus on what you're saying better without all that extra input that eye contact brings. You can check that they're paying attention by asking them to repeat what you said.

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Friendships

It's not true that autistic kids don't want to make friends. Many of them enjoy the company of others, but don't quite know how to go about building and maintaining relationships. Conversations are often tricky for them, and the complex social rules of the playground tend to pass them by. Negative experiences with bullying can also leave them a little wary of interacting with other children.

Approaching potential friends or joining in existing games can be too daunting for kids that struggle with social understanding. Their need for routine can make them sticklers for the rules which often lead to disagreements (especially when they made them up themselves), and the repetitive nature of their play can be frustrating for other kids.

They'll need a lot of support in the early days, and it may take some time before they feel settled enough to join in. You can help by setting them up with a suitable classmate as a buddy, preferably one that's patient and has a similar interest. A busy playground might be overwhelming in the first week of school, so find them a quiet spot where they can watch or play boardgames.

Social stories can be an effective way to teach your new student how to make friends and be one too. They can be especially handy for explaining the unwritten rules of playground relationships ('other kids might not like it if I stand too close when I'm talking to them').



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Emotions

Another myth about autistic kids is that they can't feel empathy. This is simply not true, they experience a wide range of emotions and are definitely capable of sharing those feelings with other people. It's just that they can have trouble identifying what those emotions are, and communication difficulties make it hard to express how they feel. They can also struggle with social understanding, which makes it hard for them to know what to do when someone is showing a particular emotion.

So if your new student laughs when a classmate is crying, he's not being unfeeling or mean but just confused. Gently explain that tears mean someone is sad, and show him how to offer comfort - "When someone is upset, we can ask them if they are okay".

It will also help if you have some visual cards which represent the different emotions, to help him communicate to you how he's feeling. He may not know which name to put to the emotion though, so might prefer to describe the way his body is feeling - "My tummy hurts" or "My heart is noisy".



Happy



Funny



Nervous



Sad



Surprised

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Group Work

Working in groups will be challenging for your new student if she has trouble finding partners to work with, understanding her role in the group or contributing to the conversation. This might leave her feeling confused, isolated and extremely anxious, not to mention the sensory overload that comes with a classroom full of noisy group work.

Her classmates might find it difficult to work with her, too. Autistic kids can have trouble moving on to another topic, taking turns, talking about topics which don't interest them and sitting close to other students. They can get annoyed when group members drift off task or don't follow the rules exactly as given, which can make them less likely to be picked when there's group work to be done.

Let your new student work 1:1 with an aide at first, or practise group work through role play exercises. Assign students to groups to avoid her always being left out or picked last. If she works well with a particular group, you might want to keep that going for a while to give her time to get more comfortable with group dynamics. Always let her know in advance when groups will be changing.

Autistic students can often find it hard to identify as a member of a particular group. They might ignore instructions which are given to the whole class or think that instructions meant for someone else are for them, and have trouble recognising their fellow group members. So use a visual aide to identify groups - a coloured badge, group name or assigned area.

Group work can be very social and chatty, and it can be hard for autistic students to keep up with the conversation. They may sit back and tune out, and be unsure or unaware of their role in the group. They cope better with assigned roles and specific jobs to do, and it will help if you provide scripted cues - "You will be in charge of writing down the ideas, so you might say 'Can you repeat that for me please'".

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Rules

Autistic kids can be great at following rules. They really want to know what's expected of them, because it's hard for them to figure it out and easy for them to get it wrong. Rules make their lives ordered and predictable, which is the reason why they can become very upset if others don't follow the rules.

Use pictures to make the classroom rules clear and easy to understand, and keep the list short. Describe exactly what they need to do, using positive language where possible ('We walk in the classroom' instead of 'No running').

Phrases like 'Show respect' or 'Be polite' can be confusing, so turn that into concrete actions like 'We say please when we ask for something'.

If your new student is having trouble following a rule, check that he understands it properly. Show him the list, explain what the rule means and how he broke it. If it happens again you may need to rethink the wording or the picture you use.

The need for order can be so strong for these kids that sometimes they make up their own rules, then get very upset when others break them. For example, he might insist that he's the only one who gets to use the computer at free play time. If this happens, ask him to explain the rule to you if he can. Show him the list of classroom rules again and point out that his rule is not one of them. Try and understand why he felt the need to impose the rule (maybe he was worried that his files would be deleted), and see if there's some other way you can make him feel comfortable about it (saving his files to an external drive).

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Following Instructions

Many autistic kids have trouble understanding what people are saying to them. Delays in receiving and processing language can make it hard for them to follow instructions, because they miss parts or can't put the meaning of the words together. Often they only catch the first step or last few words, or forget what you said when it's time for them to act.

It's also hard for them to put the information into the correct sequence, so they can give you an answer or figure out what it is they're supposed to do. These delays in responding or acting can look like they're not paying attention or ignoring you.

Use visual instructions as much as possible, with the steps clearly shown in the order that you want them completed. When you have to use verbal instructions make sure that you have his attention first, then give simple one-step instructions.



Make sure to phrase things in the positive, because gaps in auditory processing can make him miss the important bit (say 'Walk on the sidewalk' instead of 'Do not walk on the road').

Give him time to think through the words and figure out what you want him to do before asking for a response. Be careful with saying 'Do you understand' - he might always answer 'yes' because he knows that's what you want to hear (or it gets you to go away the fastest!). A better way to check for understanding is to have him tell or show you what he needs to do.

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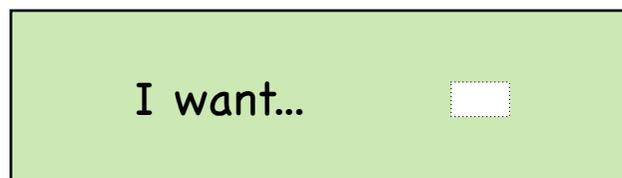
Expressing Themselves

It can be hard for autistic students to communicate their needs, wants, thoughts and feelings, either because they don't know the words, can't find them when they need to or put them together in the right way. This happens with both speech and writing, and as you can imagine it must be incredibly frustrating for them.

Students are required to use expressive language almost constantly throughout the school day, and this pressure to find and use the right words can be overwhelming for autistic kids. They also have to deal with the consequences of not getting it right - their needs and wants aren't met, their actions are misinterpreted and they get in trouble for the wrong reasons.

Your goal should be to try and reduce this pressure where possible. Start by giving your new student a way of letting you know that she doesn't know what to say, to reduce the anxiety she feels when you're waiting for a response. Give her a visual card that she can hand to you or teach her a phrase to use.

Visual prompts can help her to get started when she has something to say. Use pictures or words to cue the sentence, such as "I want...". You might need to make whole sentences this way, by selecting from a group of picture cards. You could also try teaching her scripts to say in different situations, as a way of easing her into a discussion or as a placeholder while she finds the words that she wants.



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Thinking Literally

It's not until an autistic student comes into your classroom that you realise just how rarely we say what we actually mean. Our daily language is full of idioms, puns, euphemisms, sarcasm and exaggerations, which are all really tricky for a literal mind to interpret. This can lead to a lot of misunderstandings, hurt feelings, frustration and meltdowns.

Everything we say has two meanings, literal (what the words actually mean) and figurative (what you intend the words to mean). Autistic kids are literal thinkers, so although you mean "shortly" when you say "in a minute" they will have their eyes glued to the clock counting down sixty seconds. They're then confused and hurt when the minute is up and you didn't keep to your promise.

This focus on literal meanings can have implications across the classroom, including the instructions you give, the way rules are written, understanding abstract concepts and comprehension tasks. It's also often the reason behind many of the misunderstandings between the student and his classmates - not understanding jokes, being too honest or taking sarcastic replies at face value.

So try to always say exactly what you mean. Explain any figurative phrases that you use, or better yet avoid them altogether:

* Pay attention

* Eyes on me

* Put your thinking caps on



* Open your ears

* Zip your lips

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Paying Attention

Sometimes it can be hard to get autistic students to place their attention where you'd like it to be. Hypersensitive or hyperactive kids can be easily distracted, while others can have an intense tunnel-like focus on a task which stops them from noticing what's going on around them.

Attention can be an abstract concept to understand, and it might not be clear to him exactly where or what you want him to look at. Autistic kids can have trouble learning things from context like other kids do, so they need to have concepts like these explicitly taught to them.

Be careful with asking your new student to 'pay attention' because it can be unclear and confusing for him. To a literal thinker, the word 'pay' involves money.



Delays in auditory processing and switching focus can mean that it will take a few moments for his mind to register that you've called his name or given an instruction. It takes time to recognise the words, remember what they mean and what it is he's supposed to do when he hears them. But on the outside it might look like he hasn't heard or isn't responding, so don't interrupt or say 'I said, pay attention!'

Remember that he doesn't necessarily have to look at you to pay attention to what you're saying. In fact, shutting off the extra visual input and stress from eye contact might actually help him to listen better.

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Tips for helping attention

Learn the signs of inattention

Not all kids concentrate by sitting still and looking at you, so don't just assume that he isn't engaged if he's looking away or fidgeting. Check for signs of attention by asking him if he knows what you said or want him to do.

Don't say anything

Get his attention visually or by touching. Try making a card that represents 'attention' that you can show him when you need him to focus. Sometimes the additional auditory input of 'pay attention' (or calling his name) can be enough to jam the circuits and ruin his chance to concentrate.

Allow time

Don't expect him to be able to drop what he's doing (or thinking) and concentrate as soon as you ask him to. Give him time to make the transition.

Be flexible

Provide the option of focusing in a way that's best for him. Let him walk around if he needs to, or doodle, or stare at his feet, or wiggle in his chair, or squeeze a ball. Accept that 'sit still and listen' aren't necessarily ideal conditions for every kid.

Explain exactly what you want

Give clear instructions like "sit on the mat" or "look at the TV". Help him to understand what attention is and what you expect him to do.

Figure out why it's hard

Are there visual or auditory distractions, like colourful posters or chatty students? Does he need a movement break? Is he having trouble understanding the work or the instructions? Does he have visual disturbances that make it hard to focus on the page? Is it hard for him to look at you because you're standing in front of all the toys?

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Play Skills

Autistic kids love to play, but often it's in a way that's quite different to other kids. They might order the race cars into a line instead of zooming them around the mat, enjoy touching the puzzle pieces over and over or carry around a particular game token.

They need help learning how to play interactively with classmates or with ideas for using the toys. Noticing and imitating the way other kids play is tough for them, so they won't easily pick up the rules to games or how to play with toys. Play areas are usually noisy and chaotic, and it can be stressful for them to pick something to play with.

It can be hard for autistic kids to know when a play activity is over, and the confusion can make them choose destructive endings to games like smashing down a block tower or throwing puzzle pieces.

- * Use a choice board to help him pick play activities
- * Pretend play can be difficult, so he's less likely to enjoy dress-ups, tea parties or games involving role playing
- * Make defined spaces for activities in play areas
- * Place a mat on the floor so he knows where to sit
- * Use social stories and role play to help him learn how to ask other kids to join in (and what to do if they say no)
- * Use a flip-book or picture chart to help him with ideas for playing with a toy - "How to play with the dough" or "Things you can build with blocks"
- * Watch for signs that he might be losing interest and suggest he move on to something else - have a finished basket where he can put an activity (or the choice card) when he's had enough



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Transitions

Change can be stressful for autistic kids, even when they're expecting it. Transitions are a particular type of change, from one activity to another. They happen more slowly and deliberately than the other types of sudden or unexpected change that can be so upsetting for them, like a teacher being off sick or a last minute change of schedule.

Moving from one subject to another, coming back to class after lunchtime or returning to their seats after sitting on the mat require shifts in attention and sensory input that can be uncomfortable or demanding. It's during these times that students can become particularly unsettled or anxious.

Be prepared

The best way to cope with transitions is to know that they're coming. Get into the habit of thinking about the plan for the day, the week, the month ahead and identify times of transition in advance.

Give advance warning

Always let your student know that a transition is coming up, even if it's one that you do every day. Use a visual schedule or cues to alert her to a change, like playing Bob the Builder music when it's time to pack up or counting numbers down on the whiteboard.

Allow plenty of time

The process of disengaging, switching focus and re-engaging can take longer for autistic kids so don't rush the transition. Hypersensitive bodies might also need time to adjust to the onslaught of new sensory information.

Make the end obvious

Moving on to a new activity is difficult if you don't realise that the old one is finished, so find ways to make it clear when a task is over - pull the picture from the schedule and put it in a 'completed' basket or have photos of what the finished task looks like.

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More tips for managing transitions

Use a transition object

Having an object that he can take from one activity or place to the next can help connect the two and ease the stress of the transition.

For example, carrying a library book from his bag to the library will help smooth the transition and also act as a visual reminder of where he's supposed to go.



Define physical areas and boundaries

Moving between tasks becomes easier when it's clear where to go and what to do there - mark a spot on the floor for him to sit at mat time, show him on a map the spots where he can play during lunchtime.

Avoid verbal prompts

Auditory processing isn't an area of strength for a lot of autistic kids, so opt for visual or physical prompts instead - a tap on the leg when it's time to stand up or painted footprints on the ground to show him where to walk.

Use a timer

Time is a really abstract concept, so translating it into something visual will help signal that a transition is coming up. The best ones show time passing in some concrete way, like a visual timer where time 'disappears' as it counts down.

Avoid them

One of the best ways to reduce the stress of transitions is to cut out as many of them as you can. Plan ahead to identify times of change, and see if there's a workaround that will eliminate the need to transition - arrange all the mat activities for the same time of day, for example.

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Handwriting

Handwriting can be tough for autistic kids, with some even finding it painful. Most have difficulty with the motor planning and coordination skills it requires, as well as the fine motor components like holding a pencil.



These students can take much longer than the rest of the class to complete written work, and many find that by the time they've formed the letters they've forgotten what they wanted to write in the first place.

Allowing students to complete written work on the computer, to answer questions verbally or scribe with an aide will help take the pressure off. Remember that these students will also have trouble copying notes from the board, so print them off instead and always give written copies of notices for home.

Autistic students can also sometimes have trouble comparing handwritten letters with ones that are printed - the size, font, shading and colour is different and to a kid who's focused on details this can make them hard to match.

This might make it hard for them to know if they've spelled a word correctly when working from a printed spelling list, for example. In this case it can help if they're allowed to type the word in the same size font as the one on the screen.



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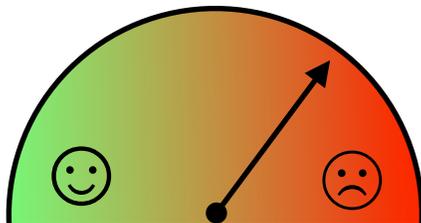
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Controlling Their Volume

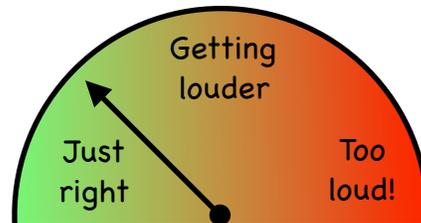
Kids with sensory integration issues often can't tell just how loud they're talking. This can be frustrating in the classroom because asking them to keep it down isn't very effective - they don't know when they're talking more quietly, and can't judge if their volume has risen again.

It can be tempting to remind them to keep quiet by yelling above the noise, but this just adds to the sensory chaos and the message isn't likely to get through. Find a gentle way to let them know when they're being too loud, like a light tap on the shoulder or a visual flashcard.

You could create a 'volume meter' where you can move the dial to indicate the volume of the student or whole class.



Lily's Volume Meter



Class Volume Meter

The First Days



Settling in

First week activities

Telling the class about autism

Getting to know the student

Getting to know the classroom

Getting to know the parents

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Settling In

The key to helping your new student settle into classroom life is to keep things as consistent and predictable as possible in his first days. Let him know what to expect (and what you expect from him), and stick to it.

Give him as much structure as possible, especially in the more flexible parts of the day such as break times and free play. Don't pressure him to join in group activities or to make friends right away.

If possible, arrange for him to start a few days into the term when the rest of the class have settled down. Things will be quieter, and the other students will know the routine and can help show him around.

One of the first things you might do is to figure out a way that he can let you know when he's stuck or upset and needs a break. It might be hard for him to find the right words or know who to talk to when everything is new and intimidating. Think of a phrase he could use, or have a special card set aside that he can hand you when things get too much for him.



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First Week Activities

The goal of the first weeks with your new student is for her to feel that your classroom is going to be a comfortable and safe place to be. Exercises which help her to become familiar with the school, the classroom and the people she needs to know can be a fun and low-pressure way to settle in.



Set up a mini treasure hunt with a map that leads the class around the various parts of the school, stopping in to meet the librarian, cafeteria staff and the gym teacher.

Make a matching game with photos of the different staff members that she needs to know. For older students, talk about all the different jobs that a school needs and the names of the people who do them in your school.

Ask your new student to bring in something from home that she can show you or the rest of the class. It will help her find potential friends with the same interests, and act as a prompt for conversations with classmates.

Knowing a bit more about her interests will also give you clues about things that you can use to motivate her later on.



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Talking To The Class About Autism

Autistic kids can do a lot of stuff that seems strange to other kids. They move, talk, learn and behave differently, and that can sometimes be hard to understand.

As strange as a lot of these behaviours are, every single one has a reason behind it. Helping the kids in your class to understand these behaviours will answer their questions, reduce the risk of bullying and give them strategies that they can use for including autistic kids in play and other group activities.

Start by talking about the things that their new classmate is good at, or that the kids like about him - he can draw well, he knows a lot about dinosaurs. Ask the class what they're good at and like to do.

Next talk about the things that make them upset, and what they do when they feel that way. This will provide a good context for talking about why he behaves the way he does and the ways he makes himself feel better. Talk about how they can help him and what they should do if it goes wrong.

Explain things like:

- * Why you ignore it when he yells out in the middle of class
- * He might really want to join in their game but not know how
- * If he doesn't want to play it doesn't mean that he doesn't like them
- * He might play with toys a bit differently than they do
- * He might like to play the same thing over and over again
- * Rules are very important to him
- * He might not like noise, being touched or when people sit too close
- * When he gets excited he might like to make noises or move his body

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Getting To Know The Student

Traditional icebreaker activities that help the class to get to know each other can be really stressful for autistic kids. Speaking in front of everyone or answering questions about themselves can be intimidating in new surroundings, and the anxiety can lead to withdrawal or meltdowns.

Even the usual 'about me' type questionnaires can be difficult, as they often have trouble expressing their likes and dislikes or choosing a favourite of something. Describing themselves can be daunting, especially in questions about their personality or friendships.

Another activity that can be tough for them is writing about what they did over the holiday break. The summer break is particularly long, so it might be hard for them to remember what they did, and writing recounts or narratives is often an area of difficulty for them.

- * Use prompts to help them remember holiday events and activities.
Choices will be easier for them than coming up with something from scratch.
“On the summer break I went... swimming / to the movies / on a trip”
- * Rephrase 'about me' type questions to make them based on facts.
Instead of “My favourite TV show is....” make it “On TV I watch
- * Ask them to describe physical features and skills instead of personality traits.
Instead of “People tell me that I am....” make it “My hair is..... and I am good at....”
- * Don't make them introduce themselves to the class on their first day.
- * Avoid group activities, or pair them with an aide or one classmate instead.

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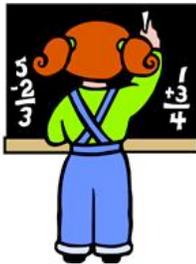
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Getting To Know The Classroom

Generalisation - bringing old skills into a new environment - is a skill that can be tricky for autistic kids. Even though your new student might have been in a classroom before, this is his first time in your classroom... and it can feel like starting from scratch for him. Everything that he's learned about school life might be forgotten when the environment he learned it in changes.

So it's important to take some time to help him understand how the classroom works. Don't assume that he knows how to ask a question in class or where to get help when he needs it, for example. Go over fundamental skills like lining up, storing his belongings and where to throw away rubbish.



Make sure that he knows where everything is, and how to recognise you when he needs help. A social story is a great way to explain the daily routine e.g. "My teacher's name is Mrs Roussel. She looks like this. Every morning I put my bag here. I sit here. The first thing we do each day is..."

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Getting To Know The Parents

One of the best things you can do for your new student is to build a good working relationship with his parents. Not only will you be working closely with them in coming months, but they will be your best source of information about his strengths, needs and ways of communicating. They can tell you what works and what doesn't, the signs that he's not coping and what you can do about it.

Try to arrange a time to meet each other before the first day. Start by asking about the things that the student is good at, what he liked about his old classroom and what he enjoys doing at home. Find out what rewards work best for him and if there's something that's particularly motivating.

Communication is going to be really important, so find out the best way to contact them and what methods worked best with his previous teachers. Find a way to let each other know when he hasn't had a good day or to give advance warning of changes to the routine - perhaps a communication log that gets sent home in his schoolbag or a quick email at the end of the day.

[Click on Resources on the menu bar](#)
[for a list of parent interview questions](#)

What Next



Keeping in contact with parents

Monitoring progress

Relief teachers

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Keeping In Contact With Parents

One of the most important things you can do going forward is to maintain good communication with your new student's parents. Keep them up-to-date with:

- * How he's coping in the classroom
- * Whether you've noticed any changes in his behaviour
- * Any new issues that have developed
- * Outcomes of applications for aide time
- * Changes to when or how assistance is provided
- * Decisions that might affect how his needs are accommodated
- * Any upcoming changes they might need to prepare for in advance

It's important to give them plenty of warning about big events that students are expected to participate in, especially ones with routine changes or a lot of sensory challenges like field trips or the class play. Discuss whether they would like him to join in, and how you might be able to make it a comfortable experience for him.

It can be common for the parents of autistic kids to feel isolated from the school community. Play-dates are hard to organise, they're less likely to participate in sports outside of school hours, they have less time to socialise with other parents and their kids don't have extensive peer networks. So take extra care to make sure they're kept in the loop about school happenings.

It can also be hard for them to keep up with all of the things that you might expect from parents, like making sure homework gets done, helping out in class or contributing to fundraisers. This is understandably frustrating, but it will be a great help to both of you if you can understand why it's hard for them (click [here](#) to learn more).

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Monitoring Progress

There are a lot of good reasons why it's important to start collecting data about your new student's abilities:

- * To record a baseline to measure progress against
- * To collect evidence for the IEP
- * To figure out whether the supports you're using are effective
- * To identify patterns in when, where and how behaviours occur
- * To communicate with others objectively about his needs and abilities
- * At the end of the year it will be nice to look back and see how far he's come

The requirement to collect data differs across countries and between school districts, with it being a specific legal requirement in some places and barely mentioned in others. But regardless of the direction your information gathering will take, the starting point is always the same - setting clear and measurable goals.

The data that you collect will be directly related to these goals and not the curriculum, so set both yourself and your student on a path for success by making them easy to measure. State the behaviour you want to observe in terms of how often, how many or how long ("Jake will sit on his mat for 10 minutes without standing for 80% of floor sessions in three consecutive weeks").

Data collection can take many forms (some of which may be specified by your state or school), but may include tracking sheets, daily observation logs, data sheets and tests. Whichever system you choose to use, make sure that it's simple, unobtrusive and easy to get to when you need to record.

Once you have some data you can start to analyse it to look for patterns, decide whether your program needs to change or extra support is needed, and communicate progress with parents.

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Relief Teachers

As we've already seen, change might be something that your new student struggles to cope with. So she might find it hard to adjust on the days when you have to be away and someone else is teaching the class.

Adding to that is the possibility that the new teacher might not be familiar with autism, which will make managing your new student and the supports you have in place a bit of a challenge for them.

One of the best things you can do to help everyone cope while you're away is to create a relief pack or information folder, including a cheat sheet which covers:

- * The student's abilities and needs
- * The way she communicates
- * The things she finds particularly challenging
- * Rewards that work well
- * Any supports that you have in place
- * How to handle challenging situations
- * People they can go to for help

[Click on Resources
on the menu bar
for a sample cheat sheet](#)

Remember to give your student ample warning that you're going to be away. This won't always be possible, especially when you're sick or called away for an emergency. In those cases, ask the school to let her parents know as soon as possible so they can prepare her before class starts (or keep her home if the change in routine is likely to be too stressful for her).

Resources



Classroom Set Up Checklist

Invitation To Tour The Classroom

Preparing Other Staff Checklist

Sample Needs Summary and Action Plan

Autism Information Sheet

Getting To Know You Sheet For Parents

Sample Relief Teacher Cheat Sheet



Checklist For Setting Up Your Classroom

- Rearrange furniture to minimise open spaces
- Create designated work areas
- Label work areas with pictures
- Remove colourful posters from around the room
- Check and replace fluorescent bulbs
- Set up dividers between desks and work spaces
- Cover shelves and computers
- Store equipment in cupboards
- Check whether craft supplies have strong smell
- Ask cleaning staff to use odour-free chemicals
- Cover tiled floors with carpet squares
- Protect chair legs with rubber soles
- Add headphones to computer stations
- Cover windows
- Create a chill-out zone
- Make a basket of fiddle toys
- Design a seating plan
- Stick an unpacking schedule next to the bag hooks
- Mark out spaces on the desk for materials
- Make a homework folder

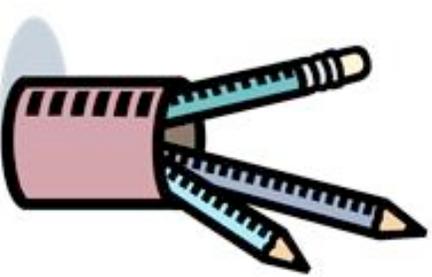
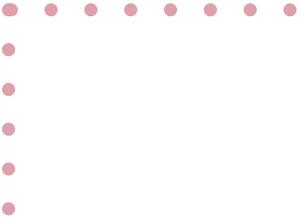


Hello!

We're excited that you'll be joining our class soon!

We'd like to invite you to come and see the classroom before your first day. You could bring something from home to show us, if you want to.

We're looking forward to meeting you!





Checklist For Preparing Other Staff

Prepare needs summary and action plan

Discuss with teaching staff:

Co-teaching staff

Physical education

Music

Art

Languages

Discuss with other key staff:

Special needs assistants

Classroom assistants

Administration

Library

Cafeteria

Custodians

Arrange autism information session

Consult with teachers on supervision duty during breaks

Make relief teacher cheat sheet

Sample Needs Summary and Action Plan



Mason Anderson

Mason is in Grade 4 and has been diagnosed with Aspergers.

A happy and quiet student, Mason enjoys rules and is happy to follow them when he understands what is expected. He can have trouble following instructions that are given verbally or contain several steps.

He does better sitting at the front of the classroom and is particularly distracted by fluorescent lights. Handwriting is difficult for Mason, but he can work well when allowed to use the computer.

Mason can find it difficult to communicate his needs, which can be extremely frustrating for him. When anxious he can shutdown and find it difficult to talk, preferring to use the communication apps on his iPad.

He uses a picture schedule during the school day. He is anxious about changes to his routine, and can become fixated on doing things in a particular order. Always give advance warning of any changes where possible.

When Mason is having trouble coping he will often bite his fingers or try to leave the situation. If upset, he will feel calmer if allowed to wind down in a quiet spot away from other students. He enjoys stroking soft objects when distressed.

Teacher:

Classroom:

Parents Contact:

Autism Information Sheet for Schools

What is autism?

Autism describes a way of thinking and behaving. It's not a disease or illness, it's a syndrome - a group of behaviours that commonly occur together. In autism, these common behaviours fall into three groups:

Communication difficulties

Examples: Talking later than usual, having one-sided conversations, repeating chunks of things that have been overheard, taking things literally, using a monotone voice

Trouble interacting with other people

Examples: Not making eye contact, finding it hard to make friends, not wanting to share enjoyment with others, having trouble recognising emotions

Limited interests and repetitive behaviours

Examples: Needing things to be done the same way or in the same order, being obsessed with a topic or object, repeating the same body movements

Why is autism called a spectrum?

Not every autistic kid does these things in the same way, and this is where the idea of a spectrum comes from. The different combinations of behaviours with their varying impacts and outcomes blend together into a range, much like the colours of a rainbow, with no clear boundaries to show where one group stops and the next one begins.

At one end of the autism spectrum you might have kids who can't talk at all and are severely intellectually delayed, while at the other end sit those kids with autistic behaviours who are clever and able to function quite well in their day-to-day life. There are many different colours of autism between these two extremes.

Some of these groupings of autistic behaviour have been singled out to have their own sub-category of diagnosis: Autism, Aspergers and PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified).

How common is autism?

The CDC estimates that as many as 1 in every 88 kids in the US is autistic.

Getting To Know You Sheet For Parents

Student's Name:

Parent's Names:

What would you say are your child's areas of strength?

What things does s/he find difficult?

Does s/he have sensory issues that I can help with?

What did s/he like best about your last classroom?

Is there anything s/he had particular trouble with?

Is there anything about this classroom that you think might be a problem?

How does s/he feel most comfortable communicating?

What are the signs that s/he isn't coping?

What should I do when that happens?

Are there particular triggers which might lead to a meltdown?

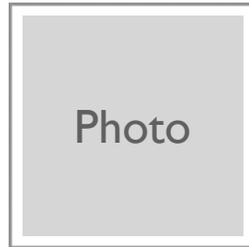
What does s/he like to do at home?

Is there something s/he finds particularly motivating?

What kinds of rewards work best?

What's the best way for me to keep in contact with you?

Sample Relief Teacher Cheat Sheet



Mason Anderson

Mason has been diagnosed with Aspergers and is allocated an assistant for four mornings a week. Her name is Ashleigh and she is in the class on Monday through Thursday until lunchtime. She takes her break at 11:30 so that she is free to help Mason in his lunch break.

Mason has settled down well into the classroom and generally doesn't have much problem following rules when he understands what is expected. He can have trouble with instructions that are given verbally, so we write them out for him on the Things To Do board on his desk.

During free play time he uses a choice board which is on the top shelf of the books cupboard. For any activity on the floor he uses a carpet square mat, which is in the drawer with his name on at the back of the room - he can collect it himself.

Handwriting is difficult for Mason so he usually either scribes to Ashleigh or uses the computer to type out his answers.

Mason can find it difficult to communicate his needs, which can be extremely frustrating for him. When anxious he can shutdown and find it difficult to talk, preferring to use the communication apps on his iPad.

The change in routine with me away might cause him to become anxious. When he's having trouble coping he will often bite his fingers or try to leave the situation. If upset, he will feel calmer if allowed to wind down in a quiet spot away from other students. He also enjoys stroking soft objects when distressed.