

Creating a positive environment for the people on the autism spectrum

Getting started

Creating a positive environment for people on the autism spectrum can really make a difference to everyday life. Whether you're on the spectrum yourself or are caring for someone on the spectrum these guidelines can help you to see where you can make changes to improve the environment.

General Guidelines

Ensure where possible that the environment for the autistic person provides:

- Predictability
- Meaningful communication
- Manageability

Use the following points to help you set up a positive environment:

- If you're prepared for the person, it's much easier to avoid problems. Avoiding problems is easier than trying to fix them afterwards.
- Help the person understand their strengths and how to work on their weaknesses.
- Set up the environment in a way that facilitates communication and reduces frustration.
- Help people compensate for difficulties they may encounter or experience.

- Become aware of ways in which you need to modify your own behaviour.
- Set realistic and achievable expectations.
- Acknowledge that there will be tough moments! Try to remember that the autistic person is probably not trying to be difficult. The world is very confusing for them and their attempts to navigate it can cause frustration for them and you.
- Aim to teach the person strategies so they can be independent.



Essential tips for supporting an autistic person

1. **Structure:** rules, schedules, time tables, checklists, task-based activities, and concise questioning all help provide a structured environment that will aid decision making and task focus.

Meaningful communication: sometimes words can be very difficult for a person on the spectrum as they tend to be visual thinkers. Communication systems such as signs, picture cards and “situational narratives” can help in getting your message across. If unsure, check that what you have communicated has been understood. Use Who, What, When, Where, and How to establish context.

2. **Predictability:** Change must be introduced in a clear and concrete manner, and constant reassurance should be given. The persons’ ability to generalise skills from one environment to another may not be well-developed, so don’t assume a learned skill will be transferred (or punish the person for failing to transfer skills). Prepare the person. Give warning of change – tell the person what will be happening next, and what they will be expecting to do when finishing and starting activities/tasks.

3. **Manageability:** it is important for autistic people that tasks are broken down into manageable steps with realistic goals. Be aware that a persons’ behaviour usually has a purpose, so look for the motivation, incentive, or reward that is available to them. Teach the person an appropriate way to ask for help. Praise successful outcomes. Be mindful of the person’s stress level. Teach ways to express or show feelings, so you can prompt appropriate action before an outburst or episode of withdrawal.

4. **Positive Support:** people on the autistic spectrum can have low self-esteem, so it’s important they feel supported. It’s more effective to use a reward system for good behaviour (i.e. stars), rather one for bad behaviour (i.e. cross’s), and change what you say to suit this (for example, “I’d love to see how well you can hold my hand” not “You must hold my hand!”). Reinforce all attempts at positive communication.

5. **Mutual Trust:** people on the spectrum need to trust the people who are helping them interpret their environment. Showing respect for the person and confidence in your ability can help them feel more comfortable in the environment.



Helpful hints

- Provide a predictable environment and routine – a routine board or daily calendar can be helpful.
- Prepare the person for changes in advance.
- Where possible introduce changes gradually and with visual information.
- Use visuals to aid understanding.
- Make instructions brief and concrete.
- Use everyday situations to teach appropriate behaviour.
- Encourage and praise appropriate behaviour, you can also use a reward.

- Use interests or preferred activities as rewards if other rewards fail to motivate.
- As difficult as it may be, remaining consistent, persistent and calm is the best method. Allow yourself some time to build up these skills.
- Allow the person some “downtime” upon returning home from school or other socially and sensory demanding activities. This downtime may be organising a favourite activity or simply allowing them to watch television or stay inside their room.
- As consistency is very important to the overall success of strategies, try to make sure that all significant adults or older siblings are aware of any new rules, strategies and consequences for your child, so that your child is well supported and won't become too confused.

©2017 Amaze

Permission is granted for the content of this information sheet to be reproduced in its entirety, provided Amaze is acknowledge as the source. Content is provided for educational and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional.