

# *Autism and Inclusion at Kindergarten*



# Welcome

*This practical resource is aimed at early childhood teachers across Victoria.*

In this resource we use the words “Autistic children” to include all children who have a diagnosis of autism. This is because we use identity first language.

We understand that people use different words to describe autism and Autistic children and respect people’s right to choose how they describe themselves. We recommend that you ask the child’s family or carer how they refer to their child’s diagnosis and use the same language.

You play an important role in the lives of children and their families. Kindergarten is a vital pathway for supporting children’s learning and development and for raising concerns about a child’s development.

If you have an Autistic child at your kindergarten this booklet has ideas to help guide you as you plan for an inclusive environment.

At the back you’ll find two templates and an example resource sheet that you can photocopy to use with Autistic children and their families.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) provides guidance to early childhood teachers through nine practice principles. While all the principles are relevant for inclusion we focus on; Partnerships with families, High expectations for every child and Equity and diversity.

Amaze developed this resource in collaboration with Dr Karen McLean at the Australian Catholic University, Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) and early childhood teachers. We thank the Department of Education and Training for funding this resource.

## Contact Amaze

[www.amaze.org.au](http://www.amaze.org.au) • 1300 308 699 • [info@amaze.org.au](mailto:info@amaze.org.au)

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# Autism in children at kindergarten

*Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition with signs that appear from birth. We use the term "autism" in this resource to refer to 'autism spectrum disorder.'*

## *Children diagnosed with autism have;*

- Differences in social communication and social skills
- Repetitive routines in behaviour, interests or activities and differences in sensory processing.

Each Autistic child has individual needs. What works for one Autistic child may not work for another.

## *Let's meet some four and five year olds.*

Yusuf spends his time at kindergarten talking to the teacher and other adults about his favourite topic – dinosaurs. He knows a lot about dinosaurs! Yusuf often plays with dinosaur toys and doesn't like other children to play with them.

Charlotte plays with other children at kindergarten and often directs the play of the other children. She likes everyone to keep to her rules and problems arise when her peers want to change the rules as she can't negotiate with them.

Yusuf and Charlotte are both Autistic and their autism affects them in different ways.

## *Autism affects the development of play skills.*

These include; sharing toys, taking turns, copying actions, trying new things, communicating with others and imagining what others are feeling and thinking.

Autistic children may only play with one or two toys and repeat the same actions the same way each time. Play is important for learning and Autistic children can learn how to play in different ways.

There are many ways to teach play skills to an Autistic child. You can ask the child's family and the child's therapists for suggestions. The Best practice inclusion: Learning environments and opportunities section in this resource has some ideas too.

## *Like to know more about autism?*

Find out more from:

- **Department of Education and Training.** Go to [www.education.vic.gov.au](http://www.education.vic.gov.au) and search 'autism'.
- **Amaze.** Support for families and early childhood teachers is available via the Amaze Autism Advisor Service call 1300 308 699, email [info@amaze.org.au](mailto:info@amaze.org.au) or go to [www.amaze.org.au](http://www.amaze.org.au)



## *Girls & autism*

Currently, three times as many boys are diagnosed as girls. This may be because autism can present differently in girls with good language skills. Also, the tools used to diagnose autism are geared toward more typically male presentation. This is a concern as undiagnosed Autistic girls may miss out on the support and services they need.

Some research has suggested that signs of autism in girls can be more subtle.

### **For example, girls may:**

- Copy social skills;
- Try to change their Autistic characteristics, and find this tiring;
- Seem to have stronger language and social communication skills than Autistic boys, but have more problems making and keeping friendships than Autistic boys;
- Have special interests that are similar to girls their age but play in different ways;
- Internalise their anxiety or talk about their emotions;
- Be labeled as shy or passive.

## *Best practice inclusion:*

# *What is inclusion?*

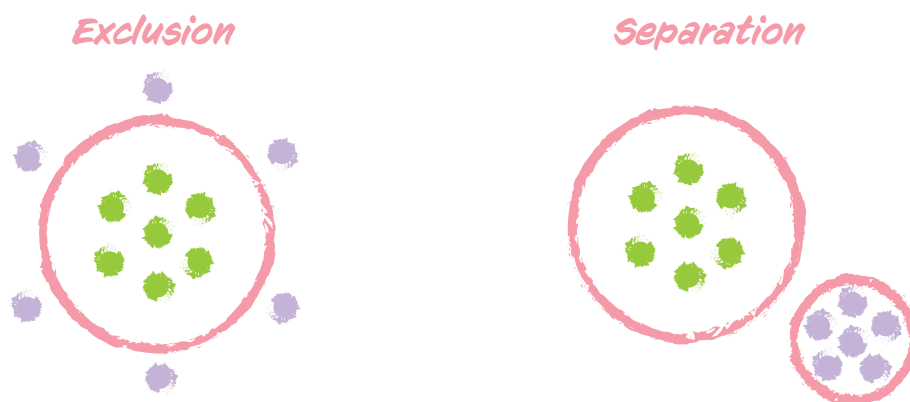
*The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) gives the following definition of inclusion:*

Inclusion involves taking into account all children's social, cultural and linguistic diversity (including learning styles, abilities, disabilities, gender, family circumstances and geographic location) in curriculum decision-making processes. The intent is to ensure that all children's rights and experiences are recognised and valued, and that all children have equitable access to resources and participation and opportunities to demonstrate their learning and to value difference.

Inclusion links to the VEYLDF practice principle of Equity and diversity "when children experience acknowledgment of and respect for diversity, their sense of identity becomes stronger."

In the diagram (below) the purple dots represent Autistic children, the green dots represent typically developing children and the circle represents the learning environment at kindergarten. The diagram shows that of the four different scenarios only inclusion provides equal access and opportunity for Autistic children to learn alongside their peers at kindergarten.

An inclusive learning environment is one where the early childhood teacher recognises the strengths, abilities and support needs of all children.



*Best practice inclusion:*

## *Learning environments and opportunities*

*Learning environments and opportunities is a key focus for best practice kindergarten inclusion.*

It links to the VEYLDF practice principle of high expectations for every child to “recognise that every child learns from birth, but some children require different opportunities, spaces and specific supports, in order to learn effectively and thrive.” VEYLDF, 2016.

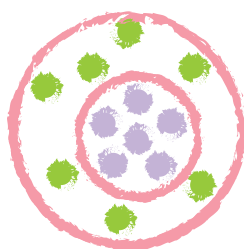
The opportunities, spaces and specific supports that each Autistic child needs can be guided by the information that you gather from communicating with families, see page 14 and the child’s SMART goal(s), see Inclusion resources on page 16. Families may provide strategies from therapists, such as Occupational Therapists, Speech Pathologists or Psychologists. Kindergarten can provide opportunities for Autistic children to practice the skills they are focusing on with their Occupational Therapist, Speech Pathologist or Psychologist.

The aim is to facilitate a coordinated approach with the family and other professionals supporting the child to ensure a consistent approach to education.

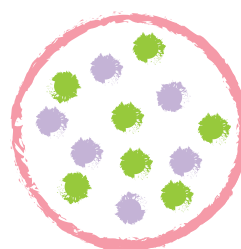
### *Visual Supports*

An example of a specific support that can help Autistic children to learn and thrive is visual supports. Many Autistic children have difficulties with language and communication and visual supports can be used to promote better understanding and learning opportunities. Visual supports can be helpful for Autistic children because they reduce processing time and support Autistic children to maintain focus.

*Integration*

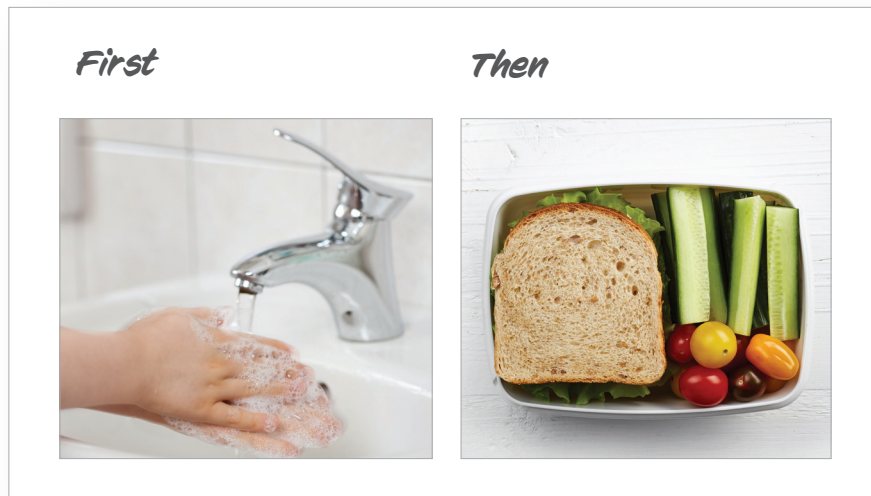


*Inclusion*





*This is a First/Then visual support. It can be used to communicate a routine, for example: First washing hands, Then eating lunch.*



Photographs of the actual item or task are the most concrete form of visual support, but you can also use illustrations.

### *When to use a First/Then visual support:*

A First/Then visual support can be used for any activity that has two steps. In our example, we've chosen to put the non-preferred activity - hand washing - first before the preferred activity - eating lunch. This may increase an Autistic child's motivation to complete the non-preferred activity because he or she can see that the preferred activity will follow.

### *How to use a First/Then visual support:*

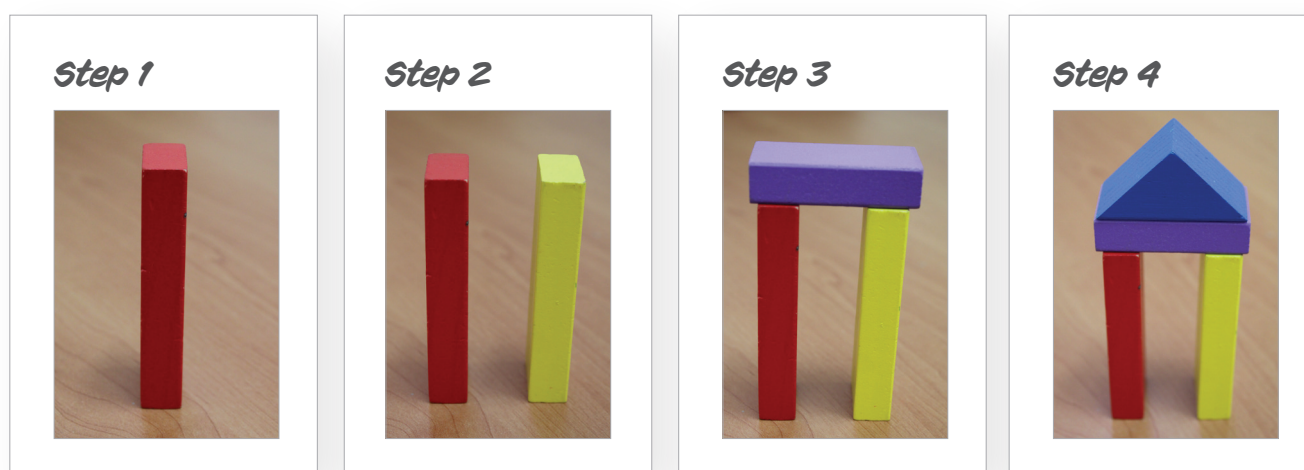
1. Seek advice from the child's family, carers and other professionals and decide whether a First/Then visual support will help the child achieve their goals.
2. Print or photocopy the template for a First/Then visual support on page 18 of this resource. Take photos of the two steps or find illustrations using the links to Visual support resources on page 17. Laminate the template and the photos, or illustrations, for durability.
3. Attach the photos or illustrations to the template with Blu tack or velcro dots.
4. Attach the First/Then visual support to the wall or put it on a table.



*Best practice inclusion:*

## *Learning environments and opportunities*

*Another type of visual support is a task analysis.*



*This is a photo of a task analysis for playing with blocks. Each step is numbered in order next to a photo of what to do with the blocks at that step. Although there are four steps in this task analysis you can change the number of steps to suit the child's needs. You might use this type of visual support to help an Autistic child learn to play with blocks.*

### *When to use a task analysis:*

A task analysis can be used when an autistic child needs support to follow a series of steps.

### *How to use a task analysis:*

1. Seek advice from the child's family, carers and other professionals and decide whether a task analysis will help the child achieve their goals.
2. If you have similar blocks you can print or photocopy the task analysis example resource sheet on page 19. Or you may like to make a task analysis for another task by taking your own photos.
3. Laminate the printed task analysis for durability.
4. Choose the area for the activity and set up the blocks with the task analysis sheet.
5. Decide whether the child needs you to model the activity first.
6. If you need to model the activity, go slowly and show the child that you are following each step.

This task analysis can be used for one to one interaction between you and the child. You could each have a set of blocks and build your own block structure, or you could take turns to add blocks at each step and make a block structure together.

*Best practice inclusion:*

## *Learning environments and opportunities*

### *Quiet play areas*

Adjustments to the physical environment can make it easier for Autistic children to play and learn.

Opportunities for quiet play and loud play give structure that may help Autistic children to feel secure. Quiet play areas can minimise distractions and support focus. Providing clearly signed areas means that children can choose to move to the play area that best suits their sensory needs.

#### *When to use quiet play areas:*

Quiet play areas allow a space for an Autistic child to go to if they're feeling overwhelmed by the noise and activity at kindergarten. This may help to reduce the stress on their senses.

#### *How to use quiet*

#### *play areas:*

1. Seek advice from the child's family, carers and other professionals and decide whether quiet play areas will help the child.
2. Draw a map of your learning environment and mark the areas where loud play tends to happen. Next mark the areas where quiet play tends to happen. For example, near the books, a quiet corner outside and so on.
3. Decide on where the quiet play areas and loud play areas will be. Draw a new map and share this with the early childhood team.
4. Make and display signs for the quiet play and loud play areas.
5. Show the children the signs and model what to do in the quiet play areas and loud play areas. For example, in the quiet play area the children might talk softly, play with puzzles, read books. In the loud play area children can talk loudly and have opportunities for gross motor play such with heavy blocks, a mini trampoline or outside.

*Best practice inclusion:*

## *Learning environments and opportunities*

### *Special interest or preferred activity*

Some Autistic children have a special interest or a preferred activity, for example playing with trains or animals. You may be able to use the child's special interest or preferred activity to involve them in play with other children.

#### *When to use the child's special interest or a preferred activity to involve them in play with other children*

1. Seek advice from the child's family, carers and other professionals in the child's special interest or a preferred activity and decide whether it supports the child to achieve their goals. An example of a goal may be for the child to build their relationships with their peers.
2. Consider whether the special interest or preferred activity is developmentally appropriate and play-based.

### *How can I use this?*

1. Find a special interest or preferred activity of the Autistic child.
2. Set up an activity based on the interest or preferred activity and invite the Autistic child and one or two other children to play. If the Autistic child is focused on their preferred activity you may look for an opportunity to facilitate interactions with peers and extend their play.
3. For success, work together with the family and the team around the child, with clear goals and outcomes.



**Best practice inclusion:**

## **Learning environments and opportunities**

### **Small group interactions**

Small group interactions provide the opportunity for turn taking. This is an important play skill.

#### **When to use small group interactions to teach turn taking:**

1. Seek advice from the child's family, carers and other professionals and decide whether small group interactions support the child's goals.

#### **How to use small group interactions to teach turn taking:**

1. Choose a simple game at a developmentally appropriate level to practice and master the goal, for example, a memory card game or kicking a ball.
2. Engage two children who are willing to play the game with you and the Autistic child.
3. Model the rules, either visually or using simple language.
4. If an Autistic child finds it hard to wait for their turn try reducing the number of players. For example, the Autistic child might play a memory card game with one other child. Once they can do that you could slowly increase the number of players.

**Environmental cues are another adjustment that can be made to the physical environment to support inclusion.**

One example is to use placemats at the lunch table. This gives each child a clear visual signal of where to sit at lunch time. Another example is to provide a mat for the child to sit on in group time. This also gives a clear visual signal of where to sit when it's group time. These may support an Autistic child to independently achieve a desired outcome.

*Best practice inclusion:*

## *Learning environments and opportunities*

*Large group interactions can be overwhelming for some Autistic children. One way to support an Autistic child in large group interactions is to create structure.*

On the previous page we introduced environmental cues and examples, like a mat to sit on during group time. Environmental cues can help to create structure for Autistic children in large group interactions.

### *When to create structure for large group interactions:*

1. Build on what is known to support group participation for the child from the relationship and knowledge shared by the family and professionals.

### *How to create structure for large group interactions*

1. Choose the large group interaction that you're working on, for example, listening at group time.
2. Decide on the type(s) of structure that you want to add. Examples may be a mat for the child to sit on, a timer to show how long the group will be sitting, picture rules for how to sit quietly. Picture rules may include; hands in lap, sitting down, facing the front, sitting on the mat. You can use photos or go to Inclusion resources on page 17 for links to resources to make visual supports.



*Timers can help Autistic children to know when an activity will end.*

*Best practice inclusion:*

## **Communicating with families**

*Communication with families is the second key focus for best practice kindergarten inclusion. It links to the VEYLDF practice principle of developing partnerships with families.*

Communicating with families of Autistic children helps you to gather “valuable information about their child’s strengths, abilities, interests and challenges.” VEYLDF, 2016.

The information you gather supports your planning cycle in tailoring learning environments and opportunities for Autistic children. You can also use it to seek advice from, and collaborate with, other professionals.

There’s a template for communicating with families on pages 20 - 21 of this resource. This template can be used to guide a conversation around an Autistic child’s strengths, abilities, interests and support needs. The template covers general points that are helpful to discuss with families. You may adapt it and change it as you gain confidence and experience in building relationships with the families of Autistic children.

Here’s an example of the information that a family might provide about their child;

At playgroup Saanvi’s grandmother notices that Saanvi often moves away from the group to be alone. Sometimes people say ‘Saanvi’s just shy’. To avoid bright lights Saanvi wears a cap inside.

Knowing more about Saanvi’s autism can support an inclusive approach at kindergarten. For example, a teacher could make some adjustments to the lighting for Saanvi, or allow Saanvi to wear a cap inside.





***When making a time to communicate with the family of an Autistic child be respectful of their time and privacy.***

Families of autistic children may have extra demands on their time to attend early intervention therapy. It's also good to be flexible with communication. If a face to face meeting isn't possible, perhaps you can talk with the child's family by phone instead.

This meeting may be in addition to the meetings that you have with the parents and carers of all children at your kindergarten.

**Examples of requests to talk with the child's family.**

***When the child is already attending kindergarten***

"When would be a good time for us to talk? I'd like to know more about [child's name]."

***Calling the parent/ carer before the child has started kindergarten***

"Hello, my name is [your name] and I'm calling from [name of kindergarten]. I'd like to make a time to meet with you about [child's name]. The purpose of the meeting is to help me learn more about what [child's name] likes, doesn't like, their abilities and anything that they need help with. Which days suit you best?"

## Inclusion resources

*Department of Education and Training provides a range of support materials for teachers.*

Go to [www.education.vic.gov.au](http://www.education.vic.gov.au) and search 'support materials'

*Including children on the autism spectrum in the Early Years is a free online learning course.*

It supports early childhood professionals to develop a greater understanding of how to include young children on the spectrum in their setting and respond to their learning and development needs. Go to <https://www.vic.gov.au/inclusion-children-with-autism-early-childhood-education-modules>

*SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time bound) goals*

[www.therapyconnect.amaze.org.au/site/wp-content/uploads/SMART-goals1.pdf](http://www.therapyconnect.amaze.org.au/site/wp-content/uploads/SMART-goals1.pdf)

*Spotlight on girls with autism, Yellow Ladybugs*

[www.yellowladybugs.com.au/school](http://www.yellowladybugs.com.au/school)

*Kindergarten inclusion for children with disabilities including support packages and the Preschool Field Officer (PSFO) program*

The Preschool Field Officer (PSFO) program provides support to Victorian government funded kindergarten programs to build their capacity to provide for the access and participation of children with additional needs in inclusive kindergarten programs.

Go to [www.education.vic.gov.au](http://www.education.vic.gov.au) and search 'kindergarten inclusion'

If you have concerns about a child's development contact the PSFO in your region for advice.

The Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) program enhances a kindergarten's capacity to provide an inclusive program for children with a disability or complex medical needs and high ongoing support needs.

*Picture books about Autistic children*

*Me and My Brain Ellie's story or Ethan's story.*

By Antoniette Preston and Kerry Lisa

*Robin and the White Rabbit*

by Emma Lindstrom and Ase Brunnstrom

You may choose to share these books at kindergarten as part of talking with the children about inclusion and without reference to a particular child or children. Disclosure of a child's diagnosis may be a sensitive issue, so it's best to discuss it with the parents or carers of Autistic children at your kindergarten.

# Visual support

## resources

### *Boardmaker*

Is a commercial software that you can use to create printed materials with Picture Communication Symbols. You can sign up for a free trial or purchase a software license. <https://goboardmaker.com>

### *Do2learn*

Provides a range of free picture cards to help you make your own visual supports. [www.do2learn.com/picturecards/overview.htm](http://www.do2learn.com/picturecards/overview.htm)



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### *Book*

Visual Strategies For Improving Communication. Practical Supports for Autism Spectrum Disorders (2011). By L.A. Hodgdon. QuirkRoberts Publishing, MI, USA.

*Go to [www.pinterest.com.au](http://www.pinterest.com.au) and search 'visual supports' to see lots of examples and to source photos.*

*Free stock photos are available at;*

- [www.unsplash.com](http://www.unsplash.com)
- [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)
- [www.pixabay.com](http://www.pixabay.com)

*First/Then template*

<i>Then</i>	
<i>First</i>	

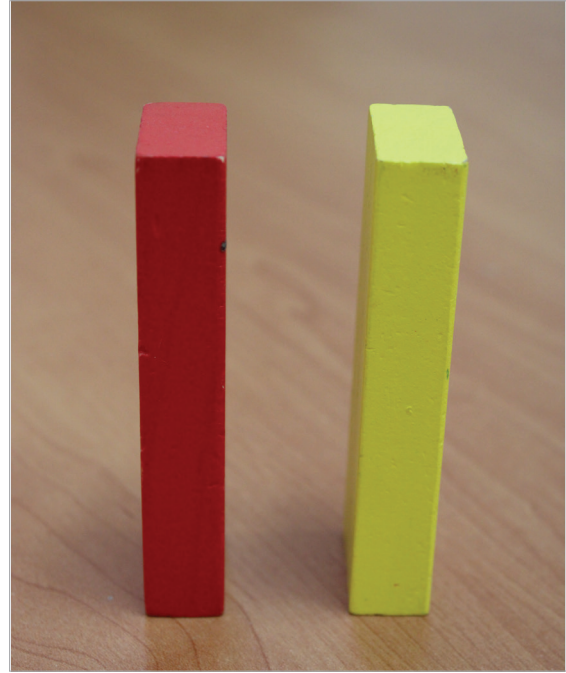
## *Task analysis example resource sheet*

Playing with blocks

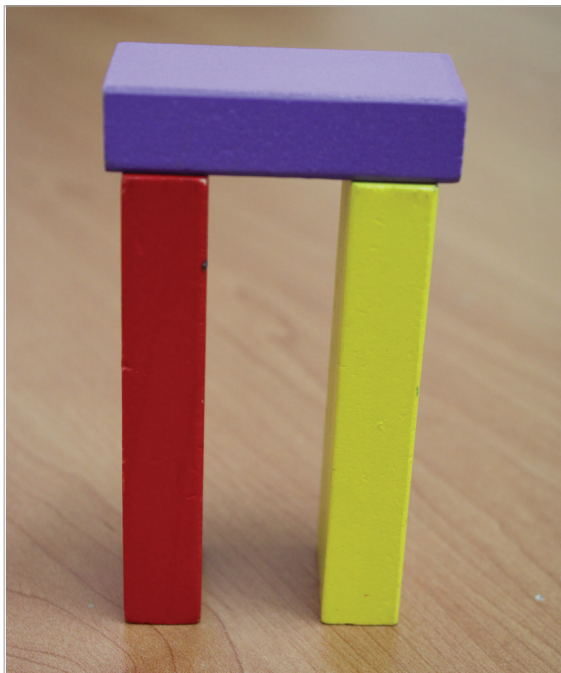
*Step 1*



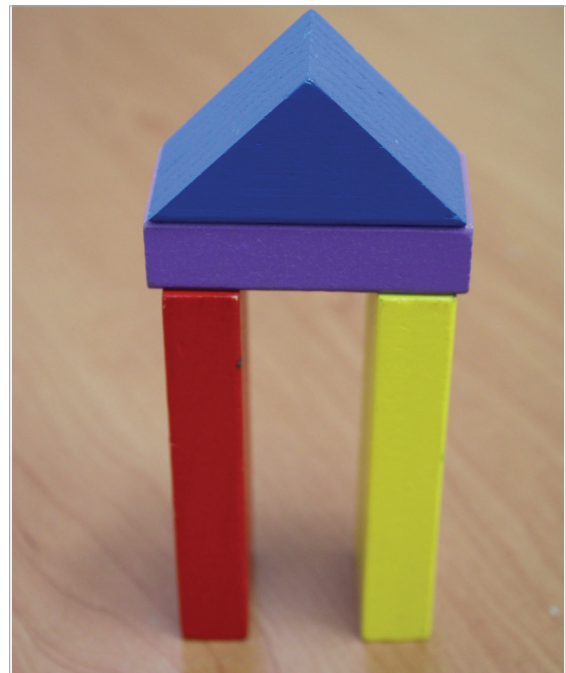
*Step 2*



*Step 3*



*Step 4*



# Communicating with families template

Thanks for coming in. This is an opportunity for me to find out more about (child’s name) and their strengths, abilities, interests and support needs. This will help me to plan and create learning opportunities at kindergarten.

## Strengths

What are [child’s name]’s strengths?

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## Abilities

What can [child’s name]’s do well?

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## Interests

What are [child’s name]’s interests?

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## Support needs

What does [child’s name]’s need help with? (If the family give a long list of support needs you may choose to use the following question to prioritise the child’s support needs.)

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What would you like us to focus on at kindergarten?

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How does your child communicate?

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Does [child's name] work with any therapists?  
For example, Occupational Therapist, Speech Pathologist, Psychologist.

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What strategies have the therapists given you to use at home that could be used at kindergarten?

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Is there anything else we should know at kindergarten?

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***Thank you for your time and input, it's helped me to get to know [child's name] better.***



## *References*

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Raising Children Network (2021) Play and Autistic children, accessed January 2023, <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/school-play-work/play-learning/play-asd>

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