

# Information Sheet: Teaching an autistic student

This information sheet is designed for teachers who are supporting autistic students in their classroom. It provides practical strategies that will help teachers to create an effective and supportive learning environment. The strategies outlined in this sheet can support the learning of all students in your classroom.

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## Getting started

Start by gathering information about the autistic student to understand how their autism may impact their school experience. Learning more about autism is important, but each autistic person is unique and it is essential to think about this in context.

Next, determine what additional supports the student will require (e.g. an educational support officer, allied health input, or specialised equipment). If the student meets criteria, the school can submit an application to the

Department of Education and Training for funding through the Program for Students with Disabilities, or the equivalent for Catholic and Independent schools.

Try to establish a good relationship with the student's parents/carers. The student will benefit from consistency in their lives and this will require collaboration between parents and the school. Schedule regular meetings with the parents and others such as the principal or deputy principal (this is called a Student Support Group meeting or SSG). Consider using a communication book to keep everyone up to date.

Ask the student's parents/carers if they would like you to tell classmates about the diagnosis. There are a number of books for autistic children and young adults that offer tips for effective friendships. Contact the Amaze Autism Advisors on 1300 308 699.

It is good to set up a professional support system which gives you access to knowledge and expertise of other teaching staff and allied health professionals. Seek professional development where possible.



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## Key points for success

**1. Structure:** designated learning areas, clear and consistent rules, timetables, checklists, and structured activities will help provide a secure environment that will improve your student's task focus and ability to transition between activities.

**2. Predictability/Routine:** autistic people like predictability and routine because they help provide stability and security. Changes to routine can be difficult and should be introduced clearly with as much notice as possible.



Your aim is to help teach your student to be more flexible through small, planned changes. Similarly, transitioning between activities can be difficult. A simple and effective strategy is to provide a countdown warning before the transition e.g. "Tom, 5 minutes' writing; then maths". A visual countdown timer will add extra support.

**3. Meaningful communication:** Autistic students will vary in their ability to communicate and understand communication. Some will respond best to keywords only and others will understand more complex sentences. As autistic people may benefit from visual supports, alternative communication systems such as signs and picture cards can assist in getting your verbal message across. Use the student's name and use positive and explicit language when giving instructions such as "Tom, walk on the footpath" instead of "hey, don't walk on the grass". As a general rule, keep your communication clear and concise.

**4. Positive reinforcement:** Autistic students benefit from explicit and immediate positive reinforcement. They may not respond to your regular reward system or to verbal praise. Find out what motivates your student. Focus your attention on rewarding positive behaviour and identifying your student's strengths.

**5. Consistency:** Ensure that all staff members are consistent in their approach and use of specific strategies with the student. This is particularly important for behaviour related strategies. Use your student's Individual Learning Plan (ILP) as a plan for sharing this information.

Teachers sometimes make the mistake of withdrawing strategies when the student is doing well. Be consistent at all times and do not remove or alter strategies without considering the effects. Even if a student appears to be doing well, the supports may still be necessary. Any change to supports or routines should only take place following careful planning.

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## Creating an autism-friendly classroom

### Physical environment

Create designated learning areas that are clearly labelled and set up with relevant equipment.

Many autistic people have difficulty processing sensory information. Noise and visual stimuli can be distracting, resulting in frustration and off task behaviour. Minimise background noise and visual stimuli, including wall and hanging displays. Consider allowing the student to use headphones or earmuffs at times.

Choose the student's seating position carefully, thinking about access to equipment, who they will sit next to, and ways to reduce visual distractions.

Provide a 'quiet space' (such as the reading corner).

Display a class timetable and refer to it at each transition. Your student may prefer a smaller version at their desk or a picture version where lessons/activities can be marked off when finished.

### Learning environment

Your student should be working towards the same learning goals as other students, but activities may need to be modified or presented differently to give them better access and support e.g. fewer words and more visuals, templates for structure, clear start and finish points, use of an iPad or other assisted technology device.

Break activities into manageable and sequential steps.

Differentiate between independent activities (easy/manageable) and supported activities (difficult/new).

Incorporate your student's favourite topic or special interest as a means of motivation.

Refer to your student's ILP and incorporate opportunities for them to achieve these individual goals throughout the school day/week.

Autistic people may have difficulty generalising skills. This means they may not automatically transfer skills and information learned in one context to another context. The context includes the place (e.g. home, classroom or playground), people (e.g. parent, regular teacher or casual teacher), and materials (e.g. work book or iPad). You may need to reinforce or re-teach certain skills where relevant.

Your student may require 'rest or reward breaks' during or at the end of lessons, depending on their ability to sustain attention and motivation. It is better to schedule these breaks beforehand, rather than waiting for off task behaviour to occur.

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## Communication environment

Be sure you have your student's attention before giving instructions or asking questions.

Allow time for information to be processed (your student may need thinking time before responding to questions).

Use language that is simple, clear, and appropriate to your student's ability.

Use gestures and modelling to help understanding.

Avoid giving mixed messages (often our non-verbal cues and verbal cues do not match; this is confusing for people on the spectrum).

Use Who, What, When, Where and How to establish context. These are also great question starters to check your student's level of understanding.

When checking if your student understands, ask them to rephrase instructions in their own words. Do not assume your student has understood if they repeat the instruction word-for-word.

Autistic people may have difficulty with problem-solving so your student may not spontaneously ask for help when required. Teach them context- appropriate ways to ask for help. Some students may find it easier to use a visual cue such as a sign that hangs off their desk/ table edge. Teach your student that, even after asking, they might need to 'wait' for your help as you might be busy. A student who finds it difficult to 'wait' should know what they can do while waiting (such as sit quietly and look at a book). Be vigilant if your student uses a visual cue to ask for help, keeping them waiting too long may result in negative behaviour/loss of motivation.

## Social-emotional environment

Many autistic people experience anxiety. The way this presents in the classroom is often misinterpreted as misbehaviour. The following examples can indicate distress: talking repetitively about the same topic, repeatedly asking the same question for reassurance, an increase in repetitive motor movements like spinning or hand-flapping, complaining about tummy pain, or trying to block out the outside world (either by withdrawing, or making enough noise to drown other things out). Be mindful of your student's stress indicators (parents/carers can help you identify these).

Autistic people can have difficulty managing their emotions and reading other people's emotions. This can result in inappropriate responses, which in a classroom setting can impact your student socially. Teach your student how to identify and respond to common emotions. It may be necessary to seek support from a psychologist or speech pathologist.

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## Social emotional environment continued

Autistic people may find social rules difficult to understand. Support your student in making and sustaining friendships. Whole class lessons about friendship and role playing common social situations are helpful.

Recess can be a difficult time for autistic students due to the core difficulties of social interaction and sensory processing. They may be unsure of how to join a game and how to follow the rules. They may also have trouble with all the chaos, noise and movement in the schoolyard. Structuring recess into part supported social play and part independent play/rest can reduce uncertainty and anxiety. You may like to offer a choice of activities and play partners (using a visual choice board) for your student to choose from before each recess. This is also a great strategy for ensuring your student tries a range of activities and plays with different students.

'Check in' with your student after recess. Allowing time to discuss experiences (both positive and negative) will mean your student is less likely to dwell on them throughout the day. It also highlights potential teaching opportunities. This is useful for all students so why not try a whole class debrief after recess?