



# **Building positive relationships with parents and carers of Autistic students**

## **For parents and carers of non-Autistic students**

Everyone has a place at school and the right to a quality education. Autistic students and their families face more barriers to equal access within schools compared to their nondisabled peers, including with friendships and social connections.<sup>1</sup>

You can promote disability inclusion in schools by talking and forming relationships with these families and learning about Autistic students' needs.

<sup>1</sup> Lodder, A, Papadopoulos, C, Randhawa, G 2019, 'The development of a stigma support intervention to improve the mental health of family carers of autistic children: suggestions from the autism community', *European Journal of Mental Health*, vol. 14, pp. 58-77.

## What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disability that affects how a person interacts with and experiences the world. Like all people, Autistic people have strengths and weaknesses. Autistic people tend to be different to non-autistic people in the ways they think, move, process sensory information, communicate and socialise. Every Autistic person is different in terms of their traits and what being Autistic means to them.

## Can I tell if someone is Autistic?

It may not be obvious to you that someone is Autistic just by looking at them. Autism is neurodevelopmental, which means related to the brain, and doesn't have physical features. Some Autistic people learn to camouflage their traits to blend in, this is called 'masking'. Any Autistic person may mask. It is especially common with Autistic gender diverse people, Autistic women and Autistic people of colour.

## How can I best support a parent/carer of an Autistic child in my school community?

Starting conversations about unfamiliar topics and experiences can sometimes feel uncomfortable and challenging. This guide has information and strategies you can use when engaging with parents/carers of Autistic students about their experiences, and to accommodate their young person's support needs in a confident and respectful manner.

**“If you've met one Autistic person, then you've met one Autistic person.”**



2 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, ABS, viewed 6 July 2023, .





# Having respectful conversations

## **Gauge their comfort levels**

It's important to check if someone is comfortable sharing their experiences before asking them personal questions. Many families of Autistic people have faced stigma after sharing their experiences with others, so may not want to share or will be hesitant about doing so, while others may be very comfortable sharing. Respect their boundaries if they say no. Asking open-ended questions and listening to how people self-describe their experiences can help build shared understanding and connection. It also helps you to avoid making assumptions about what they need or how they feel about their experiences.

## **Respect their privacy**

If a parent/carer shares with you that they or their young person is Autistic, respect their privacy and choice in how and if they share this with others. Avoid sharing their diagnosis with other parents or your young person without getting permission first.

## **Here are some examples of questions you can ask:**

**Would you like to talk about it?**

Gives them the chance to share whether they are comfortable sharing their personal experiences.

**Are you comfortable sharing your experiences?**

It is okay to share that you don't understand something. It helps the other person know where you are coming from and signals you aren't making assumptions.


**Is there a way I can support you?**

Directly asking how you can support them will help you understand how to be sensitive to their needs. It also lets them know you want to build a relationship.

## **Show interest in parents/carers and their young person**

You can show interest in the parents/carers of an Autistic young person themselves, as they are also parents and have likes, dislikes, good days and bad days like everyone else. While there will be parts of their lived experience that are different to yours, some of their experiences will overlap. Many parents of Autistic students say they want to be treated like anyone else and to bond over commonalities with other parents/carers.

You can also show interest and delight in their young person and their achievements. What an achievement or milestone is, looks different for everyone. Their achievements will be unique to them and you may get to learn about what they or their family are proud of. Acknowledging and celebrating these is a great way to be inclusive.



# Including Autistic students and their families

## Extend the invite!

Many parents and carers of Autistic students say that just being invited goes a long way. Invite them and their young person to different events and encourage social occasions outside school. Be aware they may need to say no sometimes, be with their young person throughout the activity, leave early, or cancel at the last minute. That doesn't mean they aren't interested in going. It may mean they have a lot on and can't manage it then. Keep inviting them regardless. Even if they can't go, the invitation itself can help Autistic students and their parents/carers feel considered and a part of the school community.

## Consider what accommodations they may need

Understand the different accommodations Autistic people may need by directly asking the Autistic student (if appropriate) or their parent about accommodations they require. Here are some common accommodations for Autistic students, and what these may look like in practice:

### Common adjustments

### Practical examples

**Give advance notice for social activities.**

Instead of inviting them to see a film the day before, you could organise this with them a few weeks ahead.

**Choose places and activities based on sensory needs.**

Avoid loud noises, bright lights, or overly crowded spaces. Include a 'quiet room' they can go to when they need a break. Find out what their 'safe foods' are.

**Communicate what to expect at a social gathering.**

Let them know the activities you have planned at a birthday party, and in what order. Share information about the venue ahead of time.



### Further resources

To learn more about autism, complete the 'What is autism' free online course on our website.

To learn more about inclusive education, check out our resources.

Remember, every Autistic person will have different needs. Not every Autistic person will need the accommodations listed here, and some may need different ones, so ask.

#### Acknowledgements

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