**In the classroom**

Each [autistic child and young person](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/classroom.aspx#autistic) has individual needs and abilities. Here, we look at the [challenges](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/classroom.aspx#challenges) they may face and [informal ways](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/classroom.aspx#informal) you can help.

We also talk about how they can benefit from more formal [frameworks and strategies](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/classroom.aspx#frameworks).

**Autistic pupils**

There are now many pupils in mainstream schools who have been diagnosed as being on the [autism](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/asd.aspx) spectrum, including those with [Asperger syndrome](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/asperger.aspx) and those with a [demand avoidant profile](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/pda.aspx).

Some may have accompanying learning disabilities or [other conditions](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/related-conditions.aspx) sometimes related to autism, such as [ADHD](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/related-conditions/adhd.aspx).

As an education professional working with children and young people, you will come across pupils who you believe may be autistic but don’t have a diagnosis. You can [read more about recognising autism and planning the right support](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/recognising-autism.aspx).

Pupils with a demand avoidant profile will need differing education interventions and approaches. Find out more about [how to help a pupil with a demand avoidant profile in your school.](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/classroom/pda.aspx)

**Challenges that autistic pupils may face**

Children and young people on the autism spectrum often need [routine](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/obsessions-repetitive-routines.aspx) in order to help them understand the world around them. This means that they can find [unstructured times](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/unstructured-times.aspx) such as lunch and break times particularly difficult.

They need longer to [process information](https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/tmi/stories/processing.aspx) and can also find socialising and [communicating](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/communication/communicating.aspx) challenging. Many want to make friends but find it hard as they lack the expected [social skills](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/communication.aspx). They are often bullied as their peers can lack autism awareness and acceptance.

Some may have intense interests or lack [organisation and planning skills](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/organising-sequencing-prioritising.aspx) that can affect their ability to take part in the school day.

In addition to this, many will have difficulty processing [sensory](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx) information. This can occur in one or more of the [seven senses](http://autismsparks.com/sensory-issues-our-seven-senses/). Their senses can be intensified (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hyposensitive). The degree of difficulty will vary from one individual to another and according to other factors such as mood and levels of stress and stimuli.

Trying to cope with the above during the school day can lead to [anxiety](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/classroom/understanding-anxiety.aspx), [behaviour](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/guidelines.aspx) that [challenges](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/challenging-behaviour.aspx) and [meltdowns](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/meltdowns.aspx). Often, autistic pupils will not show the stress they are feeling while they are at school, leading to [different behaviour between school and home](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/school-home.aspx).

The behaviour of some autistic children and young people can be challenging in school. This behaviour is often due to an underlying anxiety, frustration or [sensory](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx)sensitivity. It’s not always clear what has triggered it, making it hard to control the situation and identify useful strategies.

It’s helpful to monitor behaviour to see if you and the child or young person can start to recognise when anxiety or frustration is starting to build. You can then talk to them about what would help and put appropriate support in place.

**Informal ways you can help**

Here are some simple things you can do to help:

* use a routine they have created, or which has been mutually agreed
* make sure that you [prepare them for any change](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/preparing-for-change.aspx) to their routine
* use [visual supports](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/visual-supports.aspx) to help them better understand their routine and the school day, this can include resources such as a [time timer](https://www.timetimer.com/)
* simplify [communication](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/communication/communicating.aspx) and allow time for them to process information
* try [social stories](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/social-stories-comic-strips.aspx) to develop greater social understanding
* consider the school [environment](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/in-the-home/environment.aspx) and think about how you can make it more comfortable. For example, a pupil who struggles to block out background noise may benefit from wearing [ear defenders](http://www.sensorydirect.com/sense/ear-defenders-1724.html)
* deal with any [bullying](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/bullying.aspx) promptly. If a child or young person is unable to say what happened, then it may help to ask them to draw a picture of an incident
* [teach autism awareness](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/classroom/lesson-guide.aspx) and acceptance
* think about how you can [incorporate their intense interest into lessons](http://www.suelarkey.com.au/media/Motivate.pdf). For example, Minecraft have an [education edition](https://education.minecraft.net/)
* keep a [behaviour](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/guidelines.aspx#purpose) diary/ABC chart
* use a [stress scale](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/visual-supports.aspx#uses) to turn [emotions](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/guidelines.aspx#emotions) into more concrete concepts. [The Incredible 5-point scale](http://www.5pointscale.com/)is a much-used resource
* have an agreed safe and quiet place for autistic pupils to go to when they feel anxiety building or are overloaded by sensory stimuli. This shouldn’t be the same place as where pupils are sent as a form of punishment
* introduce social skills programmes such as [time to talk](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Time-Talk-Programme-Interaction-Reception/dp/1855033097/ref%3Dpd_lpo_sbs_14_t_0) and [socially speaking](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Socially-Speaking-Pragmatic-Programme-Disabilities/dp/185503252X)
* allow autistic pupils to have a time out card or exit pass to indicate to teaching staff that they are feeling anxious and need to leave the classroom
* establish good communication with parents/carers. They know their child best and may be able to suggest interventions to use. The parent may also be autistic - find out about [working with autistic parents](http://network.autism.org.uk/knowledge/insight-opinion/supporting-autistic-parents).

Trying these informal techniques can help autistic children and young people to feel better supported in school.  This can lead to a reduction in [school refusal and exclusion](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/in-education/exclusion.aspx).

However, it’s important to remember that each child is an individual and what works for one autistic pupil may not work for another.  For example, children and young people with a [demand avoidant profile](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/pda.aspx) will need [different education strategies](http://www.pdasociety.org.uk/education/educational-strategies-booklet-from-positive-pda).

**Sensory differences**

Many people on the autism spectrum have difficulty processing everyday sensory information. Any of the [senses](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx##senses) may be over- or under-sensitive, or both, at different times. These sensory differences can affect [behaviour](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour.aspx).

## **Too much information**

Sometimes an autistic person may struggle to deal with everyday sensory information and experience sensory overload. Too much information can cause stress, anxiety, and possibly physical pain. This can result in withdrawal, [challenging behaviour](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/challenging-behaviour.aspx) or [meltdown](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/meltdowns.aspx).

## **Sensory sensitivities**

Here we look at some of the effects of hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to [sights](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx##sight), [sounds](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx##sound), [smells](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx##smell), [tastes](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx##taste), [touch](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx##touch), [balance](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx##balance) and [body awareness](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx##body), and ways you could help.

###

### **Sight**

#### UNDER-SENSITIVE

* Objects appear quite dark, or lose some of their features.
* Central vision is blurred but peripheral vision quite sharp.
* A central object is magnified but things on the periphery are blurred.
* Poor depth perception, problems with throwing and catching, clumsiness.

Ways you might help include the use of [visual supports](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/visual-supports.aspx) or [coloured lenses](http://researchautism.net/interventions/2/coloured-filters-and-autism/Aims%20and%20Claims)

#### OVER-SENSITIVE

* Distorted vision - objects and bright lights can appear to jump around.
* Images may fragment.
* Easier and more pleasurable to focus on a detail rather than the whole object.
* Has difficulty getting to sleep as sensitive to the light.

You could make changes to the [environment](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/in-the-home/environment.aspx) such reducing fluorescent lighting, providing sunglasses, using blackout curtains, creating a workstation in the classroom - a space or desk with high walls or divides on both sides to block out visual distractions, using blackout curtains.

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### **Sound**

#### UNDER-SENSITIVE

* May only hear sounds in one ear, the other ear having only partial hearing or none at all.
* May not acknowledge particular sounds.
* Might enjoy crowded, noisy places or bang doors and objects.

You could help by using [visual supports](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/visual-supports.aspx) to back up verbal information, and ensuring that other people are aware of the under-sensitivity so that they can communicate effectively. You could ensure that the experiences they enjoy are included in their daily timetable, to ensure this sensory need is met.

#### OVER-SENSITIVE

* Noise can be magnified and sounds become distorted and muddled.
* May be able to hear conversations in the distance.
* Inability to cut out sounds – notably background noise, leading to difficulties concentrating.

You could help by:

* shutting doors and windows to reduce external sounds
* preparing the person before going to noisy or crowded places
* providing ear plugs and music to listen to
* creating a screened workstation in the classroom or office, positioning the person away from doors and windows.

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### **Smell**

#### UNDER-SENSITIVE

* Some people have no sense of smell and fail to notice extreme odours (this can include their own body odour).
* Some people may lick things to get a better sense of what they are.

You could help by creating a routine around regular washing and using strong-smelling products to distract people from inappropriate strong-smelling stimuli (like faeces).

#### OVER-SENSITIVE

* Smells can be intense and overpowering. This can cause [toileting problems](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/health/toilet-training.aspx).
* Dislikes people with distinctive perfumes, shampoos, etc.

‘Smells like dogs, cats, deodorant and aftershave lotion are so strong to me I can't stand it, and perfume drives me nuts.’

You could help by using unscented detergents or shampoos, avoiding wearing perfume, and making the environment as fragrance-free as possible.

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### **Taste**

#### UNDER-SENSITIVE

* Likes very spicy foods.
* Eats or mouths non-edible items such as stones, dirt, soil, grass, metal, faeces. This is known as [pica](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/challenging-behaviour/pica.aspx).

#### OVER-SENSITIVE

* Finds some flavours and foods too strong and overpowering because of very sensitive taste buds. Has a [restricted diet](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/health/eating.aspx).
* Certain textures cause discomfort - may only eat smooth foods like mashed potatoes or ice-cream.

Some autistic people may limit themselves to bland foods or crave very strong-tasting food. As long as someone has some dietary variety, this isn't necessarily a problem. Find out more about [over-eating](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/health/eating.aspx) and [restricted diets](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/health/eating.aspx).

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### **Touch**

#### UNDER-SENSITIVE

* Holds others tightly - needs to do so before there is a sensation of having applied any pressure.
* Has a high pain threshold.
* May be unable to feel food in the mouth.
* May [self-harm](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/challenging-behaviour/self-injury.aspx).
* Enjoys heavy objects (e.g. weighted blankets) on top of them.
* Smears faeces as enjoys the texture.
* Chews on everything, including clothing and inedible objects.

You could help by:

* for smearing, offering alternatives to handle with similar textures, such as jelly, or cornflour and water
* for chewing, offering latex-free tubes, straws or hard sweets (chill in the fridge).

#### OVER-SENSITIVE

* Touch can be painful and uncomfortable - people may not like to be touched and this can affect their relationships with others.
* Dislikes having anything on hands or feet.
* Difficulties brushing and washing hair because head is sensitive.
* May find many food textures uncomfortable.
* Only tolerates certain types of clothing or textures.

You could help by:

* warning the person if you are about to touch them - always approach them from the front
* remembering that a hug may be painful rather than comforting
* changing the texture of food (e.g. purée it)
* slowly introducing different textures around the person's mouth, such as a flannel, a toothbrush and some different foods
* gradually introducing different textures to touch, e.g. have a box of materials available
* allowing a person to complete activities themselves (e.g. hair brushing and washing) so that they can do what is comfortable for them
* turning clothes inside out so there is no seam, removing any tags or labels
* allowing the person to wear clothes they're comfortable in.

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### **Balance (vestibular)**

#### UNDER-SENSITIVE

* A need to rock, swing or spin to get some sensory input.

You could encourage activities that help to develop the vestibular system. This could include using rocking horses, swings, roundabouts, seesaws, catching a ball or practising walking smoothly up steps or curbs.

#### OVER-SENSITIVE

* Difficulties with activities like sport, where we need to control our movements.
* Difficulties stopping quickly or during an activity.
* Car sickness.
* Difficulties with activities where the head is not upright or feet are off the ground.

You could help by breaking down activities into small, more easily manageable steps and using visual cues such as a finish line.

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### **Body awareness (proprioception)**

Our body awareness system tells us where our bodies are in space, and how different body parts are moving.

#### UNDER-SENSITIVE

* Stands too close to others, because they cannot measure their proximity to other people and judge personal space.
* Finds it hard to navigate rooms and avoid obstructions.
* May bump into people.

You could help by:

* positioning furniture around the edge of a room to make navigation easier
* using weighted blankets to provide deep pressure
* putting coloured tape on the floor to indicate boundaries
* using the 'arm's-length rule' to judge personal space - this means standing an arm's length away from other people.

#### OVER-SENSITIVE

* Difficulties with fine motor skills, e.g. manipulating small objects like buttons or shoe laces.
* Moves whole body to look at something.

You could help by offering 'fine motor' activities like [lacing boards](http://www.elc.co.uk/Sew-and-Lace-Cards/112864%2Cdefault%2Cpd.html).