

# The Idea: Supporting Autistic Pupils to Thrive

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## What is Autism?

Autism, or Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), is a complex condition that includes sensory, processing and communication difficulties. It is called a spectrum because each Autistic individual experiences it differently.

Autism is not an illness which needs to be cured. Autism is not something that a person 'has'; it is part of an individual and how their brain works. Some Autistic people prefer to describe themselves as neurodivergent. This term embraces the natural diversity of how the human brain functions. If teaching professionals view Autism as something to be embraced and nurtured, it can lead to a positive approach to supporting Autistic pupils.

## What might Autistic pupils find difficult?

Each Autistic pupil's needs are unique and may fall into the following categories:

### Sensory processing and perception

Autistic people often experience sensory input in a very different way to neurotypical people. They may be hypersensitive (over-responsive) or hyposensitive (under-responsive) to sights, sounds, light, colours, textures, smells and tastes. Two additional senses which are often overlooked are proprioception, the sense of body position and movement, and interoception, the awareness of internal body sensations. Autism can affect the awareness of these senses too.

Hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity can result in either sensory avoidance, such as covering ears, or sensory seeking, such as making noises, touching things or rocking. Stimming is the use of repetitive body movements or sounds, either as sensory seeking or as a way of calming the nervous system.

### Language and communication

Many Autistic people have difficulty with language and communication. Around a third of Autistic people are non-verbal, with no or very little speech. Others may find it hard to understand and use body language, tone of voice, facial expressions and figurative language and nuances. Often, Autistic people have difficulty recognising their own and other people's emotions.

### Motor skills

Most Autistic people have some sort of motor difficulty with either hand-eye coordination, left-right body coordination, balance, fine motor skills or muscle tone. This is thought to be caused by differences in how parts of the brain are connected.

### Social behaviours and interests

Many Autistic people have repetitive behaviours, sometimes known as stims. These include the following:

- hand-flapping
- repeated noises
- fidgeting
- repeated phrases
- rocking
- rituals

These behaviours may be used by Autistic people to help with sensory overload, to calm themselves or to express emotion. In a school environment, they can sometimes be seen as disruptive. Over time, however, there has been a change in how these behaviours are viewed and treated. They may serve a purpose for Autistic people and can often be embraced or accommodated.

Restricted interests often manifest themselves through an Autistic person by giving significant attention to specific subjects. These interests and their intensity may be difficult for neurotypical people to identify with. However, recent research has indicated that following these special interests can provide many wellbeing benefits for Autistic people, as well as providing a context in which Autistic pupils can best develop skills they otherwise find difficult (Lalor-Warren, 2021).

## How can an Autistic pupil be supported to thrive in class?

### Get to know the pupil

Each Autistic pupil is unique. Getting to know each pupil as thoroughly as you can is the key to supporting them successfully in the classroom. This diagram shows some of the ways in which you can find out more about an Autistic pupil:

#### SENDCo

- What information do you have about this pupil?
- What plans are in place for their support?

#### Previous teacher/ education provider

- What are the pupil's needs?
- What might they find difficult?
- What support has worked well? What hasn't worked well?
- What are the child's triggers? How do you know if they are struggling?

#### Peers

- What makes this pupil happy?
- What makes them unhappy?
- What are playtimes like for this child?

#### The pupil

- Have informal, regular chats at the pupil's own level, using their preferred means of communication.
- Listen to and observe all their behaviour, as a means of communicating their needs and emotions.
- Keep a record.

#### Parents/carers

- How does your child communicate their needs to you?
- What does your child like/dislike?
- What works well at home?
- What does your child find most difficult?
- What are your child's triggers? How do you know if they are struggling?
- How do you talk about Autism with your child?
- What can we do to help you?

#### Teaching assistants

- When does the pupil seem most motivated?
- What are the signs that they are struggling?
- What do you know about their likes/dislikes?
- What kind of support seems to work best for them?

## A supportive sensory environment

The classroom environment can be adapted in many ways to suit the specific needs of an individual Autistic pupil. Firstly, the hypersensitivities or hyposensitivities of the pupil need to be identified. Incidents of sensory overload can be recorded, alongside possible triggers. Adaptations to the sensory environment can include the following:

- carefully chosen colours
- removal of clutter
- avoiding patterned fabrics
- noise-cancelling headphones
- spacious layout
- resources for additional sensory stimulation, e.g. textured foot mats
- resources to allow stimming in a non-disruptive way, e.g. fidget toys
- careful choice of lighting (no fluorescent lights)
- a sensory retreat

Other environments around the school may also need to be adapted.

## Regular parent/carers communication

Strong links between the school and parents/carers can improve an Autistic pupil's school and home life. This communication should be as regular as possible and can either be formal or informal. Formal communication includes EHCP meetings and regular progress meetings. Informal communication methods might include face-to-face updates at drop-off and pick-up, a home-school notebook, phone calls or emails.

The aim is to pass on any information that will help the teacher and the parents/carers to support the pupil emotionally or developmentally. Autistic pupils may have difficulty in communicating their emotions; parents and teachers can learn to identify different emotions and communicate them during transition times so that the pupil feels heard and understood. There should be plenty of positive feedback and teachers should avoid making parents feel responsible for their child's behaviour in school. Communicating what worked well in a specific situation can help develop transferable strategies to support the pupil in similar situations.

## Inclusion in the class community

The attitudes of other pupils in the class are often overlooked by teachers supporting Autistic pupils. Lack of understanding about Autism can lead to pupils excluding an Autistic pupil socially or even bullying them. If pupils do not understand that Autistic pupils may have different needs, this can lead to feelings of injustice or inequality from parents as well as pupils. If understanding and respect is encouraged, this can result in:

- improved social opportunities for Autistic pupils;
- positive attitudes of parents towards classroom behaviour management;
- pupil perceptions that behaviour management is fair;
- more kind and caring behaviours;
- increased parental satisfaction.

It can be difficult for teachers to balance an Autistic pupil's individual needs with their need to be included within the class. The aim should be to support pupils to thrive within the class, rather than educating them separately alongside the class. For example, rather than creating a separate behaviour reward system, adjustments should be made and support given to enable the pupil to work within the whole-school behaviour policy if possible.

## This Will Help If...

- you want to develop your understanding of SEND
- you want to support an Autistic pupil in your class
- you want your class to have a better understanding of neurodiversity

## Start Your Research Here

The website [autism.org.uk](https://autism.org.uk) is a great place to start reading around the subject of Autism.

This [Twinkl blog](#) has 15 strategies for teaching Autistic pupils in the classroom. It also includes links to related resources too.

Scientific research has driven huge advances in how Autism is understood. [Spectrum news](#) is a reliable and up-to-date collection of research on Autism.

## Action Points

### Get to know the individual

Use the diagram above to carry out a 360 degree information-gathering activity. Find as much information as you can about the pupil. Plan who you can ask and how. Record the information, making links between the different sources.

**What does this information help you to appreciate about the pupil?**

**How might this information change how you relate to the pupil?**

**How might this information help you to plan support for the pupil?**

### Do a sensory audit

Start with the classroom environment and begin to see it from an Autistic pupil's point of view. Sit in their seat and follow the pathways they would make around the classroom. Make notes on light, noise, textures, position and other pupils. Pay particular attention to any times when there is lots of conflicting sensory input. You could move onto auditing other environments, such as the lunch hall or playground.

**What could you do to improve the learning environment for the Autistic pupil?**

**How could you avoid the risk of sensory overload?**

### Develop home-school links

Create a strategy for setting up regular formal and informal communication with the parents/carers of the Autistic pupil(s). Spend some time evaluating current communication channels and talking with parents to find out what would work best for them. Ensure there is a shared understanding of how frequent communication can help the pupil to thrive. Reflect on and evaluate the impact of the new strategy.

**What communication is there with parents currently? How often?**

**What would be the parent/carer's preferred means of communication?**

**How could you build in regular opportunities to communicate?**

### Start with the class

You could start by exploring Autism with the whole class and teaching them more about it. You may be surprised to discover pupils' perceptions of Autism and the impact that these can have upon an Autistic pupil. By teaching them about Autism in an age-appropriate way, you can give them the understanding and tools to be supportive and considerate towards Autistic people.

**Is it appropriate for your Autistic pupil(s) to be present during these sessions?**

**How can you talk about Autism in a way that is sensitive to Autistic individuals and presents them in a positive light?**

**How can you create a classroom environment that values and encourages all types of diversity, including neurodiversity?**

## Source Material

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