

# Autism

## About autism

Every young person with autism is different, there is no 'one size fits all'. Students with autism typically have difficulties with socialising and communicating with others. Although they may have social difficulties they are often keen to join in, they just might not know how. Some students with autism might have lots of language and others might only use a few words or no words.

Students with autism may follow routines and class rules well as they tend to like things to be done in a particular way or order. They may have a favourite activity that they are happy to do over and over again, and they may need warning before switching between tasks.

Some students with autism may find loud noises or particular sounds or textures uncomfortable. As every young person with autism is different, it is important that teachers understand the student's sensory needs, to provide appropriate supports and ensure the classroom environment is inclusive.

## Strengths

### What might be some strengths?

- Some students may have good visual perceptual skills. They might be good at visual searches and recognition.
- Recognising different sounds and music can be a strength.
- Some students may be good at recognising patterns and solving problems.
- Students with a strong interest in a particular topic may have learned lots of information about that topic.

### Where you might provide support?

- Some students might find it hard to fit in socially. They might find it hard to join in with a group. They may find making eye contact unnatural or difficult.
- They may find recognising or understanding the emotions of others challenging without help.



- They might have difficulties expressing themselves or understanding the meaning of things said to them. They tend to learn well with concrete, rather than abstract, examples.
- They might find it harder to understand instructions. They benefit from support in using a skill they learned in one task or context in another context (generalisation).
- They tend to be less unsettled when they are warned about upcoming changes to plans or transitions between tasks.
- They may be sensitive to certain sounds or other sensations.
- Some students may find some motor tasks such as writing or drawing difficult.
- They may become easily overwhelmed and have emotional 'meltdowns'.

## Evidence-based strategies

### Adapt activities to be as inclusive as possible

- **Some tasks may need to be changed for a student.** Where you can, use concrete materials, and provide pictures showing how to complete a task, rather than using abstract concepts.

### Provide lots of opportunities to practise

- **Students may need to practise a task or behaviour many times.** Lots of time to practise in different settings and with different materials can help students learn to use that skill in other situations.
- **Offer fewer tasks with more opportunities to practise.** This helps students to learn tasks and may be more helpful than offering many tasks with little opportunity to practise.
- **When a task is new, students will learn best with help.** Provide them with help (i.e. prompts, demonstrations, encouragement). This can be gradually reduced as they become more capable. Help can be provided by teachers or other students.

### Work collaboratively

- **Provide lots of opportunities for students to work together.** Students with and without autism can get to know each other and build friendships through working together. Students can also learn through watching others. Consider ways in which you can facilitate a student's interactions with others in a group. See [peer mediation](#) for tips on this.



- **When appropriate, give individualised tasks.** Consider giving specific roles or tasks to students in a group if a student with autism is working with tailored materials or instructions. You could also select a student in a group to be a tutor or mentor.

## Best practice tips

### Provide a clear schedule and routine

- Visual cues or schedules can help students understand what is coming up and when they should complete a transition from one activity to another.

### Help students with organisational skills

- Explicitly teach organisational skills. See the AllPlay Learn story how to be organised to help students learn new routines and habits for secondary school.

### Give positive feedback and correction

- Immediate positive feedback and correction when students are learning a task or behaviour can be helpful. This can be reduced gradually as they build their capability.

### Express positive regard and support

- Teacher emotional support and encouragement helps a student with autism achieve better results. Help a student know that they are valued and supported.

### Provide a safe space

- Consider providing a quiet area that a student with autism can go to if they are feeling overwhelmed.

### Ask how to help

- Talk to parents and the young person's support team to find out the best way to work with and support the student. Parents can help you understand a young person's unique strengths and areas they need more help. You could ask parents to complete AllPlay Learn's strengths and abilities communication checklist to find out more information about the student.



## Curriculum considerations

### The Arts

- Students with autism may find loud noises or specific textures in music, woodworking, drama, or art overwhelming. Consider providing choices in activities or materials. Allowing students to go to a quiet space or use noise-reducing headphones or different materials may help.

### English

- Some students may need support with reading comprehension. In particular, because students with autism can find understanding social situations or other people's emotions and thoughts challenging, they may find interpreting the actions and intentions of characters difficult. One strategy that may assist is teaching students how to use reciprocal questioning in peer groups. Consider asking students to work in small groups to (i) guess what may happen next, (ii) identify words that they don't understand, (iii) ask questions about the plot and characters and (iv) summarise parts of the story.
- Some students with autism find pronouns (a word that replaces a person or object, such as I, me, or you) challenging. This is possibly because students with autism often echo other people's speech and have trouble understanding the social rules of language. They may need help to identify the pronouns when reading.

### Health and Physical Education

- Some students may need support with loud or messy changing rooms. Displaying clear change room rules in the change rooms may help. Consider letting a student with autism come to school in their sports uniform or change clothing when the change rooms will not be as busy. See AllPlay Learn's story school uniforms under relevant resources below.
- Adapt activities to be as inclusive as possible.
- For health, the normal sexuality education curriculum can be taught to students with autism. Extra content may also need to be covered. In particular, appropriate social behaviour could be discussed, including appropriate vs inappropriate settings, and who it is appropriate to show affection to.



## The Humanities

- Some students with autism may have much knowledge in an area of the humanities curriculum if it is one of their special interests. This can give them an opportunity to share their knowledge with others.

## Languages

- Students with autism who have communication challenges may need support with learning a new language.
- Assess whether learning a language will be of advantage to them on a case-by-case basis.
- If they are learning a language, focus on areas of strength and build from there.

## Mathematics

- Some students with autism may have trouble understanding maths questions using complex language (i.e. 'Jonny had 368 apples and ate 25' is more difficult than  $368 - 25 = ?$ ). Consider keeping language simple.
- Some students with autism may use the same strategy each time instead of trying new ways of solving a problem. Consider teaching them a range of different strategies for solving mathematics problems. Written or picture prompts can remind them to use that strategy.
- Some students prefer things to be exact, and so they may not like to use estimation.
- Concrete materials and strategies may be needed for some students.
- Lots of time to practise can help.
- Provide positive feedback and provide lots of opportunities to practise.

## Science

- Students with autism may need help to use theory or skills they learn in one task in a new task.
- Some students with autism may have much knowledge in an area of the science curriculum if it is one of their special interests. This can give them an opportunity to share their knowledge with others.



## Technologies

- Many students enjoy digital technology and will be motivated by this subject.
- Some students with autism may have much knowledge in an area of the technologies curriculum if it is one of their special interests. This can give them an opportunity to share their knowledge with others.

## Other considerations

### Planning and organisation

- Consider providing support with [planning and organisation](#).

### First aid

- Consider sensitivity to smells and textures when giving first aid to a student with autism. Some students may be distressed by blood or bandages or refuse to have an ice pack or medication.
- When possible talk to a student or their caregivers to identify the best way to manage an injury/illness.
- Students with minimal language may have difficulty communicating that they are in pain or unwell. Watch for signs of pain such as grimacing and encourage gestures or other methods of communication to work out what may be happening.

### Behaviour

- Identifying the cause of a student's behaviour can help both the teacher and the student feel less frustrated.
- Some common causes of challenging behaviour include difficulty in communicating their wants and needs, feeling anxious, sensory overload, trouble understanding or working on a task, or not understanding rules or expectations.
- Consider sharing age-appropriate stories which outline positive behaviour. Other options include showing videos of positive behaviour or asking others student to model positive behaviour.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the young person and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a young person with managing their emotions.



## Friendships

- A teenager with autism may find understanding friendships and being different challenging. See AllPlay Learn's stories [What is bullying and what to do about it](#), [Cyberbullying](#) and [Monday freak out](#) under relevant resources below.
- Read more about how [peer mediation and group work](#) can support peers with learning social and communication skills that facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities.
- Read more about the steps teachers can take to support a student who is being [bullied or excluded at school](#).

## Starting secondary school

- A student with autism may find moving from primary school to secondary school challenging. Some students may feel anxious about the transition, or experience challenges adjusting to the new routines. These challenges can impact learning and engagement, and so transition support is important.
- Multiple visits to the new school before starting and an opportunity to meet their new 'homeroom' teacher may be helpful.
- Clear schedules and timetables provided ahead of time can make routines predictable for a student.
- Visual supports such as photos of school buildings, maps, photos of teachers and staff, checklists and visual timetables may be helpful for some students.
- Peer buddies can provide social support, in addition to a safe person or place that a student can access when they need support.
- Observe students in a new classroom environment and consider if any adjustments may support their participation, particularly in terms of sensory needs.
- Teaching positive coping strategies for managing emotions may also be helpful.
- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning to a secondary school setting access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).

## Other co-occurring conditions

- Some students with autism may also be experience [anxiety](#), [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#), [Intellectual disability](#) or [oppositional defiant disorder](#).



## Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for students with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for students with autism are:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Student self-monitoring form
- Locker checklist
- Peer mediation steps poster
- Peer information activity book - autism
- Emotion cards (A4)
- AllPlay Learn Story - How to be organised
- AllPlay Learn Story - School uniforms
- AllPlay Learn Story - What is bullying and what to do about it
- AllPlay Learn Story - Cyberbullying
- AllPlay Learn Story - Monday freak out