

In order to work effectively with autistic pupils, it is important for staff to have a good understanding of autism and how it affects the individual they are supporting. Understanding the autism spectrum will help you to see how the ideas in this information sheet fit in with how autism is affecting the individual.

The learning environment

Make sure that the learning environment is clear to the individual. You should outline which chair and table/desk the individual should sit at. For shared desks, make their desk space clear by using masking tape for example. In primary school, you may want to use masking tape on the floor to separate the different areas of the classroom and what they are for.

Visual supports to the curriculum can help pupils with autism to know what is happening and when. Some schools have work stations that a pupil with autism can use to aid their concentration, but a similar environment can be created with the use of book cases or filing cabinets.

Sensory and motor issues

There may be a range of sensory issues to take into account when working with an autistic person. Each autistic person will have different sensory issues, so knowing the individual you are supporting is important. Limit the distractions from wall displays, things dangling from the ceiling or sunlight through blinds.

Sensory difficulties may also make other areas of the school difficult to access, like toilets, the dining room, the chemistry lab, and the art room. The noise of fire alarms, IT equipment or extractor fans can also cause difficulty.

Physical activity can be very good for reducing stress levels. However some pupils with autism may struggle with some aspects of a PE lesson.

For example, team games can be hard for pupils with autism, so rhythmical, individual activities such as running, jumping, cycling or swimming may be a better option. Some people with autism may have motor co-ordination issues, which can make it more difficult to take part in physical activity. Others may have sensory issues which make the noise and smell of the changing rooms or gym difficult to cope with.

Communication

Some autistic pupils may need longer to process instructions and other things that are said. Give them this additional time without repeating things, as this may cause confusion. Ensure that the pupil knows you are talking to them by saying their name at the beginning of the sentence.

In particular, when you are speaking to the whole class or a group that they are with, you may need to address them directly when giving instructions. Say their name and make it clear that the information you are about to give or the question you are asking is for them as well as the rest of the class.

Be clear and concise with your language. Try to make sure you say what you really mean, remembering that autistic people may take things literally. For example, if you say you will be with them in a minute they may expect you to be with them exactly 60 seconds later.

Some autistic people have special interests, which they may be very keen to talk about. This can sometimes become a dominating feature of the conversation. It is important for pupils with autism to be able to talk about their special interest. It is also important that they learn when not to talk about it. Having a set time or a set amount of time built into the structure of the school day may be helpful. Saying "At break time you can talk to me for five minutes about your special interest, but now you must get on with your maths work" may be a useful strategy that enables them both to learn in class, and to prevent misunderstanding with other pupils.

Social interaction

Some autistic pupils find play hard to understand and difficult to join in with. They may need to be taught basic play skills and be supported to learn how to get involved in a game, what to do to be part of a game and how to end the game.

Within the class setting pupils may need clear guidelines on how to take turns, when to answer a question and when to let others answer. Working in groups can be difficult as it is a more social way of working. A buddy system can help with group work so that the individual has someone to guide them through the social interactions.

Break times and lunch times can be stressful for autistic pupils as they are unsure of what to do and how to behave. It is important for teaching and support staff to help autistic pupils develop positive predictable routines during these unstructured times in the school day.

Buddy systems can again be helpful here so that there is not only a plan for break time, but someone in the playground to execute the plan with.

You can also allow them to use the library over lunchtime.

The need for predictability

Some autistic pupils find change difficult to cope with, and it will take time and care for them to handle something new. If timetables can be well structured, including giving structure during free time, this may help keep stress levels down. Sometimes, changes will happen which cannot be avoided. Try to prepare the pupils with autism by talking to them in advance and writing it down. In some circumstances it may be possible to give information about a change in routine via email.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is very important for all pupils as well as autistic ones and it is often difficult to build and maintain. This is an area that teaching and support staff need to be aware of and to work on. Valuing and using their gifts, skills and their special interests are important. People with low self-esteem do not learn well, and it is essential pupils have the best opportunity possible to learn during their school career.

Further reading

Asperger Syndrome: A Practical Guide for Teachers by Cumine, Leach and Stevenson

Educational Provision for Children with an ASD: Meeting their Needs by Glenys Jones

Autism Spectrum Disorders in the Secondary School by Lynn Plimley and Maggie Bowen

Supporting Pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorders by Lynn Plimley and Maggie Bowen

Helping Children to Build Self-Esteem by Deborah Plummer

Autism and Learning: A guide to good practice by Stuart Powell and Rita Jordan

Understanding and Teaching Children with Autism by Stuart Powell and Rita Jordan

Teaching Young Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders: A Practical Guide for Parents and Staff in Mainstream Schools and Nurseries by Liz Hannah