

Autism: Suggestions for school staff

Please note: These suggestions are especially relevant for children with Asperger's Syndrome and High Functioning Autism.

Children with autism spectrum disorders have particular difficulties with social communication that influence their learning and relationships at school. Their specific strengths and difficulties need to be taken into account when designing individual learning plans. Finding ways to include these children and accommodate their specific needs is also important for supporting their mental health and wellbeing. By recognising their special talents and interests, school staff can encourage these children's learning as well as encouraging others to accept and include them.

How school staff can help

Provide a predictable environment

It is important to put in place a structure that defines expectations clearly and prompts the required behaviour routines. A predictable environment will reduce student anxiety, confusion and behaviour problems and lead to better learning outcomes.

Build on strengths

Children with autism spectrum disorders often have specific talents and interests. Finding ways to incorporate their particular talents and interests helps to engage children in learning. Particular skills may also be strengths, such as skills for learning by repetition and rote memorisation.

Adjust language to support understanding

Adjust the complexity of language used to the child's level. Keep in mind the child's difficulty with symbolic language and metaphor and ensure that he/she understands your meaning.

Clarify expectations

Children with autism spectrum disorders may have unusual attentional strategies and unexpected ways of prioritising and planning. They often have limited organisational skills and may need additional assistance when required to conform to a set standard of presentation or performance in school work.

Use written prompts

Using written prompts can help some children with autism spectrum disorders understand and follow task requirements. For example, school staff may find it useful to give a written cue card to reinforce instructions and directions.

Use visual cues

Learning and understanding may be assisted in these children by visual 'scaffolding'. Use a variety of photos, real objects and diagrams during lessons and as reminders for important steps and procedures.

Adapt social requirements

Social requirements in the learning environment should be adapted to the individual child's capacities and strengths. Some children with autism spectrum disorders benefit from time with a peer helper; others may prefer some time working alone.

Teach skills for emotional regulation and perspective-taking

Children with autism spectrum disorders will benefit from a whole-school social and emotional learning curriculum. They are likely also to require additional support individually or in small groups to develop their specific skills, particularly, for example, in social awareness competencies.

Teach children to recognise nonverbal cues

Children with autism spectrum disorders can benefit from specific coaching that helps them learn to notice and respond appropriately to nonverbal cues such as facial expressions or voice tone and pitch.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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