

Teaching autistic students: Strategies for secondary school teachers



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School resources

This research review provides strategies and information for working with autistic students in secondary school settings. The strategies and information are intended to provide a starting point for teachers, and to highlight important considerations when working with autistic students. All autistic students have individual learning needs, which means that strategies will need to be adapted to suit the needs of each student. It is also highly valuable to learn about and be attentive to the individual student's strengths and areas of special interest, so that they are able to draw and build on these areas of strength in all their subject areas. Often a student's special interest can be leveraged to support the student to access areas of the curriculum or aspects of the school programme that they find more challenging.

What is autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference which means that autistic students' brains develop in distinct and atypical ways¹. This is reflected in differences in autistic individuals' social interaction, behaviour, and ways of communicating. Autistic students have brains that are able to make many diffuse neural connections at one time. This unique potential for diverse connections leads autistic individuals to have every busy brains, which may support highly focused and specialised interests, as well as difficulty with unexpected changes and transitions between activities².

The way that autism is defined and described has changed a great deal since it was first identified in the 1940s³. Presently, the correct diagnostic label is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). However, this label can be perceived as offensive by autistic people and their families, and reinforce the negative stereotype that autism means something is wrong and in need of curing. Autism, Autistic Spectrum Conditions [ASC], or autism spectrum are preferable terms⁴.

Some common characteristics associated with autism include specialised and intense interests, a different style of social engagement, and difficulty adjusting to unexpected change or unfamiliar routines. As there is a spectrum of differences related to autism, the range of characteristics that describe an autistic individual varies widely. Although there are common traits associated with autism, it is important to remember that no two autistic people are the same. For a more detailed overview of autism, see [An introduction to autism](#).

Transition to the secondary school environment

Transitioning from primary or intermediate school to secondary school poses challenges for all students. Some of these challenges come from environmental changes such as being in a new place, the size of the campus, a possible increase in student population, the need to move from classroom to classroom, and the increased frequency of school bells. Other challenges include the change in the structure for teaching and learning, the emphasis on assessment, and the more general struggles of adolescence⁵. As autistic students' sense of wellbeing and personal strengths often rely on predictability and routine, it is important to carefully plan for and manage transitions. It is beneficial to include autistic students, their parents, and teachers from both schools in preparing for the transition, in order to share information and plan carefully how best to support the student before and during the period of transition.

Sensory needs. It is common for autistic students to experience [differences in processing and regulating sensory information](#). Sensory information includes sounds, sights, smells, touch, taste, balance, and body awareness (such as temperature). Students may have an under-sensitivity, over-sensitivity, or possibly a mixture of both, to certain sensory information. For example, a student with an over-sensitivity to noise may become unsettled by the frequency and volume of school bells, or the noise of chatter and movement in the corridors in between classes. In circumstances like this, it may help the student to wear noise-cancelling headphones. If a student has a combination of over-sensitivity to noise and too much movement in their sight, then it may help to leave class five minutes earlier than their peers to enable them to reach their next classroom while the corridors are quieter. Each case will need to be assessed based on individual student needs. Primary school teachers, family members, specialists, and the students themselves will be able to provide helpful information about their sensory differences.

Transition visits. The unfamiliarity of a new environment and the demand for students to be flexible can be both daunting and overwhelming for autistic students. Transition visits are a valuable tool to help prepare students for their new school. Transition visits should be arranged in consultation with the student, their family, the primary or intermediate school they are coming from, and the secondary school they will be attending. If other professionals such as speech language therapists or occupational therapists are working with a student, they should also be included in the transition process. Consultation allows for a thorough handover and ensures that relevant information about effective teaching and learning strategies, behaviour, communication, and other additional learning support needs are discussed with all of those concerned.

Buddy systems. Putting a buddy system in place is another strategy that can be used to support students who need additional support during the transition to secondary school. A buddy is usually another student who has the same or similar timetable as the autistic student. A buddy can accompany the student from one class to next, which can lessen anxiety and the demand placed on the autistic student, and may also assist that student in developing new routines so that eventually they can be independent. Teacher aides or other supporting adults may also be used in a buddy-like capacity, although this will not provide the same opportunities for peer interaction. It is important to consider the compatibility of the potential buddy and the student who may require extra support to increase the chances of a successful partnership, and to have a back-up plan in place, just in case a buddy is away. It is also important that everyone understands the purpose of the buddy system. Regular discussions or reviews can provide the autistic student with opportunities to share what they may need, what is working well, or what may not be working for them yet.

Timetables and routines. There are significant differences between daily routines at primary or intermediate schools and secondary schools. In the typical primary or intermediate school, there is a greater level of predictability, with majority of teaching and learning taking place in one class with one teacher. At secondary school, students have to adapt to regular changes in routine. These changes include having multiple teachers in multiple classrooms across the school, shifting timetables where they may have some teachers and some subjects one day but not the next, rotating classes (for example, Maths first period Monday but last period on a Wednesday), and timetables that may be rearranged to suit subject rotations. It may be helpful for some autistic students to colour code their timetable, or use images as well as text, to support them to process the information presented on their timetable, as visual receptiveness is a common strength of autistic students.

The structure of teaching and learning

The structure of teaching and learning in secondary school differs greatly from primary or intermediate school and demands a greater level of independence and time management, increasingly complex academic work to process and interpret, and also a greater emphasis on assessment.

Workload and curriculum. The secondary school workload often requires students to manage multiple due dates for assignment work across multiple subjects, an increased pace of work, and a higher level of thinking. It is important to work closely with autistic students, their families, and other professionals who know the student well to understand how best to design learning programmes that build on the student's strengths while allowing them to access the curriculum and fulfil the relevant assessment requirements. One way to do this is to employ a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach, which offers all students a range of ways to access the curriculum and multiple options for expressing and communicating their learning. For some students, it may be appropriate to create an individual education plan in collaboration with the student, their family, teaches, and other professionals who may work with that student. These plans may include learning goals, support that cover all curriculum areas, information regarding the student's strengths and special interests, and specific adjustments that may be appropriate .

Break and help cards. A break card is a card that students can use when they feel that they need a break from the current environment or learning activity, such as having a few minutes of fresh air to calm anxiety. A help card can be used for students who have difficulty signalling that they need assistance with work or are struggling with a particular part of the intended learning activity. Students can hold up their card, hand them to the teacher, or place the card on the desk in front of them. The cards can use images, words, or colour cards to express what is needed, as in the examples below. It is important for all teachers to understand the significance of the different cards, and to be alert to how the student may use a card to communicate a need.

IMAGE 1 An example of different kinds of break cards

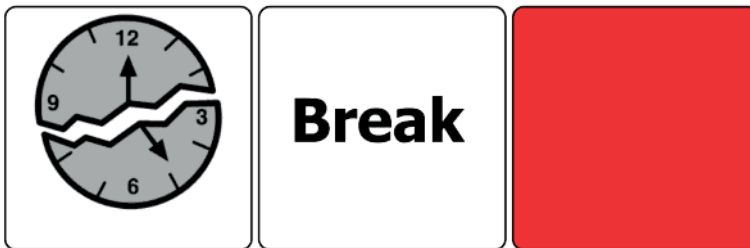
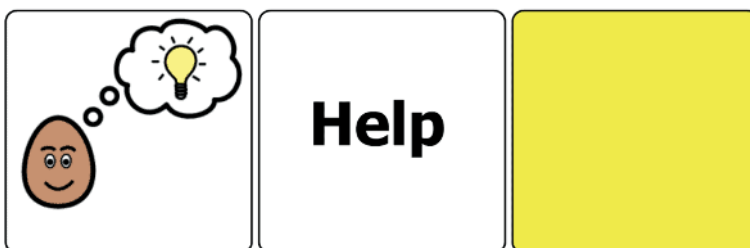


IMAGE 2 An example of different kinds of help cards



Assessment. Many autistic students may need adjustments to the way their learning is assessed for internal and external assessments and qualifications. In New Zealand, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) has specific guidelines for special assessment conditions which cover additional time and environmental needs, reader or writer assistance, and the use of technology⁶. These conditions apply to students for internal and external assessments, although schools must make an application, with supporting evidence, to the NZQA for students to be granted special assessment conditions. In the year levels preceding external assessment for qualifications or university entrance, schools are able to decide assessment conditions for students. It is important to consider being consistent with assessment conditions to best prepare students for assessment conditions they may encounter in assessments for national and international qualifications.

Structured teaching approaches

The design and layout of the physical environment and the use of visual supports are the two key elements for teachers to consider when planning how best to support autistic students. This is because clarity and predictability can support autistic students to understand the way the learning environment works, and what they need to do when they are in that environment.

The physical environment. When considering the physical environment, some teachers and some subject areas will have more autonomy over how their teaching environments are organised. For example, an English classroom with desks or tables chairs can be rearranged in ways that a hard materials classroom with workbenches and heavy machinery cannot. In the secondary school environment, there are some standard considerations that can be made, such as clearly labelling specialist equipment so that students know where resources are kept, having set seating plans to provide the student with stability knowing 'their desk' will always be available, and removing clutter or unnecessary furniture so that the student does not feel overcrowded. Some students may prefer not to sit in areas where there is high foot traffic, such as near the door with people coming in and out during the lesson, or by a large window if another class is playing sports outside. The best way to decide where a student may like to sit, and even who they may or may not like to sit with, is by asking them.

Visual supports. The break and help communication cards shown earlier in this resource are some examples of visual supports. Another way that visual supports can be implemented in the secondary school environment is through the structuring of learning activities. For example, instructions may be given verbally and also in printed form. Furthermore, instructions may be given one step at a time or all at once, depending on the student's ability to process information. Colour coding and obvious differences in text size may also be used to give the written information a clear hierarchy. If necessary, images or symbols may also be used to give the student prompts for interpreting text-based instructions.

Social and emotional skills

Autistic students often will have unique social interaction patterns, which may affect the way they form and maintain friendships, read and respond to social situations, and process non-verbal communication such as messages portrayed by body language and tone of voice. For these reasons, some autistic students may find it challenging to navigate social situations, understand social boundaries, and interpret sarcasm, and they may misread subtle nuances in social interactions⁷. However, it is important to note that recent research has found that differences in communication between neurotypes do not exist to the same extent between autistic people⁸.

These social difficulties can make autistic students vulnerable and easily misunderstood by their neurotypical peers. Therefore, it is important to ensure that teachers, professionals, and other students

are educated about autism and individual students' specific social and emotional needs. This should be done in a gentle manner with the aim of developing a network of support that does not exclude or alienate the autistic student.

Social stories. Social stories are one strategy that can be used to support autistic students to better understand social situations⁹. Research suggests that three types of sentences should be used in social stories: descriptive sentences that state what, where, and why, directive sentences that frame what needs to happen, and perspective sentences that describe the emotions and responses of others associated with the social situation. For secondary school aged students, it is not always necessary to illustrate the social story with symbols or images, but this should be decided based on whether or not the individual student will benefit from the use of visual supports.

Endnotes

- 1 Heyworth, M. (2021). Introduction to autism, Part 1: What is autism? Reframing autism. <https://reframingautism.org.au/what-is-autism/>
- 2 Heyworth, 2021.
- 3 Kanner, L. (1943). Autistic disturbances of affective contact. *Nervous Child*, 2, 217-250.
- 4 Autism NZ. (2022). Autism Terminology Guidance From the Autistic Community of Aotearoa New Zealand (autismnz.org.nz)
- 5 Plimley, L., & Bowen, M. (2006). *Autistic spectrum disorders in the secondary school*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- 6 NZQA (n.d.). Special assessment conditions.
- 7 Blome, L., & Zelle, M. (2018). *Practical strategies for supporting emotional regulation in students with autism: Enhancing engagement and learning in the classroom*. London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- 8 Davis, R., & Crompton, C. (2021). What do new findings about social interaction in autistic adults mean for neurodevelopmental research? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620958010>
- 9 Gray, C., & Garand, J. (1993). Social stories: Improving responses of students with autism with accurate social information. *Focus on Autistic Behavior*, 8(1), 1-10.

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Julie Skelling

Julie is a special education teacher currently completing a PhD at the University of Auckland. She is exploring ideas about inclusion and inclusive pedagogies from special school perspectives. Julie specialises in working with students with autism spectrum disorder and wants to help make research in this area more accessible to a greater number of teachers.