



Autism in Children and Young People

Autistic Play

There are lots of opinions out there about autistic people and playing. You may have read or been told that autistic people won't be able to play imaginatively, or that if they do, they are likely to take longer to do so. You may have been told that autistic children play inappropriately with toys. The fact is that many autistic people play very imaginatively from very young ages! Many of us have vivid imaginations, compose music, write poetry and novels, are amazing artists. Please do not assume that autistic people will be unable to be imaginative.

Sometimes we play in different ways from other people – this is what is often referred to as inappropriate. We would argue that there is no right or wrong way to play.

Autistic play can be:

- Playing with toys in unexpected ways (e.g., spinning wheels on a car)
- Lining up toys (for many of us that is the game by itself)
- Playing with a toy for longer/shorter than you may expect for a child's age
- Word play and puns
- Interest in things you'd expect in a younger/older child
- Repetition, and repetition, and repetition, and repetition...
- Attachment to objects you may not expect e.g., spoons, DVD cases
- Intense/fleeting focus
- Playing in parallel (alongside a friend) or individually
- Sensory seeking
- Stimming (self-stimulatory behaviours)
- Acting out scenes from TV, movies, books etc.
- Echolalia (repeating a word or phrase said by someone else)
- Palilalia (repeating a word or phrase they made up themselves)
- Scripting games before they happen
- Making up own rules for games where there are already established rules
- Taking on other people's personas
- Highly integrated into the game – deep focus
- Organising/sorting items
- Creating patterns
- And much more!



While some of these may look quite different, autistic people around the world play in these ways, and it is an important part of autistic culture. Supporting autistic play is essential for good mental health and it can be done in the following ways:

Accept the way we play

Give us the time and space to play in a way that feels natural to us. We understand that it may be different to other people, but we get a lot of enjoyment out of playing our own way!

Praise creativity and imagination

This will let us know that our natural ways of playing are valued, and our play just as worthwhile as everyone else's. It will also give the person playing confidence that they do have a beautiful imagination when others then repeat the myth that we lack imagination to them.

Support special interests

Special interests are of massive importance to autistic people! They bring enormous joy, help us to regulate, and for many of us can lead to careers in the future.

Parallel play (may or may not turn into co-operative play)

If a child is playing, you can check if they are happy with you to play next to them. For example, if they are playing with some Lego, build a different model next to them. Sometimes this will turn into co-operative play, sometimes it won't, but parallel play is well enjoyed in the autistic community.

Buy toys they are *actually* interested in

Often autistic people will be interested in toys, games, objects, etc., that may be unexpected. It means the world to many of us when we receive gifts related to our interests, even if the interest could be considered unusual for someone of our age.

Don't always wait for special occasions

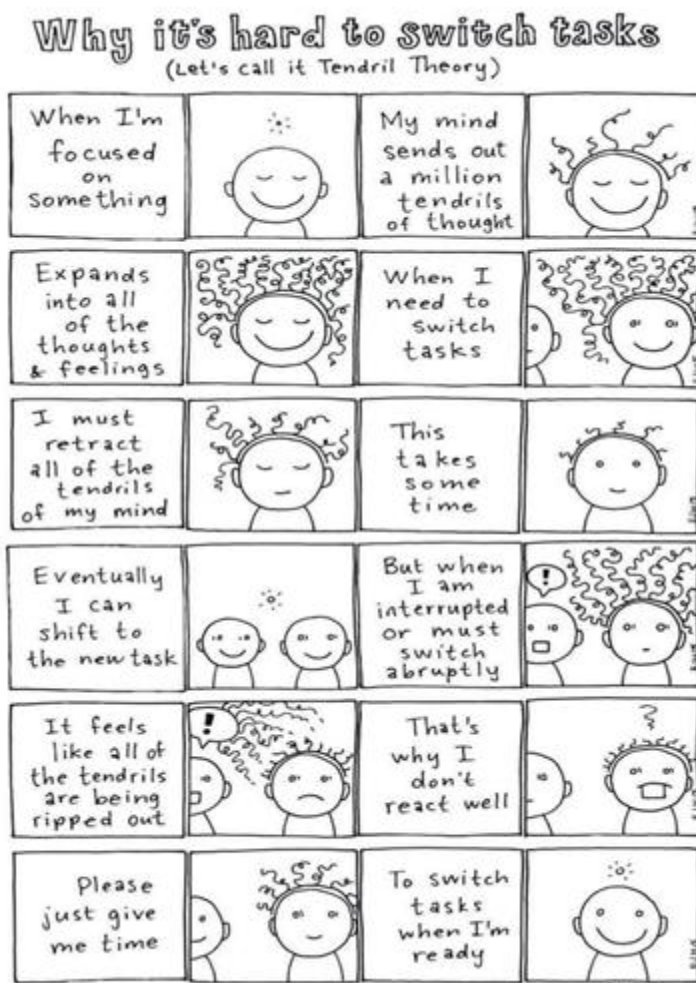
Sometimes special interests pass quickly! We know many families who have bought an expensive gift and keep it aside for a birthday or festival only for the person to have moved on. If the time is right, give the gift.

Some autistic children may not show too much interest in playing with you or friends. That's ok too. Many children like to play alongside other people rather than in a game together and playing different things side by side can be fun too. Watching the child's play and joining in gradually is one way to engage more. Learn their style, copy their actions, and let them see you as someone to play with. If they are drawing, you can pick up a pencil and some paper and draw something they like. If they are playing with characters from a tv show, act out one of the scenes from the show if you know it.

Playing in parallel with a child or young person can sometimes lead to playing together, but sometimes it might not. Showing them that you value the way they play is important – if you are joining them, you are a guest in their game, not the other way around. It is important for us to learn the rules of some games, e.g., board games and sports, so we can play these with peers if we choose to do so, but sometimes finding new ways to play with toys is great fun!

Supporting Transitions

Switching tasks is something that can be difficult for autistic people of all ages. This diagram by Erin Human is an excellent visual representation of why that can be



Pic by Erin Human

For ease of reading we have put the text from the image above here:

When I'm focused on something
My mind sends out a million tendrils of thought
Expands into all of the thoughts and feelings
When I need to switch tasks
I must retract all of the tendrils of my mind



This takes some time
Eventually I can shift to a new task
But when I am interrupted or must switch abruptly
It feels like all of the tendrils are being ripped out
That's why I don't react well
Please just give me time
To switch tasks when I'm ready

There are lots of different kinds of transitions. These can include:

- Going to the toilet
- Stopping for a snack/lunch/dinner
- Getting ready to go out
- *Actually* going out
- Coming home again
- Getting into/out of a car
- Getting into/out of a shower/bath
- Moving to a different room
- Anything where you are stopping one thing and starting another

There are lots of different ways to support the transition. Not all suggestions will work for all people, but consider:

Giving advance notice of when an activity will end. For example, "at 12:30 your lunch will be ready and we will have to pause the game then." If we know how long we have to do something it can help us to prepare. Give notice when it is getting closer to the time – "It's 12:15, so 15 minutes till lunch time." Sometimes visual prompts like timers can be useful here, and it is worth asking the young person and experimenting with a few.

As the time gets closer, it can also help to share their interest in what they are doing. If they are playing a video game for instance, can they tell you what they are doing? What has been their goal? Who are the characters? And you can help them to find a natural stopping point to which they can return.

Let them know when they can return to the task too – if they are putting their book down to have lunch, can they pick it back up again afterwards? If not, when?

Give reasons why this transition is happening. How does this new activity benefit them? If they are pausing to eat, they will be better able to focus after some food. Likewise, if they are pausing what they are doing to go to the toilet.

Answer all their questions about the transition. Yes, they are going for lunch, but what is lunch going to be? Is it at home? Grandma's house? How long will it last? Give choice wherever possible too. Can they be involved in the choice of food, or help prepare it?



Support objects can aid with transitions too. If the transition is going from the classroom to the hall for music lessons, or to the car as you are going to the supermarket, can they take a special item with them to keep a hold of to aid the transition?

Special interests can help with transitions too. If they are going to lunch, is it something that a favourite character ate in a TV episode? Can they do something related to the special interest during the meal?

Bigger transitions may need more work and support.

These can include:

- Starting school
- Moving to a new school
- Moving house
- Divorce
- Bereavement
- New sibling
- Getting a pet
- Developing an illness/disability
- Puberty

Some things that might help include:

- Advance visits to new locations. More schools are now allowing transitional visits, and it can be worthwhile asking if this can be done. Many local authorities offer an enhanced transition from primary to secondary for many autistic children.
- Photos and videos can help ease a lot of anxiety. Just knowing what something looks like can help. If you are visiting a new location ask if photos can be taken, or have a look online and see what is already available.
- Information passports can be helpful for new staff/doctors etc to get to know the autistic person. Work with the autistic young person to put these together. What information does the child or young person think is really important to share? It may be different to what you expect.
- Opportunity to ask questions is essential. Sometimes when we receive a new piece of information, it may take some time to process it before we have questions. It might be the day after we find out we are having a new sibling before we start asking questions about it.
- Peer support can also help big transitions. Does the new school have a social group for autistic students? Does it have peer mentoring? Is there someone like me I can talk to about my concerns? We would recommend all schools introduce a peer support system for autistic pupils.



- Build in down time. Big transitions can be exhausting, and we would recommend everyone involved has plenty of rest as required.
- Consider making a poster or writing a guide for the transition together. Involve them at every stage so they are aware of what is likely to happen and roughly when. This allows them to take ownership over it, and can be referred back to as required.

Supporting sensory needs during any transition, big or small, is good practice. The more our sensory needs are supported, the more relaxed we are likely to feel. Remember that some sensory input can bring sensory bliss, so work with the autistic young person to support their sensory needs. Often sensory input is something that we become anxious about with a new transition – how noisy is it? Are there new smells to get used to? Will people brush past me? Especially during puberty when sensory profiles are likely to change.

How to Have a Successful School Meeting

First and Foremost

We understand school meetings can be stressful for all involved but it is important to remember that most of the time everyone around the table wants what is best for the child.

Different people have different, sometimes conflicting, understandings of autism. When in doubt we advise, checking our website or NHS Inform.

Autism as a Disability and the Legislation

It can be useful to know a bit about the legislation around children and disabled people when going into a school meeting. For more information about autism as a disability, see our Use of Language Page [here](#).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to:

- Freedom from discrimination
- Their best interests being a primary consideration
- Effective access to education
- Their views being respected



The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities states (amongst other things) that persons with disabilities have the right to:

- Freedom from discrimination
- Full and effective participation in society
- Respect for their evolving capacities
- An accessible environment to learn in

On top of the conventions from the UN, we also have the Equality Act 2010. The Equality Act further states autistic children have the right to:

- Reasonable adjustments
- Information being presented in an accessible way
- Recognition of intersectionality

Before the Meeting

Before the meeting even starts, it's good practice to ensure certain things have been done and considered.

- Speak to the child to gain their views and find out if they are happy to join the meeting.
- Ask for/provide an agenda listing the topics to be discussed. All meeting participants can contribute to the agenda.
- Be clear on who is attending and who is chairing the meeting.
- Be clear on who is taking minutes.
- Be clear about when the meeting is due to start and finish. Ensure sufficient time is given to cover all topics required or arrange two separate meetings if that is not possible.
- Ensure the meeting environment is appropriate and meets the sensory needs for all in attendance.
- If needed or desired, arrange for an advocate or a supporter to attend. An advocate is there to support the child's rights and should follow the Advocacy Code of Practice. A supporter can be a friend, family member, or from a charity or organisation the family are involved with (both can be asked to speak up on the child's behalf).
- Feel free to share questions in advance so the person can have time to process the question before the meeting and prepare an answer.
- Check you/everyone has the previous minutes and relevant documentation in advance.
- Ensure downtime is available for anyone who may need it afterwards. Some meetings can be high energy, and not having a break afterwards can be difficult.



During the Meeting

During the meeting it is important that:

- Everyone should be made to feel welcome.
- Introductions should be made where people may not have met previously.
- It may be useful to discuss minutes and progress from the previous meeting if applicable.
- Everyone has access to note taking materials, but someone takes on the role of taking minutes to be distributed following the meeting.
- It's ensured you discuss how to support the child with their strengths, as well as the areas in which they struggle. The child is more than the sum of their difficulties.

Make sure the child feels welcome during the meeting if they have attended. Remember, the child should:

- Be included in the introductions.
- Not be spoken over or ignored (adults should not act as though the child is not in the room).
- Have access to fidget, sensory, or comfort items.
- Asked for their input throughout and not just as an afterthought.
- Be leading, rather than in the centre.
- Not be overwhelmed by too many people (consider who really needs to be there).
- Be well supported if attending an online meeting in school.

It is particularly important for staff to remember:

- That many autistic people only show they are autistic to people they trust. You may not see certain traits, but that does not mean they do not exist. (see also our guidance on [masking](#))
- The coke bottle effect is real (the phenomenon where autistic children hide their struggles all day at school and have a big meltdown once they are home and feel safe)! It is often a response to heavy masking.
- Many parents of autistic children are themselves autistic. The parent may or may not be aware of this, and if they are aware they are not obligated to disclose it. Some teachers and other professionals are autistic too. Again, they may not know, and are not obliged to disclose.
- That different people in the meeting may have different communication styles. Speak clearly, avoid jargon, and allow sufficient time for questions and clarification.
- Sensory needs are real. They do not diminish over time but are dynamic and are influenced by many different factors. Our [environmental checklist](#) can provide guidance to ensure the school environment is as flexible as possible to support varying needs.



- Stopping stimming and/or increasing eye contact should never be goals for any autistic person regardless of their age.
- Autistic social skills are valid. If we are teaching an autistic child about non autistic social skills, we should be teaching non autistic people about autistic social skills too. Spending time with other autistic students can help confidence and allow them to socialise in a way which is natural to them.

At points, you might find someone says something you believe to be untrue about autism. If this happens, it is a good idea to:

- Query where they got the info from.
- Discuss why you disagree – what is your evidence?
- Signpost to a better source of info if necessary. Why is it a better source?
- Understand that they were possibly taught this a long time ago and may not be aware research has moved on.
- Recognise it takes people time to develop their understanding.

Before the meeting ends, it's a good idea to check:

- You talked about the child's strength and positive attributes.
- Everyone has been heard.
- Everyone has agreed to the key points and actions.
- Everyone knows when the minutes will be distributed.
- How everyone is feeling.
- You have agreed when the next meeting should take place.

After the Meeting

After the meeting has finished, everyone will probably need some time to process what was discussed. Once this has happened, it's worth:

- Sending out the minutes as soon as possible if you were responsible for taking them.
- Emailing for confirmation on key points.
- Asking for amendments and additions to the minutes if they do not reflect your experience of the meeting.
- Ensuring you have the date for the next meeting in your diary.
- Planning in time to carry out any agreed upon actions.

If you are dissatisfied with the results of a meeting, you can voice your concerns. As a first step, it's a good idea to talk with those supporting the child first.



If you are still dissatisfied, you can:

- Seek mediation.
- Bring in an outside professional (from CAMHS, SALT, etc.).
- Use formal routes (may be different in each local authority).
- Additional Needs Support Tribunal.

To get more detail, visit www.enquire.org.uk

Useful links

- Different minds - <https://differentminds.scot/>
- NHS Inform - <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/brain-nerves-and-spinal-cord/autism-spectrum-disorder-asd>
- UNCRPD - <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>
- UNCRC - <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>
- Equality Act 2010 - <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>
- Enquire - <https://enquire.org.uk/>
- My Rights, My Say - <https://myrightsmysay.scot/>

School Phobia/Refusal

There is much debate around the appropriateness of the term school refusal. This gives the impression that someone has a choice around whether or not they want to go to school. For many autistic young people, it is not so simple, and might be more accurately described as school phobia. They are as able to return to school as an arachnophobe is to allow a spider to crawl over their hand.

Many autistic people are highly driven, and really want to succeed, but if school becomes unmanageable, it does not matter how much we want to learn, we just can't go. This can be for many different reasons including, but not limited to:

- bullying
- lack of staff understanding
- inaccessible environment
- work being either too challenging or not challenging enough.

Often it can be a mixture of some or all of the above. Tackling the root of the problem is essential for settling an autistic young person back into school, and it is important that the young person feels listened to and valued.



If it gets to the stage that the young person is unable to manage school, there are some dos and don'ts to bear in mind:

- Do recognise that when an autistic young person tells you they are anxious it may have taken them a huge amount of courage to approach you. They have spent time thinking about the words they are going to use, the order to put them in, when is best to approach you, they will have worried about whether or not they are going to be taken seriously – coming and saying “school makes me feel anxious” is an enormous step for some young people, so it needs to be taken seriously.
- Don't be dismissive. We know that everyone feels anxious at times, but many autistic people have high levels of anxiety nearly all the time. We often need more help with it than others.
- Do realise that high anxiety = more sensory sensitivity. The more anxious we are the more heightened our sensory processing is. This means that it may not take much for us to become overwhelmed with sensory input
- Don't treat it like truancy. Showing us absentee reports will compound that anxiety. Telling us how much we have missed is not useful and something we already know.
- Do ask what can be done to make school more accessible. Not “what one thing can we do?”, ask about all the things that have made school difficult in the first place, and ask how you can work together to make things easier. Our Environmental Checklist and Sensory Profile may help with this.
- Don't assume that what has helped one other autistic young person will help another. All autistic people are unique in our abilities, sensory needs, how much social contact we need, how academic we are and so on. Treat us as individuals and recognise that your autistic young people may teach you more about what it means to be autistic than you already knew.
- Do speak with the autistic young person about where they are most comfortable. Do they prefer working in the mainstream classroom, a quieter area with fewer students, the library, computer suite?
- Don't dismiss ideas out of hand. Just because it has not been done before does not mean it can't be done.
- Do ask how they are physically. How are their fine motor skills? Would typing be easier than writing? Do they need jotters with bigger lines to accommodate bigger writing? Do they need more time to get changed after PE? More time with exams? Do they need support from CAMHS or a counsellor?
- Do check for co-occurring conditions. Autistic people can also have dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, Ehlers-Danlos, depression, eating disorders, and many more things we can list. All of these can have an impact on whether or not we can attend school
- Do deal with bullying. Autistic people are often bullied. Being fundamentally built differently means we are often viewed as easy targets for bullies. If you have a zero tolerance approach to bullying, ensure that is acted upon. Autistic people should never have to build resilience to bullying.



- Do help us to “own” our being autistic and any accompanying quirkiness. Many autistic adults report that when they started to become more accepting of their own differences, they felt much better about themselves and boosted confidence. We cannot change the fact we are autistic, but we can learn to embrace being autistic.
- Do check that the workload is appropriately challenging, and there is enough support to complete it. Check that we understand the point of doing the work. Due to our anxiety and need to do well, we may benefit from a little one on one time with a teacher regularly to ask questions, have work checked halfway through, or just check in emotionally.
- Do ask about personal goals. What does your young person want to achieve? Where do they excel? Give time to work on personal goals. Allowing time to focus on writing, photography, football, whatever it is that the autistic young person does well will help.
- Do consider who should be at the meeting. Lots of input from different professionals could be useful, but will it make the young person less likely to contribute? Who is the young person comfortable with? Where in the room are they best to sit? Is it a good time of day?

Most importantly, be patient and don't blame. Meetings to sort these issues out may take longer than others, you may need to have several meetings about it. Ensure the young person has access to school work and that all options are explored.

Preparing for the Summer Holidays

The summer holidays are nearly upon us with children, parents, and schools all preparing themselves for a much-deserved break! Many children will be filled with excitement as they count down the final days of school, looking forward to a summer filled with their favourite activities, seeing friends, or visiting new places. However, some families, and particularly those with autistic children, might be approaching the summer holidays with feelings of anxiety.

Why the summer holidays might present challenges

Many autistic people benefit from having familiar routines and structures in their day. When implemented as part of a structured timetable, routines can prepare us for the day ahead, helping us to understand what is expected of us, and reducing anxiety of the unknown. In a chaotic world, this predictability can be very reassuring! And so, the consistent structure of a school day can be beneficial for some autistic children with set lessons, breaks, and lunch times that (infrequently!) differ from day to day. Therefore, the transition from school term to six or seven weeks of summer holidays might feel a bit overwhelming. For those autistic people who need more flexibility, not knowing what they could be doing over the holidays can be stressful all by itself.



Alongside change of routine, the summer holidays can present additional sensory challenges such as warmer weather (although maybe not in Scotland!), different smells / onset of hay fever, and the wearing of sunscreen, which all may cause distress for autistic people. Planned outings might require the use of crowded public transport, waiting in long queues, or involve spending time in busier spaces. Meanwhile, some families will travel further from home or abroad for their holidays, to new or unfamiliar places. These situations can also lead to sensory or emotional overwhelm.

The summer holidays might also precede more significant transitions – from primary to secondary school, or from secondary onto college, university, and the wider adult world. These larger transitions can be daunting for any child or young person, not just autistic people, and may also contribute to feelings of anxiety around this period.

However, it is important to highlight that with the right supports and strategies in place, the summer holidays can be a fantastic time for autistic children and their families! While some autistic people may prefer routine and predictability, this doesn't mean that we are unable to cope with new places or experiences. In fact, with appropriate support, such experiences can be extremely rewarding, helping to increase our confidence in new situations. Here are some strategies to support autistic children and young people transition between the school term and summer holidays.

- *Routine* – while some things during the summer holidays will change, others will remain the same! For example, eating breakfast and dressing to get ready in the morning. Likewise, getting ready for bed can provide an opportunity to follow a familiar routine. Keeping simple structures in place at the start and end of each day can help provide consistency and comfort for autistic children. Additional routines during the day (for example, going for walk after breakfast) might be useful for some children, helping to ease anxiety of the unknown. However, any routines you put in place need to work for your whole family and should be discussed with your autistic child, to align with their interests and motivations. This is important for all autistic people but particularly key for those who require a lot of autonomy!
- *Visual supports* – in school, it is possible your child has access to a visual timetable (either an individualised or whole-class display), which illustrates the nature and order of activities happening that specific day. Visual timetables can help some autistic children to prepare for the day ahead by providing information about what is happening, when, and with whom, in advance. This can lessen anxiety as well as supporting successful transitions between activities. If your child finds this useful in class, a similar approach could be adopted at home. Your child's class teacher might be able to provide resources for use over the summer holidays, but you could also make your own. Printing photos, images, or even drawing the symbols together would help personalise your child's timetable, encouraging their participation. You might want to create a list of common activities before hand, e.g., playing in the garden, going for a walk, eating lunch, visiting the park, etc. You could also create symbols of family members that might be helping or visiting over the summer holidays. For some children, a written schedule might be more appropriate. Many families find that a calendar with key dates noted down can be useful.



- *Planning* – at the beginning of the holidays, it might be useful to sit down as a family and discuss what activities you would like to do in the coming weeks, as well as any pre-existing plans or commitments. This will help your child to prepare for any planned events, as well as giving them an opportunity to share their hopes, or worries, about the holidays. Of course, plans may likely change! Ideally, autistic children will benefit from advance notice of any changes where possible, so it might be worth reviewing your plans as a family regularly. Equally, if you are planning a trip to a new or unfamiliar place, e.g., a zoo or theme park, it can be helpful to do some research with your child ahead of time. A simple internet search of the venue can provide information such as photos, maps, activities, or menus ahead of time, helping to increase familiarity and reduce anxiety. More and more organisations are providing ‘Neurodiverse Guides’ online for their visitors (e.g., virtual tours, audio clips), so it is well worth checking what is available! Some venues might also offer access to sensory or chill out rooms, alternative entrances, and reduced capacity opening hours to promote accessibility, which might be beneficial for your child. Some families create lists of indoor and outdoor activities their family enjoys with their autistic children which can be used to help the child choose how they would like to plan their holiday.
- *Sensory needs* – as mentioned above, the summer season usually brings many sensory changes which can be unsettling for many autistic people. If your child has a sensory profile in place, it is likely that you can already predict possible triggers, e.g., the sensation of wet sand on bare feet. Identifying possible triggers ahead of time means you can plan to accommodate this, for instance, providing jelly shoes to wear on the beach. However, a sensory ‘First Aid Kit’ might also be useful for emergency situations! This could include favourite fidget toys or support objects that provide positive sensory feedback and are easily transported.
- *Time management strategies* – some autistic people struggle with transitions, including moving from one activity to another – especially if that activity is a special interest! If this is something that your child finds difficult, it might be worth using an alarm or timer to help them to understand when they need to finish an activity, tidy up, and move onto the next task. Some autistic children require additional processing time and might benefit from advance warnings that an activity is coming to an end (either verbally or visually). Read more about supporting transitions here: [Children and Young People — Autism Understanding Scotland](#)
- *Relaxation and down time* – parents can feel a huge pressure to fill every moment of the summer holidays with exciting activities and outings, causing an unnecessary amount of stress both for themselves and their children! Many autistic children will simply appreciate the summer holidays as a time to immerse themselves in their special interests, e.g., drawing, gaming, reading, etc. Spending time focused on their interests can provide time to rest and recharge, supporting their confidence, and improving their wellbeing. And while museum trips, theme parks, and adventurous holidays can be highly enjoyable experiences, it is likely that for an autistic person, they will need some time to recover and regulate from the excitement of it all! Spacing out big events or holidays is advisable. Likewise, try to set boundaries around down time, without feeling pressured to attend events simply because you have been invited or something special has been scheduled.



- *Transitioning back to school* – the summer holidays feels like a long time, but before you know it, it will be time to go back to school! Again, a visual timetable or calendar might be useful so that your child can keep track and prepare themselves for the transition back to school. Hopefully, they will have had an opportunity to meet their class teacher for after the summer, as well as seeing their new classroom to reduce their anxiety of the unknown. Closer to the time, it might be worth practicing the school route, looking at photos or videos online, and trying on their school uniform to increase familiarity. Keeping a summer holiday scrap book with drawings, photos, or souvenirs from their adventures might also help as a support object which they can show their teacher or friends upon returning to school, helping to bridge the transition with positive memories, and a talking point in class!

Hopefully some of these strategies might be useful as you and our child prepare for the summer holidays. However, it's important to remember that every autistic person is different, and what works for one child might not work for another! You know your child best, so feel free to adapt any of these suggestions as you see fit, to best support the needs of your family. Despite the best planning, change is inevitable, so try not to be too hard on yourself, and adjust as you go along. And finally, we hope you have a wonderful summer holiday!

Universal Design and School

What is Universal Design?

Universal Design means the design of buildings, products, and services that can be accessed, used, and understood by everyone to the greatest possible extent, without the need for further adaptations. When designers anticipate and plan for peoples' diverse needs and abilities from the outset, they are more likely to increase access and inclusion for everyone.

Universal Design is often associated with making accommodations for the disabled community, but really it goes beyond providing physical access to spaces. People can be excluded from spaces that don't feel welcoming, safe, or designed for them based on their gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, and other characteristics. Universal Design means designing buildings, products, and services that can be used confidently and independently by anyone.

Legislation

The Equality Act (2010) recognises autism as a protected characteristic. It protects disabled people, including autistic people, against discrimination in education, work, and other services. It requires schools, employers, service providers, and venues to make reasonable adjustments, provide support, and make things accessible for disabled people. Alongside the Education (Scotland) Act 2002, this means that local authorities are responsible for ensuring full access, and participation in education for disabled children and young people. If a child requires additional support to access learning, schools are required to provide reasonable adjustments.

Schools also operate as a workplace and community resource. Therefore, design considerations should reflect not only the needs of pupils, but everyone using the space – e.g., teachers, administrative staff, parents, and other visitors.



Barriers to accessibility in schools

Most autistic children and young people in Scotland attend a mainstream school as this is thought to increase attainment, social development, and quality of life. However, listening to the experiences of children and young people at AUScot, we believe many of these schools simply aren't built with the needs of autistic people in mind.

For example, there has been a trend in the last decade of building open-plan schools with fewer walls and doorways between classes. The theory behind this is to encourage social development and collaboration between teachers and learners. However, through first-hand experience as teachers, and from multiple conversations with both neurodivergent pupils and staff, we believe open-plan classrooms are completely inappropriate spaces for many, particularly autistic people. High noise levels, poor ventilation, and larger groups of people all affect our ability to concentrate, self-regulate, and therefore participate in learning and teaching.

Reports also show that the needs of autistic children and young people simply aren't being accommodated in many school environments. It's estimated that autistic children are 20 times more likely to be excluded from school compared to those without additional support needs. Absence rates also tend to be far higher amongst autistic pupils. Of those attending school, many encounter segregation from their peers, either on a part-time or full-time basis. Regarding attainment, autistic young people are also likely to leave school with fewer qualifications than non-disabled peers.

At AUScot, we feel that considering neurodivergent needs and incorporating Universal Design principles from the outset, especially in new build projects, would help to make schools and education more accessible for all children. This would also reduce the time, cost, and effort often spent on planning and providing reasonable adjustments to individuals. Below are just a few examples of autism-friendly design features which would benefit all users.

Autism-appropriate design features

Layout – ideally, all classrooms should have doors and walls separating the space from other areas to minimise noise, and background activity as these can distract and dis-regulate autistic people, impacting their ability to learn. Noise-absorbing materials, partitions, and double-glazing can all help to minimise background noise, echo, and reverberation. Classrooms should be spacious enough for the number of children they accommodate, as being near too many others can be overwhelming for autistic people.

Classroom furniture – modular furniture can give teachers and children more flexibility to personalise their learning space to suit their needs, e.g., partition walls, standing desk spaces, study pods. Smaller, self-contained spaces within wider classrooms can also provide a safe place for autistic children to retreat to, without needing to leave the classroom altogether.



Break out zones / sensory rooms – these are necessary spaces for autistic people and can provide safety and respite when the wider environment becomes over-whelming. These spaces should be easily accessed at any time, with independence where possible. Natural elements and materials (e.g., wood, plants, water features) can have a calming effect on the senses. Access to specialist sensory equipment within these areas means that users can personalise the space to meet their needs in that moment.

Playgrounds – large, open spaces with undefined boundaries or purpose can be over-whelming and confusing for many autistic children. Providing calm, cosy spaces can give autistic children a place to take a break – this could be quiet seated area, den-building zone, or included as part of play structures such as a tunnel or fort. Sensory equipment such as tactile paths, musical instruments, and swings can provide much needed sensory input, as well as helping to develop balance and gross motor skills.

Bathroom / changing facilities – autistic people are more likely than non-autistic people to identify as trans or non-binary, and gender exploration can begin from a young age. So, the provision of gender-neutral facilities in schools is extremely important. More information can be found here: [Supporting transgender young people in schools: guidance for Scottish schools - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/supporting-transgender-young-people-in-schools/guidance-for-scottish-schools-2020/pages/1-3.aspx). Many autistic people experience gastro-intestinal issues, or have additional support needs regarding their toileting, and so it is also important to provide discrete, closed cubicle spaces away from busy areas, to preserve dignity and put users at greater ease. Hand dryers can also make toilets inaccessible due to their loud and often unexpected noise.

Lighting – natural lighting should be maximised throughout the school to aid regulation, although blackout blinds might be required to avoid glare during the brightest parts of the day. LED lighting is preferable to the use of fluorescent bulbs, as these cause less flickering and low-level noise, minimising distraction.

Colour schemes, materials, and finishing's – avoid use of vibrant colour and dramatic contrast. Neutral colours, tones, and materials are known to be less stimulating, and are generally more autism appropriate. Natural materials are also less likely to cause glare or reflection, which can cause sensory discomfort. Some autistic people can be sensory seekers in this area, so flexibility to introduce more vibrant colours as required can be useful too.

Making Reasonable Adjustments

Here at AUScot, we often receive questions about reasonable adjustments in schools for autistic children, young people, and even staff. While there is no 'official' list of reasonable adjustments, we wanted to share some examples of best practice that have worked well for some of our service users.

Some of our staff team have worked in schools and implemented some of these approaches for ourselves and our pupils. Of course, all autistic people are different and there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. All adjustments should be made on an individual basis. You should work with the individual to find what works for them.



Be mindful that needs can change during a lifetime, the course of a year, over a term, and even daily! For some of us here at HOPE, our needs change hourly - especially if we:

- haven't slept well the night before
- are hungry
- thirsty
- hormonal
- stressed
- experiencing autistic burnout
- are feeling poorly

This might change how we structure our day, and autistic pupils and staff need the same flexibility. Any adjustments made should be reviewed regularly to make sure they are still helpful. Children and their families have a right to be involved in these decisions and adjustments. Remember that they know what works best and might be able to share strategies from home. Involving the pupil and their family in these decisions before decisions are made can ensure the right supports are put in at the right time.

Working in partnership with other professionals such as Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, CAMHS, Social Work, independent advocates, and of course organisations such as AUScot can help to ensure you have proper support. These professionals can provide expertise in a range of specialist areas and help explain why some of these adjustments can be beneficial. Given that refreshing autism training is not currently mandatory for school staff, we can also help keep schools up to date with current thinking around autism and share examples of best practice.

Below is a list of examples to get you started or support discussions.

Sensory Needs

Sensory needs are essential to support, yet many autistic people are not fully aware of their sensory needs, or that they differ from those of most others. If you support an autistic pupil or staff member, we always recommend contacting Occupational Therapy to see about developing a sensory profile to help inform where they may benefit from support. We understand however that this is not always readily available, and guidance for creating a sensory profile can be downloaded from our [Downloadable Documents](#) page. The following are some of the most commonly used supports.

- Use of stim toys / focus tools/transition objects: these do not necessarily have to be expensive, many objects already in the classroom may work well. Blu tack, paintbrushes, books, class teddies may all serve this purpose
- Ear defenders / ear plugs: many people try to encourage autistic children to remove ear defenders when they think that the classroom is quiet enough, but noise sensitivity may be very different for the autistic child. Taking ear defenders off should not be a set goal, they are a tool to help autistic people cope in a noise filled environment.



- Sensory breaks / activities: these allow us to remove ourselves from sensory difficult environments or allow us to do big sensory seeking movements. These are beneficial to all pupils. Sensory breaks should be given as required. Do not withhold sensory breaks until they have been “earned” or only allowed when a certain amount of work has been completed.
- Uniform adjustments: hard collars, ties, leather school shoes, formal skirts and trousers, these can all be difficult to manage for many autistic people. The use of more comfortable fabrics can allow us to concentrate more fully on our tasks. Many schools now encourage children to attend school with trainers and a school hoodie for comfort and practicality.
- Wobble cushions / stretchy bands on chair legs/wobble boards: these should be obtained from Occupational Therapy or purchased on the internet with guidance from OT. Sitting still can be extremely difficult for many autistic people, especially for extended periods. These items can provide sensory feedback and help us remain feeling comfortable.
- Standing desk: for those who find sitting difficult, a standing desk can allow for easy movement.
- Prompts to drink water, go to the toilet etc.: these will help autistic pupils to attend to basic needs as interoceptive (the ability to sense the internal workings of the body and recognise hunger, thirst etc.) issues may mean they don’t recognise body signals.

Environment

- Our Environmental Checklist can help look at a variety of ways that can help adjust the environment to suit the needs of the autistic people in the classroom. Below is a selection of some of the most commonly used.
- Adjusted lighting: dimmer lights, removing some strip lighting, using lamps or turning off lights completely can all help. Increasing natural lighting can be beneficial.
- Quiet table: having a small break out space, tables facing a wall, likely as far from the classroom door to minimise external noises can help. For some autistic pupils working in an area like this can be quieter and help them minimise distractions.
- Close classroom doors and windows: this will eliminate background and unpredictable noise and smells from other classrooms and outside. This is particularly useful in otherwise open plan areas or when next to a main road.
- Including special interests in wall displays: if you have a pupil especially interested in e.g., SpongeBob, having a spelling or math wall featuring characters from the show may make it more engaging.
- Allowing the child to personalise their spaces: this gives a sense of ownership and helps them to feel they belong.
- Flexible seating plan: allowing the child to choose seat (near an exit, near a wall, with a safe person, away from drafts/lights/noises, etc.). This can be done before the new academic year starts ready for their first day.



- Flexible start/end times/soft starts: not all autistic children will be comfortable starting school later or having different start times on different days. Some autistic children however will thrive with this flexibility.

Communication/Social

- Use of visuals around the classroom and during lessons: not all autistic children like or need the use of visuals, but these can be useful to many as well as to the rest of the class.
- Appropriate language usage: some autistic children may need language simplified, while others may benefit from more complicated language usage.
- Give explicit instructions with examples: this is beneficial for all students, but autistic pupils may find this especially helpful.
- Provide written instructions in addition to verbal instructions, bullet points can be used: verbal instructions can be difficult to remember for many, particularly if there are multiple instructions all at once. Bullet points makes it easier to follow a set of instructions.
- Allow enough time for questions: many autistic people need to know “why” when given a task. This is not belligerence; this is often a genuine question. Autistic pupils with a PDA profile may especially need to know why. Many autistic people have more questions than their peers and may ask the same question more than once. Allowing them enough time to ask all their questions and using the same language back in the answer can be beneficial.
- Provide mentoring/befriending/buddy: having an assigned adult to talk with when experiencing problems with regular check ins can help reduce anxiety. Many autistic pupils benefit from peer mentoring from other autistic pupils.
- Providing choices: having options for what to do during break and lunch other than the playground can be extremely helpful. Groups or clubs, access to the library or gym with a staff member can all be good alternatives.
- Recording work: many autistic students feel anxious standing up in front of classmates to deliver presentations or reading aloud. Allowing them to record the presentation or reading may allow them to perform better with less anxiety.

Group Work

- Contrary to stereotype, many autistic people excel at group work when reasonable adjustments are put in place.
- Teachers choose groups and assign roles: for many autistic adults the phrase “choose a partner” still evokes painful memories. Having an assigned partner who can be chosen with the teacher can help. Having assigned roles in the group can also be useful to ensure that the autistic person is carrying out the work they are interested in and/or best suited to.
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- Taking on an aspect that can be completed separately: consider if each person in the group can complete one section of the work to be added to the project as a whole.
- Assigning deadlines: give a structure for when you expect certain aspects of project completed ready for the next stage.
- Teacher will guide them on how they will communicate: if this is an ongoing piece of work, the teacher can assist in the setting up a method of communication that will work for all group members.

Executive Functioning

- Timetables (visual/written/a combination of both), now and next cards: knowing what is going to happen next can help alleviate anxiety around the unknown.
- Use of timers: these can help the pupil know how long an activity is going to last, how much time until transitioning to the next activity.
- Planners and checklists: giving guidance on what is expected with the task can help students to see how best to achieve their goals.
- Chunking tasks into smaller sections: instead of a full textbook page, giving portions of the page at a time to avoid overwhelm. Regularly review how big the chunks should be.
- Advance notice of changes, and transitions, where possible: if there is to be a guest in the classroom, a change of staff, change of timetable, plenty notice of what that change will mean to the pupil will alleviate stress.

Cognition

- Multi-sensory learning activities: practical activities can help the pupil explore the subject matter in different ways
- Use of fidget toys / focus tools/transition objects: see above.
- Processing time during activities and assessment matches pupil's needs: some autistic pupils need additional processing time, some may need less, and this can vary daily.
- Reduced timetable: any reduced timetable should be made with agreement with the pupil and the family. Provision should be made to allow learning to continue at home if desired. A reduced timetable should be regularly reviewed to see if it is meeting needs, or if the pupil is ready to increase their time at school.
- Assistive technology, e.g., reading pens, writing tasks on laptops: many autistic pupils struggle with hyper mobility and joints may tire easily. Using assistive technology can help alleviate this.
- Incorporating interests: if a lesson can have a focus on one of the pupil's interests, they may have a higher motivation to participate fully. An example would be using Pokémon to teach about statistics.



- Focus feedback on the purpose of the task: if the purpose of the lesson is to learn about use of shading in art, then all constructive feedback should be focussed on their use of shading.
- Time extension for tasks: some pupils may benefit from time extensions if they are struggling.
- More advanced work if required: many autistic children have a spiky education profile meaning they may excel in some areas compared to their peers. Allowing them to attend a class with older pupils for certain subjects can allow them to learn at a pace that matches their skills and help keep the pupil engaged.
- Personalised curriculum: for some autistic pupils a personalised curriculum created with the pupil will be highly motivating. Using a topic or topics in which they have strong interest and taking that as a starting point for personalised study will keep them focussed. Be mindful that interests can and do change. Many autistic people choose careers which are related to their interests and many can study to great depths on topics. Task extensions can also to help them further explore the depth of their topic and allow them to show their learning in multiple ways. Pupils may be more motivated to share or present their learning to others when it is on a favoured topic.

Transitions

See also our section on [Transitions](#).

- Peer mentoring from autistic pupil in new setting: this will allow the autistic pupil to ask a fellow autistic pupil all the questions they may have about the new setting.
- Enhanced transition: more visits to the new location, more time with staff, more time for queries than most other students can help relieve anxiety around the transition.