
Autism: Tips for Teachers

Supporting autistic pupils in the classroom

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What is Autism Spectrum Condition?

Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, social interaction, and behaviour. How it presents in the classroom varies widely. Some autistic pupils are highly motivated learners who call out answers and correct others. Some follow lessons closely but are unable to contribute verbally. Others struggle with transitions, seem frequently distracted, or have meltdowns triggered by changes in routine or sensory overload.

Consider sensory needs in the classroom

Autistic pupils often report intense sensitivity to unexpected loud noise, bright lights, and strong smells. Even low-level background noise or visual clutter can be overwhelming. Adjustments that may help include:

- Seating at the front of the class, near the teacher, for some pupils.
- A separate workstation to screen out noise and visual distraction for others.
- Permission to use ear defenders to aid concentration.

Identify learning strengths and difficulties

Even able autistic pupils may have specific learning difficulties that increase stress and reduce access to the curriculum. Difficulties with reading, writing, and maths are common. Pupils will often need more time to process verbal information and respond to questions, and will find comprehension tasks requiring inference more challenging. Autistic pupils are entitled to reasonable adjustments — for example, laptop access for written work or rest breaks.

Use visual supports

Visual timetables and other visual aids help pupils process information when they are feeling overwhelmed. Knowing in advance what each lesson will involve reduces anxiety and increases engagement. Being able to refer back to a timetable reassures the pupil that they can get to where they need to be and that the school day will end at a set time. Colour-coded folders and homework systems can also address organisational difficulties.

Provide a safe space

Some autistic pupils need respite from sensory and social overload. A safe area within the classroom, or a designated room elsewhere in school such as the library or learning hub, can help pupils decompress and avert meltdowns. Pupils who struggle with busy dining halls or playgrounds may benefit from eating in a quieter space or joining a structured lunchtime club. An early corridor pass can reduce anxiety caused by crowded transitions between lessons.

Help with social misunderstandings

Autistic pupils are at increased risk of bullying and peer rejection. Cognitive rigidity and a tendency towards literal interpretation can contribute to social misunderstandings. Pupils often need more staff support to navigate the unwritten social rules of school life. When something goes wrong, a teacher who understands that the pupil may have missed non-verbal cues can help bridge the gap — explaining what happened and acting as a go-between with peers and other staff. Given that autistic pupils are at much higher risk of anxiety and depression, the support of a trusted member of staff can be invaluable.

Further resources

- National Autistic Society (free resources and teacher training): autism.org.uk
- Autism Education Trust: autismeducationtrust.org.uk