



Autism

About autism

Every child with autism is different, there is no 'one size fits all'. Children with autism typically have difficulties with socialising and communicating with others. Although they may have social difficulties they are often keen to join in, they just might not know how. Some children might have lots of language and others might only use a few words or no words.

Children with autism may follow routines and class rules well as they tend to like things to be done in a particular way or order. They may have a favourite activity that they are happy to do over and over again, and they may need warning before switching between tasks. Some children may find loud noises or particular sounds or textures uncomfortable. As every child with autism is different, it is important that the teacher understands the child's sensory needs, to provide appropriate supports and ensure the classroom environment is inclusive.

Strengths

What might be some strengths?

- Some children may have good visual perceptual skills. They may be good at visual searches and recognition.
- Recognising different sounds and music can be a strength.
- Some children may be good at recognising patterns and solving problems.
- Children with a strong interest in a particular topic may have learned lots of information about that topic.

Where you might provide support?

- Some children might find it hard to fit in socially. They may find recognising or understanding the emotions of others challenging without help.
- They might have difficulties expressing themselves or understanding the meaning of things said to them. They tend to learn well with concrete, rather than abstract, examples.



- They may find it harder to know when or how to join in activities with other children. This means they may keep to themselves if they're not shown how to join in or play within a group.
- Some children may not make eye contact.
- They might find it harder to understand instructions. They benefit from support in using a skill they learned in one task or context in another context (generalisation).
- They tend to be less unsettled when plans are changed or they need to move between tasks when they are warned about the change.
- They may be sensitive to certain sounds or other sensations.
- Some children may struggle with motor tasks such as writing or drawing.
- They may become easily overwhelmed and have emotional 'meltdowns'

Evidence-based strategies

Consider adjustments to communication style

- **Provide a clear schedule and routine.** Visual cues or schedules can help students understand what is coming up and when they should complete a transition from one activity to another. See AllPlay Learn's printable class schedule
- **Give a warning when a transition is coming up.** Children who find it difficult to move from one activity to another often feel less unsettled if they are warned about the transition (for example: "in two minutes we are going to pack away and go to art"). Provide clear instructions about the transition.

Tailor activities to be as inclusive as possible

- **Some tasks may need to be modified for a student.** Where you can, use concrete materials (such as images to supplement text, blocks to model maths), rather than abstract concepts. Where needed provide simplified text and pictures showing how to complete a task.
- **Where possible, add child interests into the learning process.** For example, if a student is motivated by cars, offer a small bundle of toy cars for addition and subtraction, and when the student completes their maths, encourage them by giving them some time to play with the cars.



Provide positive feedback

- **Give encouragement and correction.** Consider giving positive feedback and correction immediately when children are learning a task or behaviour. This can be reduced gradually as they build their capability.
- **Encourage using interests.** Some children may be highly motivated by their interests. Consider letting a child engage in an activity related to their interests as an encouragement for their efforts.
- **Express positive regard and support.** Teacher emotional support and encouragement helps a student with autism achieve better results. Help a child know that they are valued and supported.

Provide lots of opportunities to practise

- **Students may need to practise a task or behaviour many times.** Lots of time to practise in different settings and with different materials can help students learn to use that skill in other situations.
- **Offer fewer tasks with more opportunities to practise.** This helps children to learn tasks and may be more helpful than offering many tasks with little opportunity to practise.
- **Help them with one to one attention.** When a task is new, children will learn best with help (i.e. prompts, demonstrations, encouragement). This help can be gradually reduced as they become more capable. Help can be provided by teachers or other students.

Work collaboratively

- **Provide lots of opportunities for students to work together.** Children with and without autism can get to know each other and build friendships through working together. Students can also learn through watching others. Consider ways in which you can facilitate a child's interactions with others in a group. See AllPlay Learn's [peer mediation and group work](#) page for tips on this.
- **When appropriate, give individualised tasks.** Consider giving specific roles or tasks to students in a group if a student with autism is working with tailored materials or instructions. You could also select a student in a group to be a tutor or mentor.



Best practice tips

Provide a safe space

- Consider providing a quiet area that a child with autism can access to support them if they feel overwhelmed.

Allow the use of noise-reducing headphones

- Noise-reducing headphones may help a child if they find the classroom or playground too loud.

Support children to learn social behaviours

- Consider prompting children to use social behaviours, such as asking another child to play, share, or wait their turn.

Minimise background noise and distractions while giving instructions

- This can help all children hear and focus on the teacher. You might need to face the group away from distractions behind you.

Ask how to help

- Talk to parents and the child's support team to find out the best way to work with and support the student. Parents can help you understand a child's unique strengths and areas they need more help. You could ask parents to complete AllPlay Learn's Strengths and Abilities Communication Checklist which can be found below.

Curriculum considerations

The Arts

- Children with autism may find loud noises during music or some textures in art overwhelming. Consider providing choices in activities or materials. A quiet space or noise-reducing headphones may help some children.



English

- Some students may need support with reading comprehension. Consider using a story map for important story elements such as the main characters, setting, beginning, middle, end. Ask comprehension questions and provide prompts that increase in support when needed (i.e. start with an open question, and move to a choice of two options if needed). Tactile and visual supports that link to the story and encourage student interaction may also be helpful.
- Some students with autism find pronouns (a word that replaces a person or object, such as I, me, or you) challenging. This is possibly because children with autism often echo other people's speech and have trouble understanding the social rules of language. They may need help to identify the pronouns when reading.
- Provide lots of time to practise
- Children with autism may need help to use strategies or skills they learned in one task in a new task

Health and Physical Education

- Children may learn a new movement skill more easily if they are given a picture card of that skill just before they start practising. Give them one picture card at a time if learning several new skills.
- It may help to pair a child who is finding it hard to learn a new skill with a child who can help them learn that skill. The other child can help break down instructions, model a skill, and affirm for correct attempts. See AllPlay Learn's [peer mediation and group work](#) for important tips on pairing children together.
- Consider adjustments to communication style and tailor activities to be as inclusive as possible.

The Humanities

- Some students with autism may have much knowledge in an area of the humanities curriculum if it is one of their special interests. This can give them an opportunity to share their knowledge with others.

Languages

- Children with autism who have communication challenges may need support with learning a new language



- Assess whether learning a language will be of advantage to them on a case-by-case basis
- If they are learning a language, focus on areas of strength and build from there

Mathematics

- Some children with autism may find it difficult to connect an image of a number with 'how many' (the quantity) it represents. Dots/lines indented into a written or printed number can help them learn by pointing to or touching each dot/line to count 'how many'.
- Provide lots of time to practise
- Children with autism may need help to use strategies or skills they learned in one task in a new task
- Provide positive feedback and provide lots of opportunities to practise

Science

- Children with autism may need help to use theory or skills they learned in one task in a new task
- Some children with autism may have much knowledge in an area of the science curriculum if it is one of their special interests. This can give them an opportunity to share their knowledge with others.

Technologies

- Many children enjoy digital technology and will be motivated by this subject
- Some children with autism may have much knowledge about technology if it is one of their special interests. This can give them an opportunity to share their knowledge with others.

Other considerations

First aid

- Consider sensitivity to smells and textures when giving first aid to a student with autism. Some students may be distressed by blood or bandages or refuse to have an ice pack or medication.
- Talk to a child's caregivers to identify the best way to manage an injury/illness



- Children with minimal language may have difficulty communicating that they are in pain or unwell. Watch for signs of pain such as grimacing, and encourage gestures or other methods of communication to work out what may be happening.

Safety drills

- Unexpected safety drills may upset some children with autism.
- Consider letting a child know beforehand that there will be a drill.
- Pair them with a buddy or person they feel safe with.
- Noise-reducing headphones may help if they find the noise of the alarms overwhelming
- Some children with autism may not know how to tell an adult if there is an emergency, or what to do in an emergency or emergency drill. Consider making time for demonstrating and practising what to do.

Behaviour

- Identifying what may be causing a child's behaviour can help both the teacher and the child feel less frustrated.
- Some common causes of challenging behaviour include difficulty in communicating their wants and needs, feeling anxious, sensory overload, trouble understanding or working on a task, or not understanding the rules or expectations.
- Encouragement and acknowledging positive behaviour may help. Encouragement that is linked to a student's interests may be particularly helpful.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.

Relief teachers

- A child with autism may find having a different teacher and changed routine upsetting.
- Telling relief teachers about the specific routines and teaching tips that will help that child may prevent distress.
- See AllPlay Learn's story *When my teacher is away*



Friendships

- A child with autism may face challenges with friendship dynamics or feeling different. Teachers may need to help facilitate and navigate friendships.
- See AllPlay Learn's social inclusion resources
- See AllPlay Learn's Being different

Excursions/camps

- A child with autism may find the change in routine of camp or excursions challenging. Providing detailed information in advance about the change can be helpful.
- See AllPlay Learn's story Going on an excursion

Transitions

- A child with autism may benefit from supports when moving across education settings.
- It may be helpful to teach and practice organisation and homework skills, and time- and self-management skills.
- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning to a primary or secondary school setting access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).
- For children transitioning to primary school access AllPlay Learn's Story A school day, and for children transitioning to secondary school access Access AllPlay Learn's story How to be Organised How to be organised

Other co-occurring conditions

- Some children with autism may also experience [anxiety](#), [Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#), [intellectual disability](#) or [oppositional defiant disorder](#).



Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. AllPlay Learn's [stories](#) can help children with autism become familiar with primary school and some of the skills they need to participate in these settings. Other relevant resources for children with autism are:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Class schedule
- Student self-monitoring form
- Stay play talk poster (simple)
- Stay play talk poster
- Peer mediation steps poster
- Peer mediation communication prompts poster (for older children)
- Peer information activity book - autism
- Emotion cards (A4)