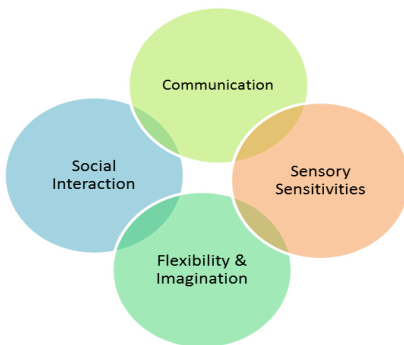


# MEETING THE NEEDS OF AUTISTIC LEARNERS

## Supporting Glasgow's Learners

Session 2020-21

Autism is a lifelong neuro-developmental difference. This means it is a condition that affects the development of the brain. Autism affects the way a person communicates and interacts with others, how information is processed and how the person makes sense of the world.



Within the autistic population there is a great deal of diversity and autism manifests differently from person to person. Autism is not a linear scale running from 'high functioning' to 'low functioning', which are unhelpful terms. Instead, autism varies in several different ways - sensory differences, levels of anxiety, social skills and thinking skills all vary both from person to person and from time to time. There is a reciprocal relationship between the autistic learner and the environment - this includes the physical environment and the people around them. If schools provide appropriately adapted environments, autistic learners can be supported and encouraged to achieve their fullest potential.

The **Autism Toolbox** is a free online resource developed to support the inclusion of autistic learners in Scottish Early Learning and Childcare settings, Primary and Secondary schools. The Toolbox supports the Scottish Strategy for Autism which aims to build on improvements to autism services and increase access to these. As well as introducing and describing some of the more common challenges an autistic learner might face, it provides real life case studies from Scottish schools and practical examples of supports that you can translate and use in your own setting. It also signposts other useful websites.



## Sensory differences:

Many autistic learners have difficulty processing everyday sensory information. Any of the senses may be over- or under-sensitive, or both, at different times. These sensory differences can affect behaviour, and sometimes an autistic child/young people may behave in a way that you wouldn't immediately link to sensory sensitivities.

A child who struggles to deal with everyday sensory information can experience sensory overload, or information overload. Too much information can cause stress, anxiety, and distressed behaviours. For some children/young people who cannot communicate how they are feeling, reactions to sensory input may be mistakenly interpreted as challenging behaviour.

When under stress, autistic learners can have a limited ability to calm themselves or control their behaviours. They need you to help them to do that by:

## TURNING DOWN THE HEAT



Gallagher (2006)

To understand the child you have to **understand their Autism**  
To support the child you have to be **Predictable**  
To earn the trust of the child you have to be **Reliable**  
To communicate with the child you have to be **Clear and Calm**  
Learn to **recognise** what creates stress for the child  
**Understand** what helps reduce the stress  
**A less anxious child = A less anxious staff member**

**Please note:** Many people within the autistic community have requested the term **autistic person** be used rather than **person with autism**. Therefore this leaflet uses the term autistic learner or autistic children; also in line with Autism Toolbox and NAIT terminology.

## Working with Parents/Carers in Partnership

- ◆ Working in partnership involves listening to, acknowledging and valuing the contributions that parents/ carers make
- ◆ Ensure the parents/ carers know that they are crucial to their child's progress and that the best outcomes are achieved through partnership
- ◆ Be sensitive to the stress the family may be under and the importance of your professional role in all communication.
- ◆ Use the agreed strategy for communication eg. home-school link diary.

### The following key messages provide a framework to help meet the needs of autistic learners:

1. **Difference not deficit**— it is important that we do not see autistic people as presenting with a series of deficits but rather that we live in a world where differences between people are expected and are viewed positively.
2. **Environment first;** e.g. provide a safe space—an area of the learning environment where a child can choose to go when they feel overwhelmed or need time and space to regulate behaviour.
3. **Provide predictability**—predictable routines/ structures and a visual timetable help to reduce anxieties. Plan for movement breaks to support emotional regulation.
4. **Make learning meaningful**—match activities and expectations to each learner's profile.
5. **Seek to understand distressed behaviour**—recognise how stress and anxiety arise over time; seek to understand 'why?'.
6. **Ensure adjustments are anticipatory**—this means getting to know the child's strengths, needs and preferences and preparing for key transition points.
7. **We were expecting you!** Almost one-third (30.9% ) of Scotland's school population have an additional support need (ASL Review 2020). Children with a range of needs and presentations should be expected and welcomed.

(\*see GTC and NAIT guidance for further detail)

## ALL BEHAVIOUR IS COMMUNICATION

At times staff may experience a lack of confidence and feel 'de-skilled' or that behaviour is personalised towards them. It is important to always remember that **all behaviour is communication**, and understanding what is being communicated will help us develop appropriate support from the range of responses, interventions and programmes available. *In order to develop appropriate and supportive strategies it is essential to examine the underlying reasons for behaviours and not take them at face value* Peeters, T. 1997

## Useful Links

### Autism Toolbox

[www.autismtoolbox.co.uk](http://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk)

**KIDS (Kids Independently Developing Skills) Joining in with Sensory Differences :**

[www.nhsggc.org.uk/KIDS](http://www.nhsggc.org.uk/KIDS)

**National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT)**

[www.thirdspace.scot/NAIT/](http://www.thirdspace.scot/NAIT/)

**GTC Meeting the needs of autistic learners. A professional guide for teachers.**

<http://www.gtcs.org.uk/web/FILES/professional-guides/Professional-Guide-Autism.pdf>

**The Language and Communication Friendly Establishment**

[www.goglasgow.org.uk/pages/show/365](http://www.goglasgow.org.uk/pages/show/365)

**National Autistic Society**

[www.autism.org.uk/](http://www.autism.org.uk/)



## ALLOW TIME TO BE AUTISTIC

It is important to allow time to 'be autistic' rather than have expectations of complying with normal behavioural patterns at all times. For example, whilst it may not be appropriate, and indeed can be distracting for others if a child is hand-flapping all the time, it is essential to consider if the behaviour plays a vital role in stress reduction for the individual. It may be important to create times when the child can engage in sensory behaviours. One suggestion is that the child has a 'sensory box' that they are able to spend 5 minutes with at scheduled times throughout the day. This should integrate into the timetable and not be seen as a 'reward' or 'add on'.