



Where Autism
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Top 5 autism tips for professionals: transport to school for autistic students

1. Vehicles

Suitable vehicles should be purchased with the following criteria in mind:

Seating

All seats should face forward. There should be sufficient space between rows/seats to reduce the necessity of passengers physically touching each other. Seats should have high backs and/or limited sightlines with other passengers.

Safety

Vehicles should be regularly checked for exterior and interior safety, including ensuring that no extraneous objects or items are within reach of passengers. Only drivers should have access to the controls for windows and doors

Emergencies

Procedures should be in place, including

- individual passenger information
- medical bags as required
- emergency plans

- mobile phones

Comfort

Access to additional travel accessories for comfort or health and safety purposes e.g.:

- seat belt clips
- safety harnesses
- shoulder strap padding
- neck cushion
- functioning heating
- air-conditioning.

2. Crews

Crew members who are calm and experienced should be carefully recruited and trained. Their training should include:

- autism awareness
- techniques and strategies to maintain health and safety and safeguarding needs.
- opportunities for drivers to familiarise themselves with routes and the vehicles without passengers on board.

Induction

Opportunities should be provided for new crew members to ride alongside current crews on a number of different routes. This enables them to be flexible if a change of route or vehicle is required at short notice.

Where possible, 'taster' sessions in classrooms or on school activities should be provided for drivers and travel assistants in order for them to see some of the autism-friendly strategies in place. This will also help them familiarise themselves with school routines, staff teams and pupils.

Allocation

Crews should be chosen for individual routes according to their prior experience and knowledge. Ratios should be considered carefully to reflect the needs and number of pupil passengers.

3. Travel

Routes

- Routes should be planned to keep travel times to the minimum.

- Procedures should be in place to identify the safest and most manageable routes, for example those with potential 'pull in' areas in case of emergencies
- Avoid routes known to have no phone signal.
- Routes should be checked before departure to verify localised traffic conditions 'on the day'.

Passenger allocation

- Passenger's profiles should be assessed to ensure they are grouped to reduce known problem 'combinations'.
- If necessary pupils should travel alone, with the appropriate crew and assistant ratios.

Time

In order to reduce stress and anxiety, adjustments should be made to routes and times of departure. For example, for those passengers who find long waits in heavy traffic difficult, departure times may be planned for a less busy time of day. To avoid certain problem areas with known roadworks, routes that are more predictable but possibly longer could be chosen.

Crew allocation

At times, it may be necessary to 'match' crews to passengers. For example, at the beginning of a new transport provision, a travel assistant who has prior experience with that child may be chosen.

4. Journey experience

Knowledge

Crews should be aware of individual passenger profiles and aspects to consider and provide for include:

- medical, communication, behavioural and sensory issues
- likes/preferences, known dislikes or 'triggers' for anxiety
- what helps them to calm, reduce anxiety levels or avoid sensory overload

Communication

As well as familiarising themselves with individual passengers' specific ways of communicating, crews should be trained to use minimal, positive (or diversional) language and maintain a calm and light-hearted atmosphere.

The use of visual cue cards or objects of reference may be appropriate in some cases, and the use of 'scripts' or phrases that provide familiarity and clarity can also be very helpful.

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Atmosphere

Crews should endeavour to maintain a cool and calm environment in the vehicle. This may include the provision of calming or easy listening music (via the vehicle sound system or individual headphones as appropriate).

Occupation

Provision of activities that enable passengers to entertain themselves on journeys are encouraged, this might include technology such as iPad or Kindles, sketch pad, cards or books, sensory items such as fidgets or chewies.

Risk management

All items provided must be safe and individual pupil risk assessments taken into account e.g. those children known to use objects as 'missiles' may be given items that are soft or attached to a coil key ring.

5. Relationships

Parents and carers

Crews should be encouraged to support and communicate with parents/carers in a clear and professional manner.

Policies should be in place to maintain safe procedures and safeguard all persons involved in the journey as well as maintaining a high degree of professionalism, with a calm and friendly approach. The aim is that parents feel they can trust the crew to provide the best possible service for their child.

Pupils

Crews and school staff who settle the pupils onto the vehicle, or who receive them on arrival, should always endeavour to see the whole journey from the classroom to the home as a continuum. This will hopefully facilitate a productive, calm and safe transition between home and school.

Local authorities

Suitable transport provision, as part of a safe, calm and effective transition to and from the pupil's home to school, should be seen as an important aspect of the school day. It should be part of a pupil's access to appropriate educational provision. For some pupils, this is the start of an all-important move into a positive approach to coming in to school and ultimately accessing the curriculum.