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## Designing schools for autistic pupils

Autistic children have a range of particular needs when it comes to the ideal learning environment, and these are unlikely to be provided for by standard classroom design. Richardson and Peat has experience in designing and building the ideal spaces for autistic pupils in school. We have identified five key areas to consider when aiming to create learning spaces which support autistic children.

### Space

Teaching tends to take place either in small groups or on a one-to-one basis, therefore subdividing rooms with partitions allows staff to create areas depending on the requirements of the pupils needing to use them at that time. It is better to choose movable furniture as it offers a flexible alternative to the restricted all-front-facing design of a standard classroom space.

Break-out spaces are important to allow a calm space for children who may get overwhelmed at times in the classroom. When staff see that a child is starting to find a situation uncomfortable they can direct them into a nearby quiet space to calm and de-escalate the situation.

## **Wider corridors**

An element that has become central to our design is opening-up corridor areas. A more open layout has the benefit of giving students a clear sightline to classrooms which makes them feel more comfortable and less intimidated, providing a lighter feel to what is typically a building's central core. This can be further enhanced by substituting curves for right angled corners.

## **Natural light**

Most teachers would agree that natural light is essential, but a general rule with autistic children is that windows offering too much visual stimulation are a problematic distraction. Provided the views are fairly non-descript however, there is no major issue with normal level windows - the seating layout can be adjusted for pupils that may get distracted.

High level windows and rooflights go a long way to helping achieve good natural light levels if there is an issue with the external areas in terms of normal level windows. We have found that creating high ceilings which slope with the shape of the roof, plus the addition of rooflights, enables natural light to work well throughout the space and gives a fresh feel to the environment.

## **Acoustic performance**

Key to all areas is the need for a high level of acoustic performance. Classrooms need to have good sound absorption and reverberation - a noise-sensitive environment helps create a sense of calm within specialist learning areas.

To this effect, we have worked with acoustic ceilings specialist [Ecophon](#) to install acoustic tiles to ceilings to provide a high level of performance. Walls have been designed to reduce reverberation times in line with the required acoustic levels for specialist teaching, which vary depending on class type and size.

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## **Colour**

To create a calming influence within the building the colour palette for internal finishes is one of the most critical areas that needs to be addressed. After experimenting with various colour schemes we settled on a combination of pastel colours and a feature wall with a bolder contrasting colour for use in specialist education. Although still subtle, this contrast can help to highlight the layout of the building for pupils. We have a general policy to look for colours that are non-intimidating, yet interesting enough to give the spaces character.

Bearing all of these factors in mind can help create the ideal learning spaces for autistic children. In some cases this attention to detail can also facilitate pupils' integration into mainstream schooling.