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How do autistic children access tests in mainstream primary schools?

The short answer is: with a great deal of difficulty, in many cases. Data from the department for Education show that autistic children often fail to meet the 'expected standard' in national tests and, particularly in the case of Phonics, may not even have a result recorded. Because of the ways in which progress is measured, and how the monitoring of children with a diagnosis of autism functions within national datasets, this only provides a partial picture at best. Even so, tests are a neglected aspect of educational inclusion.

There is a great deal of debate and even outright anger in the UK because of recent changes to national tests. This is accompanied by a concern that young children in particular are being subject to unnecessary stress, and an assumption too that 'vulnerable' children, such as those with a diagnosis of autism, must be protected from this.

However, the starting point for any kind of analysis of how, or whether, to include autistic children in tests (be they class-based or national tests) is to work with the child in front of you, rather than the label. Don't presuppose that the child will be put under strain by taking part and especially that it's not worth the effort to make a few adjustments, which might in fact benefit all of the children in the class. We are aiming for inclusion, after all.

Accommodations and adjustments

There are no guidelines on autism-specific adaptations and accommodations for national tests, but not all school staff realise that there are many general provisions which extend well beyond 'extra time', the accommodation school staff seem most familiar with. Several access arrangements do not even require official approval, as long as they reflect 'normal classroom practice'. This is a key point because, in my research, school staff tended to be fearful of breaking the rules in some way, and to be potentially open to the accusation of 'over-helping' the autistic children during tests. Therefore what can happen is that not only do the autistic children receive less help than usual, but the teaching assistant, for example, supports them in a different way too. For some children, who might find unexplained changes in the behaviour of

others confusing and upsetting, this is less than helpful. So, rather than continuing with 'normal classroom practice' and, importantly, giving the child the support that s/he might be entitled to, school staff tend to give less help than is needed, for fear of giving too much.

For Key Stage 2 tests, access arrangements which do not require official agreement include:

- having a reader
- a prompter
- rest breaks
- written or oral translations
- apparatus in Maths tests
- modified test papers.

Others, including early opening and additional time, need to be applied for in advance. Having a scribe, a transcriber (someone to rewrite what the child has written due to poor hand-writing), use of word-processors or other technological aids and administering the test at an alternative location, do not require formal approval, as long as the Standards and Testing Agency is notified in advance. Many autistic children would benefit greatly from these provisions and it is, after all, their right if the criteria are met.

Other adjustments which might help autistic children include:

- not changing the classroom layout or where the child usually sits for the purpose of the test;
- enabling the child to have 'mini breaks' during the session to walk around and vocalise (the child would probably have to be sitting apart from the main cohort in these circumstances),
- avoiding visual distractions and providing a low arousal environment.

For teacher assessment or class-based tests, centring the tests on a child's interests could be hugely beneficial and above all, the language used should be concise and literal.

Ultimately, it is a case of familiarisation with the available provisions, being sufficiently organised to submit advance applications when needed and, above all, responding to the individual profile of the child. And this might mean – dare I say it – not making any adaptations at all for that child, even if it would be to her or his benefit. One boy in my study was adamant that he didn't want any accommodations specific to him alone, even though this would have helped him. Fortunately, his teachers were sensible and sensitive enough to respect that wish. The next step, surely, is to have a system which is sufficiently flexible for the benefit of all children, so that a few do not stand out as needing 'access arrangements'.

Further reading/information

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[Guidance from the department for Education on access arrangements at Key Stage 2](#)

Department for Education (2014) *Reforming assessment and accountability for primary schools*, London: Department for Education.

Wilkinson, K. and Twist, L. (2010) *Autism and Educational Assessment: UK Policy and Practice*, Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.