



Where Autism
Professionals Connect

Exclusively sponsored by:



Supporting autistic pupils with exams

The Equality Act 2010 (Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland) makes it unlawful for responsible bodies, for example schools and authorities, to discriminate against disabled pupils and students. Unlawful discrimination includes a failure to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils or students to allow them to fully participate in their education, including exams.

Schools can make their own arrangements for autistic pupils and students during internal exams. For public or external national exams, they must apply for special arrangements to be put in place. These may also be called access or assessment arrangements.

Special arrangements

Schools have to demonstrate that special arrangements are needed. For example pupils and students may first have been assessed by a specialist teacher or educational psychologist to determine which arrangements are appropriate.

Autistic pupils and students can feel overwhelmed by the size and unfamiliarity of exam halls. Things such as an invigilator walking around the hall, strip lighting, noise and smells can all be distracting. Special arrangements such as a separate room away from distractions can be useful for a small group or individual pupil.

It can be difficult for autistic pupils and students to understand how long they have to spend on each question, in order to finish an exam in time. Extra time may be needed for them to process instructions and understand exam questions. Special arrangements can allow someone to stay with pupils and be their prompt.

Many autistic young people have difficulty with fine motor skills. This could mean that it takes them longer to write and their handwriting may be difficult to read. Some pupils may be able to use a computer or possibly have a scribe as part of their special arrangements

Author: Carla Manini-Rowden

Organisation: Education Rights and Lifelong Services Manager, The National Autistic Society

Date of publication: 13 March 2018

Other special arrangements can include:

- a reader (someone to read the questions aloud)
- an oral language modifier (someone qualified to change the language of the question)
- assistive software (screen reader/voice recognition)
- exam papers in different formats, such as digital
- supervised rest breaks.

Special arrangements must be requested in advance from exam boards or awarding bodies and there are often deadlines involved.

Autistic people can take things literally and may not understand open-ended questions. Exam boards have a duty to make sure that exam questions are accessible to all, whilst making sure it tests the candidate's knowledge. If you are setting assessments within a school or college, look at how questions are phrased. Will they be understood by autistic pupils and students? Before they sit public or external national exams, it will help to look at old exam questions and talk about how to interpret the questions.

Preparing for exams

In addition to making reasonable adjustments for exams, schools have a role to play in supporting and preparing autistic pupils for exams. Additional support could be put in place by schools to help them acquire the necessary skills.

Exams may increase anxiety because they are a new and unpredictable experience that mean a change in routine. It helps to explain to pupils and students:

- when exams will take place
- how to prepare for them
- exam day procedures.

Visual supports can help with this.

Autistic pupils and students will have different learning styles – it is important that they think about what works best for them when planning revision. Encourage them to think about makes them feel most comfortable and able to absorb information. Some pupils find that mind maps or flashcards help with their revision or they may prefer to use study apps.

Autistic young people may find revision time or study leave difficult as it is unstructured. They may not know how to plan their time or they may have an untraditional learning style. Creating a revision timetable can provide structure and help them to prioritise which subjects to revise and when. It's important to include time for exercise, meals and drinks in a revision timetable - these can help them to remain positive and relieve anxiety or stress.

Copyright: When reproducing this document, you must fully acknowledge the author of the document as shown at the top of the page. Please see Network Autism Terms and Conditions for details.

Author: Carla Manini-Rowden

Organisation: Education Rights and Lifelong Services Manager, The National Autistic Society

Date of publication: 13 March 2018

Further support strategies could include:

- weekly study plans
- exam timetables
- practice or past papers to work on exam technique
- social stories to explain what happens during exams.

You can also help their understanding of open-ended questions and figurative language. Try to see pupils at the start of each exam, as seeing a familiar face may help.

Further information

Further information can be found from our [Exam guidance for parents and education professionals](#)

Our [Education Rights Service](#) can provide information, support and advice on educational rights and entitlements for children and young people on the autism spectrum.