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## Teaching secondary school autistic students

Secondary teachers may have 120 or more students coming through their lessons every day. Sometimes they meet students only once a week and others they may see every day. Below are some general tips for secondary teachers to help them support autistic students.

Please note that it is very important to recognise that not every autistic student will be the same. Each student is unique and has their own strengths and difficulties - getting to know and understand them will be your biggest reward.

### 1. Read the information from the SENCO

This may seem like obvious advice but it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the amount of information given to you by the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). If they have a one page profile of the student with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND), then this will be your most useful document. It should include:

- what the student may struggle with
- what strategies help them most
- what should be avoided
- what the student's interests are and any other useful information.

Use the strategies that have been recommended. For example an autistic student might need extra time to process instructions or may need them broken down into smaller tasks. Using strategies that work will help you build up a good relationship with the student, who will then develop trust in you. Don't wait until the first sign of your usual strategies going wrong (which may be very quickly apparent) before you try those recommended by the SENCO.

### 2. Make learning accessible

Ask the student where they will be most comfortable sitting in the classroom. The environment and fellow students can be overstimulating for the autistic students' senses and so getting the

seating position right can make all the difference. Avoid changing seating plans without consulting them first - change can cause huge anxiety.

Give instructions in lists, breaking down the task into manageable chunks. If the student finds open-ended questions difficult then make it more concrete for them to begin with, or provide them with some vocabulary, structure or ideas. Executive functioning, the brain's ability to organise, plan, predict and monitor, can be an area of difficulty for some autistic students. Give autistic students time to process information and don't put them on the spot by asking questions publicly, unless you know that they are comfortable with this. Prepare them for what is coming and if you are relying on a teaching assistant (TA) to do this, make sure the TA can also see a copy of your lesson plan.

Use visuals and structured tasks, incorporating the student's own interests wherever possible. Verbal information is fleeting and the person has to remember it whilst working out what they should do with it. Some autistic students cannot follow the fast pace of verbal information so backing it up with a written account, list or picture can help enormously. Other autistic students have excellent verbal memories but may find it difficult to apply that information to another situation, and may need support to do this.

### **3. Homework**

Well we have to tackle this topic in a secondary school! Homework is difficult for many autistic students for a number of reasons. Most commonly they are exhausted after school. The energy they use just coping throughout the day is far more than most other students and so there may be nothing left in the bank to do homework as well.

Some autistic students may have rigid thoughts about *school is school* and *home is home*, and may find it difficult to understand why they need to do schoolwork at home.

Often the biggest difficulties for autistic students is understanding how to do the homework. If the teacher has explained it to the class in a way that the autistic student cannot understand, then they will not be able to do it. This can lead to a lot of distress at home.

There are a number of things you can do to help, including:

- print the homework off on a sticky label and put that in the student's planner
- email the parents so they know what the homework is
- differentiate the homework so that it is something related to the student's interests or involves less writing
- teach the student how to use speech to text technology in Word or other programmes so there is less writing
- support them to do the homework in school homework clubs
- ...or give them less homework, especially in KS3. Build it up slowly and make it successful.

#### **4. Understanding behaviour**

All teachers want a class of calm and alert students who want to learn. Autistic students can be the quietest and most compliant students in the class. If a student does present 'behaviour that challenges', it is important to remember that this is often communicating a need or difficulty.

Remember to stop and think. Ask yourself the following questions and then work out a way to support the student better:

- do they understand what I mean?
- are they struggling with their peers?
- are they overloaded with sensory sensations?
- are they worried, anxious, fearful?
- do they know how to organise that task?

You may need help from the SENCO but a positive approach makes all the difference.

#### **5. Have high expectations**

Read [subject specific advice about teaching autistic students](#), get to know the students you teach and build a positive relationship with them. Encourage shared interests with other students, as shared interests often make the best friendships.

Autistic students can thrive and achieve in secondary school. They may need adaptations, a different approach some of the time and a lot of kindness and understanding. Many autistic students can go on to further and higher education, have jobs and families. Assume they will do something in life that they are interested in, and that you can help them get there.

I want to leave you with an example of an autistic student who was interested in where all the pipes and wires were laid around the school. The school gave him a session a week with the Design Technology (DT) technician and built that into his support programme. The student struggled with English and other text based lessons but thrived in DT, IT and practical lessons. This boy went on to be an electrician because the school helped him into an apprenticeship that supported and understood him. We can help all our autistic students thrive.

#### **Further reading**

[Children with autism: Strategies for accessing the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4](#)

An old document that has plenty of still current advice

[Wiltshire County Council \(2006\). The secondary teacher's toolkit for including young people with social communication difficulties \(including autism spectrum disorders & Asperger syndrome\)](#)

A good handbook that's free to download

[McCann, Lynn \(2017\). How to support pupils with autism spectrum condition in secondary school. Learn Develop Achieve](#)

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My own book covers much more advice and support such as tests, social relationships, emotional development, more subject and access to learning advice, Puberty, Sex and Relationships Education, sensory support and transition.