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Top 5 autism tips for professionals: Overcoming the barriers to inclusion

The exclusion rate for pupils with special educational or additional support needs, including those on the autism spectrum, is higher than those without special needs. What can be done to reduce the risk of exclusion for autistic pupils?

There is no one quick-fix set of strategies that schools can use to overcome barriers to inclusion. However, schools may like to consider the following tips when planning how best to support an autistic pupil:

Top 5 Tips

1. Get to know the individual

Every autistic person is unique. Therefore, a one size fits all approach is inappropriate. Listening to an autistic pupil and trying to understand how they see and experience the world is essential, especially how their autism impacts on them as an individual. When are they happiest and most calm? What are their strengths? What is it about school life that causes them difficulties?

Aim to reduce an autistic pupil's anxiety and stress so that they can increase their resilience and willingness to engage in learning. Behaviour is a form of communication. Discover the underlying causes of behaviour and you can then adopt strategies to help an autistic pupil. Although you can't change the world around an individual on the autism spectrum, you can often predict when something is likely to make them anxious and make tailored reasonable adjustments, or take avoiding action.

2. Work in partnership with the autistic pupil, parents and other professionals

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Building and maintaining positive, nurturing and accepting relationships, with all those who work with an autistic pupil – including peers - is vital. Mutual trust is key and care needs to be taken not to judge the pupil or take incidents personally - starting each day calmly with a clean slate.

Parents are often experts on their own individual child. Schools should recognise this and help to build a more complete picture of the pupil. Staff need to work together as a team, supporting one another; looking for solutions and being clear what action will be taken if the pupil reaches crisis. Good partnership work across education, health and care is crucial, with schools collaborating with colleagues from other schools and services, including, educational psychology speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and autism advisory services (such as an Autism Outreach Team).

3. Address issues around stress and anxiety

Schools can do this by:

- identifying what triggers high levels of stress and anxiety
- recognising the strategies individuals may already use to manage their own stress and anxiety, but not trying to eliminate them (for example hobbies/interests or self-stimulatory behaviour – ‘stimming’ - can reduce anxiety)
- providing the individual with ways of identifying their own rising levels of stress and strategies to manage them (for example Stress bucket, Thermometer, STAR chart/analysis, 5 point scale, Turtle technique, and How fast does your engine run? Find out more from [AET's Tools for teachers](#))
- creating a safe place - somewhere in the school where the pupil can have the time and space away from any source of anxiety. If space is an issue this could be a play tent, cushions and/or a blanket
- at times of high anxiety allow the individual to access their safe place to self-regulate and become calm.

4. Reasonable adjustments need to be made to school policies and practices

Schools have a duty, under the Equality Act 2010 (and Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland), to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils. Schools need to take positive steps to ensure that autistic pupils can fully participate in all aspects of school life. A school's behaviour policy should make allowance for behaviour which is a consequence of autism. A one size fits all – zero tolerance - policy, fixing a standard penalty for a particular action, is not only unfair and inappropriate for an autistic pupil but can also amount to disability discrimination.

5. All school staff should have autism training

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To gain a better understanding of how to work with autistic pupils, staff should have autism training appropriate to their role. Staff need to be alert to the warning signs or triggers that if left unheeded, could lead to potentially explosive situations.

To ensure consistency of approach, it is important to emphasise that any autism training should involve all staff. This includes support staff and lunchtime supervisors, who play a crucial role in overseeing unstructured parts of the school day which can be a source of difficulties. For the successful inclusion of autistic pupils, the whole school community must have a genuinely inclusive ethos, accepting and celebrating difference.

Additional resources

The National Autistic Society [information for teachers](#)

[Resources for teachers to help overcome some of the barriers to the inclusion of autistic pupils](#), produced by The National Autistic Society on behalf of the Autism Education Trust, including the following:

- school stress and anxiety – how it can lead to school refusal and impact on family life
- successful reintegration of autistic pupils following school exclusion
- steps to avoid the exclusion of autistic pupils

Schools may also find the [Autism Education Trust](#) website useful for a number of education training resources, including the parents' guide [Working together with your child's school](#) and [Tools for teachers](#).