

ASE guide to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Teaching children on the autism spectrum in mainstream schools



Jo Galloway, Principal of the National Autistic Society's (NAS) Radlett Lodge School shares tips for teaching students on the autism spectrum:

Introduction

More than 1 in 100 people are on the autism spectrum, and the vast majority attend mainstream schools. Therefore, it is certain that every teacher will educate a student with autism at least once in his/her career.

Autism is a spectrum condition, which affects everyone differently, although all autistic people share difficulties around social communication and interaction. With the right educational support, people on the spectrum can do well at school and beyond. For students on the autism spectrum, having a teacher who understands their condition and individual learning needs can make all the difference.

Make sure you understand autism

People on the autism spectrum take things very literally and struggle to understand social rules, pick up on social cues or communicate their feelings in a conventional way. Because of this, it is important to treat all the students' behaviour as communication and to use multiple ways of communicating with them. When you use language, be clear and consistent and allow them more time to process what you're saying.

Autistic people's senses may be either intensified or under-sensitive. For some, the sound of a radiator can be distracting, while others may find an overhead light so strong that it is painful. It is important to consider making small adjustments to the environment, and understand that a student may experience sensory 'overload' from a stimulus that others wouldn't notice.

Many autistic people rely on routines to cope with an unpredictable and chaotic world. They can experience high levels of anxiety if their routine is disrupted or they go somewhere unfamiliar. Always prepare someone for change – for instance, showing pictures of new places or visual stories can be helpful preparation for school trips.

Get to know your student

It is important to work with parents to gather as much information as possible about your students and how autism affects them, including their strengths and difficulties. If you can, find out about their special interests and how you can use these in your teaching.

Each individual on the spectrum is unique and will need a person-centred learning approach. The NAS runs eight autism-specific schools, offering education that is tailored to each individual, using a strategy 'My Progress': <http://www.autism.org.uk/our-services/our-schools/myprogress.aspx>

Look beyond the curriculum

Don't be afraid to look at the curriculum in a different way; often autistic students' strengths and weaknesses may not be best developed through the National Curriculum. For example, social development is not part of the curriculum, but it is an area of difficulty for people on the spectrum and therefore needs to be factored into your teaching.

Know your own skills as a teacher

Know what your strengths are and how you can match them to your students' needs; think about what success will look like for them, and plan out each step towards a goal that you can feel positive about them achieving. Remember that when you are working with disability, you shouldn't always expect someone to meet you halfway, and you might have to go the extra mile to address barriers to their education.

Helpful tips:

- It's all about structure! Plan everything you can.
- Do NOT rely on verbal communication alone.
- When using language, be clear and precise.
- Be consistent – don't repeat the same thing using different language.
- Allow at least 10 seconds for each piece of information to be processed.

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- Do whatever you can to reduce anxiety – no one can learn when they feel anxious.
- Don't take behaviour personally.
- Set realistic goals that you and your student should feel proud of achieving.

You can find more information about autism at www.autism.org.uk and, by signing up to the NAS My World campaign, you can receive free autism-related education resources.

Debra Tucker, Chair of the Asperger's Syndrome Foundation, highlights some challenges facing SENCOs when dealing with Asperger's and other SEND students:

On numerous occasions during school visits where I have discussed the role of the SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator), the job description has unanimously been 'it's like putting fires out!' During a busy school day, class teachers go from lesson to lesson reinforcing messages in a range of subjects that all have their individual aims and objectives. Lessons are designed to enable effective learning. Classes range in size and differ in how many children with SEND are included. These children may or may not have a diagnosis, statement or the new educational, health and care plan (EHC). They will all, however, be displaying behaviour that interrupts their learning. Well-trained learning assistants alleviate the disruption and children have 1:1 support outside the classroom. So far, so good.

The SEND register in a school will list all the children and have assessments by professionals with diagnoses. The most important part for the SENCO is the prognosis: What does that child need in order to succeed in a mainstream setting, having the confidence and self-esteem to achieve, in spite of bullying and feeling like an 'alien in the playground'? At this point in the conversation, I am often told by dedicated SENCOs, 'we know what the child needs, but we don't have the human resources or the money to do it'.

I have been teaching and training for over 15 years. There are many resources and programmes for teachers and SENCOs to aid their classroom teaching and which cover a host of issues. For the last two years, I have been a trainer for the national anti-bullying charity Kidscape, as part of its Primary Bullying Intervention Training (BIT) project. This is fully funded by the Department for Education and is currently being delivered to primary schools across London. Kidscape also runs assertiveness workshops for bullied young people, which aim to decrease bullying incidents through raising young people's self esteem and offering them practical strategies to use to deflect potential bullying situations.

In addition to being a special needs teacher, I am also a parent to three adult sons with an interest in Asperger's Syndrome. As well as 'putting their fires out' as they went through their educational journey, I have often heard from educationalists along the way that 'one size doesn't fit all'. Some children need a more tailored, individual and bespoke programme. Over the years, I have sought out the best resources for teachers and schools to use for children on the autistic spectrum and there is no room to list them all. My focus here is to point out that a child with autism needs a multidisciplinary approach. The child needs to be understood and will grow and develop within that support system.

When looking for training for schools, the Autism Education Trust has developed a best practice guide for ideas to help children in the classroom: Tools for Teachers, Practical resources for classroom success. This breaks down the reasons for why a child with autism might find certain things more difficult. For example, Social Understanding has a whole section on how to teach rules and conversation cues. The Asperger's Syndrome Foundation (ASF) also provides training for parents, carers and professionals. For more information, please e-mail: info@aspergerfoundation.org.uk

The Cat-kit – Cognitive Affective Training, by Kirsten Callesen, Annette Moller Nielsen and my Asperger go-to guru, Tony Attwood, can be used by parents, teachers, educationalists, psychologists and therapists when addressing topics such as conflict resolution or ways to express thoughts and emotions.

Finally, when this work is being done, side-by-side with that being carried out on how to break down and effectively teach each subject and make the science curriculum interesting and accessible to children on the spectrum, we can start to put out some of those fires.