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# Meeting the needs of autistic learners

A professional guide for teachers

In partnership with



# What is this guide for?

Autism is a common developmental difference, which is considered to be lifelong and present from birth. Teachers are likely to come across autistic learners in their class; autistic learners account for more of the challenges reported than other additional support needs.

We know that:

- **1 – 15% of children are diagnosed autistic**, with a further 3% having related needs
- **86% of autistic children and young people** attend mainstream schools
- **4.6% of exclusions in Scotland's local authority schools** are autistic learners
- 68% of tribunals are for autistic learners (M Dunsmuir (Chamber President of the Additional Support Needs Tribunal for Scotland) Additional Support for Learning Summit, oral presentation, 2019).

We also know that good autism practice benefits all children.

The purpose of this Professional Guide is to provide support for teachers to reflect on their actions and consider whether they may need further advice or professional learning. The guide is intended to complement your employer's policies and to help you meet the needs of autistic learners. A series of guides have been produced by GTC Scotland, two of which are on dyslexia and neurodiversity and may be helpful further reading on additional support needs. You can access all the guides on the [GTC Scotland website](#).

The guides do not form part of the Professional Code for teachers. Teachers and schools may find them useful professional learning and discussion tools but they are not intended for use in any competency or conduct process. They are part of GTC Scotland's services to teachers to enhance teacher professionalism as part of our advisory role as the professional body for all of Scotland's teachers.



# What is expected of teachers?

Your commitment to the professional values of integrity, trust and respect and social justice should be demonstrated in all aspects of your role as a teacher.

A core component of teachers' professional commitment is understanding the needs of learners with additional support needs, including autism. GTC Scotland Professional Standards state that teachers should recognise, see and acknowledge the value in everyone and have a deep awareness of the need for culturally responsive pedagogies. It is the role of teachers to promote equality and diversity, paying careful attention to the needs of learners from diverse groups and in upholding children's rights.

The *Review of Additional Support for Learning Implementation (2020)* highlights the importance of all teachers holding and enacting professional values of inclusion and inclusive practice and emphasises that this should be seen as a core part of your role.

All teachers have a duty to critically examine personal and professional attitudes and beliefs and to challenge assumptions and professional practice. The mindset with which you approach support for autistic learners is really important and will influence whether a learner feels included and is able to participate in school. You won't always know what to do but you can come at a challenge with an open mind, willing to do things differently.



# How to meet the needs of autistic children and young people

The following **seven key messages** provide a framework to help meet the needs of autistic learners.

## 1: Difference not deficit

The human population is highly diverse. Neurodiversity is a term that describes this normal variation across all people. Within the autistic population there is also a great deal of diversity and autism manifests differently from person to person.

Autism affects the way a person communicates and interacts with others, how information is processed and how the person makes sense of the world. It is important that we do not see autistic people as presenting with a series of deficits but rather that we live in a neurodiverse world where differences between people are expected and are viewed positively.

There is a reciprocal relationship between the autistic learner and the environment which includes the physical environment and the people around them. If schools provide appropriately adapted environments, autistic learners can be supported and encouraged to meet their fullest potential.

## 2: Environment first

The physical and social environment should be appropriately adapted to meet the needs of all learners.

The physical environment includes the way school looks and feels, and how

learners use materials and move around. Noisy and busy parts of the school (e.g. dining hall and gym) are often stressful environments for autistic learners.

The social environment includes the relationships the learner has with peers and adults, social rules and expectations, and the ways these are communicated.

It is recommended that all children with an autism presentation have an individual Safe Space provided in a form that suits them. This is an area of the learning environment where a child can choose to go when they feel overwhelmed or need time and space to regulate. It can take many forms, including a pop up tent, a cover over a table, a spot on the floor or a high backed chair. This is never a place the child is sent to nor should it have to be earned. An individual Safe Space is a different thing to a Nurture space. Guidance on providing a Safe Space for an autistic learner is available on the [\*National Autism Implementation Team website\*](#).

## 3: Provide predictability

Predictability helps to reduce anxiety. Disrupted expectations increase anxiety. An autistic learner might not actively seek routine and predictability but they are likely to be calm, better regulated and able to participate when predictability is provided.

Teachers can help to reduce anxiety and support participation by providing an environment that is predictable to

learners. You can think about making yourself predictable and about providing predictable:

- routines
- structures
- interactions
- learning supports (e.g. visual timetables; timers; chunking tasks).

#### 4: Make learning meaningful

It is important to match activities and expectations to each learner's profile. The biggest reason for the distressed behaviours that we see is the mismatch between expectations and a learner's developmental stage.

For all aspects of learning, consideration should be given to each learner's:

- developmental stage
- communication
- sensory profile
- motivation.

If a learner is refusing to participate or engage in something, it's possible that it doesn't make sense to them and they don't know why they are being expected to do it. Rather than view this as non-compliance, you can focus on making it meaningful. Ask yourself:

- Does the task make sense to the learner?
- Do they need more time?
- How can I break this task down?
- What visual and learning supports might be helpful?

Try to build a learner's interests and sensory preferences into activities; motivation should be intrinsic to task rather than a reward for completing it.

Teachers can support autistic learners to communicate their views and preferences in a range of ways, appropriate to developmental level, to ensure that they are meaningfully included in planning for their learning and wellbeing.

#### 5: Seek to understand distressed behaviour

In order to understand distressed behaviour you can:

- seek to understand 'why?'
- identify potential explanations
- avoid 'post match analysis' with the learner (i.e. it is helpful for the adults to reflect but not with the learner)
- make adaptations to avoid the same situation arising again
- recognise how stress and anxiety arise over time (see Autism Toolbox).

#### 6: Ensure adjustments are anticipatory

The Equality Act (2010) requires 'reasonable adjustments' and states that these should be 'anticipatory'; let's not just see how it goes.

Through the provision of anticipatory support, autistic learners are less likely to become dysregulated or to become anxious or distressed, reducing the likelihood of learners experiencing distress and/or engaging in distressed behaviours.

#### 7: We were expecting you!

Almost one-third (**30.9%**) of *Scotland's school population* have an additional support need. Children with a range of needs and presentations should be expected and welcomed.

## What you can do

It is a teacher's role to identify and plan to meet need. No child's support should be diagnosis dependent, however, autistic individuals and their families tell us that diagnosis is important to them. Health colleagues advise that teachers who think that a child might be autistic should 'say what they see' (e.g. I've noticed that they like to play with one thing for extended periods of time) rather than suggest to parents or carers that a child is autistic. School teams can work collaboratively with relevant health professionals, through Getting it Right processes, to support any diagnostic process.

In addition to implementing the seven key messages, it is important to remember that each learner is an individual who requires an individualised approach. Building positive, trusting relationships with both the learner and their parents or carers will be critical to getting this approach right.

So, familiarise yourself with your employer's policies and ask yourself:

- Do I know the developmental and communication levels of the autistic learners that I teach or what I might need to do to find out?
- Am I tailoring activities and expectations to match with these?
- Am I making appropriate anticipatory 'reasonable adjustments' to meet the needs of autistic learners?
- Am I communicating effectively with my autistic learners and with their parents/ carers?



- If I implement the key messages from this guidance, what changes might I see in my practice and with my learners?
- Do I know how and where to seek further advice and support to guide my practice, both within and outwith my school?
- With regard to my autistic learners, am I thinking about differences rather than having a deficit focused outlook?
- Do I model an inclusive mindset to my class and school community?
- How can I support and challenge my colleagues to think more inclusively?
- What reading/other professional learning can I do to further inform me about the needs of autistic learners?



# Additional resources

*Guides on dyslexia and neurodiversity have been produced as part of this series of professional guides.* [↗](#)

- [Autism Toolbox](#) [↗](#)
- [CIRCLE Inclusive Classroom Scale](#) [↗](#)
- [GTC Scotland's Professional Standards for Teachers](#) [↗](#)
- [National Autism Implementation Team](#) [↗](#)

*Resources include:*

- [NAIT Safe Space Guidance for Schools](#) [↗](#)
  - [NAIT Home–School Communication Guidance](#) [↗](#)
  - [NAIT Equality Act Guidance](#) [↗](#)
  - [Information about Autism Diagnosis for Early Learning and Childcare Settings](#) [↗](#)
  - [Information about Autism Diagnosis for Primary Schools](#) [↗](#)
  - [Information about Autism Diagnosis for Secondary Schools](#) [↗](#)
  - [NAIT Information for Schools when a Child Receives a Diagnosis of Autism](#) [↗](#)
- [National Autistic Society](#) [↗](#)
  - [National Autistic Society 'Too Much Information' clip 1:](#) [↗](#)
  - [National Autistic Society 'Too Much Information' clip 2:](#) [↗](#)
  - Prizant, B. M., & Fields–Meyer, T. (2015). *Uniquely Human: A different way of seeing autism.* Simon and Schuster
  - [Scottish Autism](#) [↗](#)
  - Silberman, S. (2017). *Neurotribes: The legacy of autism and how to think smarter about people who think differently.* Atlantic Books
  - [TED Talk Amy Laurent 'Compliance is not the goal: Letting go of control and rethinking support for autistic individuals'](#) [↗](#)



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