

Autism – School Support – Top Tips Environment whole school and classroom

Developing excellent quality education for all children and young people with autism must focus on the need for **mutual adaptation** on behalf of the individual with autism *and* those who live or work with them. This means reflecting on the dynamic relationship between the individual and those around them and understanding the way the individual processes and experiences the world. The performance and actions of an individual with autism depend very much on their context. One can create a learning environment where the child or young person feels uncomfortable, anxious, and excluded or one where they feel relaxed, included, and confident.

1. Autism-friendly policies in schools and settings are most effective when they form part of the **whole school development plan** and when progress towards the goals and targets of the plan is regularly monitored. A tool freely available to all schools and educational settings for assessing and developing good autism practice is the AET Autism Standards. The standards are a set of forty statements which reflect good practice for those on the autism spectrum. For each standard, the user can evaluate the extent to which this standard is in place in their school or setting, using the ratings: 'not appropriate,' 'not yet developed,' 'developing,' 'established' or 'enhanced.' Each standard is linked to resources which demonstrate examples of how a school or setting might achieve and evidence the standards.

2. The National Autistic Society has developed a framework called **SPELL**, to assist professionals in understanding and responding to the needs of individuals with autism. SPELL stands for Structure; Positive; Empathy; Low arousal; and Links.

Structure:

- Introducing **timetables** will help the child to predict what is happening next, and to tell them about any changes to the usual routine. Use **timers** to clearly label how long an activity will last.
- Ensure all planned activities are achievable. Explain tasks in **small manageable chunks** with a clear start and end point.
- Use **visual cues** (symbols and pictures) to support a child's understanding of an activity.
- Provide structure in **unstructured times**, for example, offer choice boards and structured games at lunchtime and playtime. Limit choices, making them clear to avoid any confusion.
- Structure your **communication**. Use the child's name first to obtain their attention before giving instruction and allow the child time to process this before moving on to the next. Use **language** that is clear, precise, and concrete.
- **Colour code work sets**, for example, colour all science books blue and label all science equipment with a blue sticker to enable the child to organise themselves more independently.

Positive:

- Ensure **expectations are realistic** and individual to the child. All work given must be achievable to ensure continued motivation and success.
- Use **reward strategies** and **motivators** to ensure appropriate behaviour is continued. Use low arousal (deadpan) response when dealing with inappropriate behaviours.
- Maintain **consistency** when dealing with challenging behaviour using behaviour support plans. Provide **positive alternatives** to behaviour, for example, allow the child to use a time out when he/she becomes anxious in class.
- Identify and use a pupil's **strengths** or **special interests** when planning activities.

SEND SERVICES GUIDES

- Build **self-esteem** by creating opportunities for pupils to develop independence, have a responsibility and contribute to a group.

Empathy:

- Develop a **pupil profile** to increase staff understanding of an individual child. Include triggers to behaviour, phobias, motivators, and anxieties. Include a **sensory profile** to understand which stimuli are overly sensitive. Share this information with all school staff likely to meet that child, including lunchtime assistants and school caretakers, to try to avoid situations which may lead to distress.
- **Educate** staff and peers through training and strategies such as a “circle of friends.”
- Offer **practical help** for problem areas such as social scripts and understanding social rules.
- See **behaviour** as a means of communication – what is he/she trying to tell me?
- Ensure **actual comprehension** has been achieved – understanding may be masked by learned phrases or echolalia. Use communication strategies such as visual supports and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) to assist this.

Low arousal:

- Check the **environment** for potential distractions specific to the individual (flickering lights, strong smells, noises)
- Create a **workstation** or space free from distractions for work tasks or learning new or complex skills.
- **Filter out** irrelevant stimuli, for example, unnecessary illustrations on worksheets.
- Use **resources** to address individual needs (ear defenders to block out sounds when working, tangle toys, weighted blankets etc).

Links:

- Ensure **parents** are involved throughout the process to help monitor progress and review targets. Share information through home schoolbooks and draw up behaviour support plans together. These can then be used consistently across home and school.
- See the child themselves as a **partner** in the education process and consult with them and their parents on developments.
- Ensure all **staff** are informed of support strategies and current issues.
- **Share** information with other professionals such as Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Educational Psychologists and so on.

Useful References and Links

www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk
www.autism.org.uk