

A guide for transferring to primary and secondary schools for a child with autism

Children who are on the Autism Spectrum have a different thinking style and perception of the world which can lead to difficulties in accessing the academic curriculum. Some of these differences or difficulties can include:

- Style of thinking tends to be visual and concrete
- Planning, organising and sequencing thoughts are often weaker
- They might not automatically focus on the same thing as others
- Difficulty identifying and filtering the important information from an environment
- Applying and generalising known skills often takes much more time
- Difficulties recognising the “same work” in a different format or layout
- Understanding and recognising their own emotions and those of others is often very hard
- Difficulty evaluating their own progress
- Might struggle to retain purely verbal information
- Might find writing or colouring for any length of time difficult (motor difficulties and processing from brain to paper)
- Likely to have a longer processing time of information and have difficulties switching quickly from one topic or task to another
- Display a need to finish pieces of work/questions before being able to move on
- Might find it difficult negotiating with others in group work and accepting other viewpoints
- Show a lack of motivation for subjects where the child can see no relevance to themselves
- Find putting themselves in “other people’s shoes” very tricky

It is important to remember that even academically able students may have some or all of these difficulties.

Autism and Asperger Syndrome can seem invisible

Although the child might seem to cope with the majority of normally differentiated work, there will be times when more individual differentiation is required for the child to successfully achieve the learning objectives. It is appreciated that this can be difficult to plan and organise, but in order for the child to be included successfully, reduce inappropriate behaviour and reach their potential, changes may be needed.

What Can I do to help?

Presentation and layout of material

Make things as visual as possible, bullet point tasks so they are clear. A small whiteboard near the child can be useful. Try to plan work with a clear start and finish.

Use the child's likely relative strengths

Focus to detail, liking to follow rules, competency with ICT and concentration on certain topics may well be a real asset in some tasks; if used within activities and manipulated so the child can take a lead role with their peers, gives the opportunity for the child to be seen to excel by others and boost self and peer esteem.

Amount of information given

If there is too much text or verbal input, the child might struggle to follow it. List the points to look out for on the board so the child can refer back to them.

Support to help the child understand work surrounding emotions, relationships, other people's views

The child might find it extremely difficult identifying these and will need considerable support in accessing work on these topics.

Support in group work or discussion tasks

The child might need discrete support with the social aspects of this, not necessarily the actual academic content. The bigger the group, the more likely the child is to struggle to communicate effectively so they might need specific support to help to assign roles within the group, accept other people's opinions, resolve conflict and modelling appropriate behaviour if there is a competitive nature to the task.

Reducing purely administrative tasks such as copying out, colouring in

These are likely to be demanding for the child so they have less focus on the actual learning. Try to utilise the computer or follow a flow diagram, Dictaphone, speech bubbles, cut out and stick etc. Allow the child to get on with the work before writing the date, title and learning objective.

Teaching explicitly why they need to redraft and how to do it

Children often perceive that redrafting is "doing the same work again, and that they have done it once so already know it". The child might need to know the reasons for needing to redraft, and support to appreciate different audiences.

Expectations of quantity of work done to demonstrate understanding of learning objective

The child might find it more achievable and motivating to do one example well than struggle to do more examples and could actually lose the point of the learning.

Support to help the child access more abstract material

The child is likely to need individual support to explain these tasks and to first link the concept to something in their experience. They might not be able to imagine what it was like

in ages past or predict how someone might feel in a given situation. Remember they might struggle even to predict how they might feel in any given situation.

Explanations for identification and appreciation of audience

Children might need explicit explanation as to why they need to write neatly or show workings out in maths. They may need more support to write or present information for differing audiences.

Multi-tasking

Learning styles can differ from others and therefore they will have difficulties listening and writing at the same time. Perhaps allow them to watch or listen first then make notes.

Support with self-evaluation

Any learning is one of the fundamental difficulties of a child on the Autism Spectrum. They will often need much simplified layouts or considerable help talking about how they feel and why.

Homework

Children on the Autism Spectrum often have huge difficulties with home or school boundaries. They might never talk about school to their parents and seem to completely compartmentalise the school times from being at home (more so than most). They are unlikely to be able to remember tasks done at school or remember homework. If the bare details of homework tasks are given, they are likely to be able to elaborate on them. Parents can find it very difficult to help.

If possible:

- Write out very clearly the entire homework task so that parents know exactly how to support the student.
- Limit the number of examples that the child has to do to demonstrate an understanding of the learning outcome. It will be better for the student to do one example really well than struggle with more and lose the actual learning intention.
- Accept that the task might not be exactly what you meant or the child's viewpoint is very different to everyone else's i.e. characterisation focuses solely on Doctor Who characters. Even though this might not be from the text you were reading, they may well have achieved the learning objective but written about what they know.
- Be sure to think carefully about the actual learning objective of the task and limit the admin tasks that make the work less attractive to most children.
- Limit the actual amount of homework as the child is likely to require much more support at home to do even a small amount and their pace of working may be slow. They could be doing homework all night and have no chill out time at all.
- Whenever possible give visual praise for work so that the child can recognise when they have done something well but dependent on the individual, take care about how much praise and where this praise is given. Positive events can also cause levels of anxiety.