

Autism spectrum guideline

This guideline is a recommended course of action under the operational policy framework. Any edits to this guideline must follow the process outlined on the [creating, updating and deleting operational policies](#) page.

Overview

This guideline supports staff to plan personalised learning for children and young people with autism in preschools and schools.

It provides guidance on understanding diverse presentations of autism, selecting appropriate adjustments, and developing strengths-based approaches that support inclusion and achievement. It also includes tools and resources to build staff understanding of the diverse strengths, skills and support needs of children and young people with autism.

This document uses identity-first and person-first language interchangeably. This reflects the diversity of preferences within the autism community, where some people prefer person-first language, some prefer identity-first language, and others use both.

Scope

This guideline applies to educators, principals, directors and education support staff working in education and care settings.



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Detail

What is the autism spectrum?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that shapes how a person thinks, communicates, interacts, processes information and experiences their environment. The characteristics of autism occur on a spectrum meaning that support needs vary across different contexts and over time. This is also known as the autism spectrum.

Diagnosis is based on behavioural observations and characteristics. Individuals on the autism spectrum can appear quite different to each other. The way a person's autism characteristics interact with each other, and the environment varies from person to person. Strengths and support needs of people on the autism spectrum vary across time and contexts.

The strengths and abilities of children and young people on the autism spectrum are not always obvious. Some children and young people with autism appear to cope well for some of their educational journey and as they experience more difficulties in adolescence, only then start on the diagnostic journey. Due to difficulties in accessing the diagnostic process in some areas, not all children and young people will have a diagnosis by the time they start school. Children and young people with autism may excel in one or more curriculum areas and have difficulties in others.

The autism spectrum includes a wide range of strengths and difficulties. Each learner with autism is a unique individual. It's important for preschools, schools and families to work together to develop strengths-based support for children and young people with autism.

Educators and leaders who support children and young people with autism should make sure adjustments to their learning and environment are tailored to their needs. When you understand the impact of autism, you'll be better able to adjust to those needs. Specific adjustments need to be tailored for each individual and may need to be changed over time.

Adjustments and support documentation

Under the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (DSE) and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA), education and care settings must provide reasonable adjustments that respond to each student's functional support needs, ensuring equitable engagement with learning, wellbeing and the education environment.

Children and young people with autism present diverse strengths, needs and ways of engaging, shaped by their individual backgrounds and experiences. As a result, a single instructional model cannot adequately address the requirements of all students. Educators and leaders are to implement responsive adjustments that align teaching practice with each learner's profile, ensuring support that is both appropriate and effective. For further information refer to [adjustments for learners with autism](#) (staff log in required).

Although clinical information is beneficial, a diagnosis is not required to implement adjustments to support a child or young person in their education and learning. Educators can use evidence of functional need, such as teacher observations, learning profiles, or a history of difficulties to determine if an adjustment is needed and develop a [personalised learning plan](#) (staff log in required).

relevant information and key areas which may assist in reducing sensory overload for the child or young person, including:

- communication strategies
- sensory sensitivities and strategies
- skills, strengths and interests
- learning preferences (not all children and young people with autism are visual thinkers)
- adjustment needs and types.

Updating Personalised Learning Plans is recommended at points of transition eg preschool to primary, new teacher, or primary to secondary and as needs change. Education staff, the child or young person and their family or other members of their care team work together to develop and update support documentation.

Development and implementation steps

Individualised support planning:

- Work with the child or young person and their family to better understand individualised supports that can be reasonably introduced to their education and learning environment (classroom PE lessons camps and excursions etc).
- Include teachers, student support officers working with the child and young person, allied health teams, and Student Support Services team members.

Use these ideas to plan for a positive, strengths based first contact between a child and young person and any new teacher or SSO:

- Find out if the child or young person has a special interest prior to meeting them.
- Check in with the child or young person about their preferred communication modes, including daily greetings and how they would like successes to be celebrated.
- Talk about something they are interested in or share a picture or object of something they are interested in.

Be patient. Spend time getting to know the child or young person and build your understanding of them:

- Small details can be big signposts to their emotional state even when they are unaware of their emotional state.
- Consider if the child or young person's tone, pitch or volume of vocalisations changes according to their emotional state.

Use adjustments to respond to their strengths and support needs.

Teach new skills and knowledge through current interests. For example, teaching counting using dinosaurs.

Celebrate progress (in their preferred way) with the child and young person, their class and family.

Provide positive role models that reflect the variety of positions that adults with autism have, including; parent, artist, musician, teacher, nurse, surgeon, university lecturer etc.

Explicitly teach the whole class how to interact positively and respectfully.

Help the child or young person to use visual and written supports and reminders.

Use positive behaviour for learning practices.

Information and support services

Go to [supporting children and students on the autism spectrum](#) for information and resources.

See also [Practice Guidance](#) information on autism.

The department's children and students with disability policy

The [children and students with disability policy \(PDF 195KB\)](#) ensures all children and young people with disability have access to a learning program that meets the requirements of the early years learning framework and the Australian Curriculum.

It describes the legal responsibilities of staff to provide appropriate learning programs and services to children and young people with disability.

Student support services

[Student support services](#) (staff login required) has supports for children and young people with disabilities, including inclusion educators, psychology, speech pathology, behaviour support coaches and consultative advice. Written referral to any support service requires signed consent from families.

Inclusive Education Support Program

Additional resourcing can be applied for through the [Inclusive Education Support Program \(IESP\)](#) (staff login required).

Statewide Inclusive Education Services

[Statewide Inclusive Education Services \(SIES\)](#) has learning and teaching materials and specialised services for children and young people with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Other services

Other organisations that provide professional development, funding and support for education and care services and individual children and young people include:

- [Positive Partnerships](#) provides support through targeted professional learning
- [Autism SA](#) provides a range of service supports for individual children and young people and training opportunities staff.
- [Novita Children's Services](#) provides a range service supports for individual children and young people.

- [National Disability Insurance Scheme \(NDIS\)](#) supports connections to community services, including preschool and school.

Definitions

adjustments

Changes to environment, teaching or assessment that support equitable participation.

autism spectrum

A neurodevelopmental difference that shapes how a person thinks, communicates, processes information and experiences their environment. It includes a wide range of strengths, support needs and presentations.

communication differences

Variations in how a person expresses and receives information (spoken, AAC, gesture, written, selective communication).

functional needs

The practical support requirements a learner has in daily school activities, regardless of diagnosis.

guideline

A recommended course of action taken from evidence-based best practice. It provides specific detail on matters that are the subject of legislation, regulation, policy or decision by executive directors and are discretionary.

identity-first language

Phrasing such as 'autistic person', recognising autism as part of identity.

neurodivergent

A person whose cognitive profile differs from the majority (e.g., autistic, ADHD).

neurodiversity

The natural variation in human brains and thinking styles. Autism, ADHD, dyslexia and other neurotypes are part of this diversity.

neurotypical

A person whose cognitive profile aligns with common social and developmental expectations.

person-first language

Phrasing such as 'person with autism', emphasising personhood before characteristics.

social communication

How individuals use language, behaviour and non-verbal cues to interact. Autistic learners may engage differently but meaningfully.

Roles and responsibilities

All staff

Use this guideline to inform practice.

Refer to [Practice Guidance](#) information on autism.

Supporting information

[Disability access and inclusion for our education system](#)

[Inclusive Education Support Program \(IESP\)](#) (staff login required)

[Planning transition from preschool to school](#) (staff login required)

[Statewide transition process](#) (staff login required)

[Supporting children and students on the autism spectrum](#)

Related policies

[Children and students with disability policy \(PDF 195KB\)](#)

Related legislation

[Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disability](#)

[Convention of the Rights of the Child](#)

[Disability Discrimination Act 1992 \(Cth\)](#)

[Disability Standards for Education 2005 \(Cth\)](#)

[Education and Children's Services Act 2019 \(SA\)](#)

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