

ABOUT AUTISM



Autism refers to a broad range of conditions that affect how a person thinks, feels, interacts with others and experiences their environment.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that can affect some people's lives significantly, while for others the symptoms may be mild and experienced as a difference in thinking and perceiving.

Each learner with autism is a unique individual and adjustments to their educational program and learning environment should be tailored to their needs. When you understand the impact of autism on the individual learner, you'll be better able to adjust to their needs.



**Government
of South Australia**

Department for Education

Autism and other conditions

More than half of the people on the autism spectrum have 4 or more other conditions (Soke et al. 2018), including:

- medical problems such as epilepsy, gastrointestinal issues or sleep disorders
- developmental diagnoses such as global developmental delay, intellectual disability or language delay
- mental health conditions such as anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder or depression, or neurodevelopmental conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- genetic conditions including fragile X syndrome and tuberous sclerosis complex.

The language of autism

When referring to themselves, some learners prefer identity first language, some prefer people first language and some use the terms interchangeably. It's important to check with each learner and their family to determine how they would like to be identified, for example autistic, autistic learner, learner with autism, learner who has autism.

Many individuals and organisations refer to autism as a neurodevelopmental difference and not a disability or disorder. This is intentional and is used to reinforce the fact that a neurodivergent brain is not a disordered brain or one that works 'incorrectly', but a brain that works in a different way that has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Impacts of autism on learning

In a learning environment, a learner with autism can:

- seem inflexible or have difficulty switching focus to new activities (between learning activities and between learning and break times)
- have difficulty with social communication and social interactions
- have their independent learning impacted by their organisation and planning difficulties
- understand and use language literally
- have restrictive or repetitive behaviours
- be highly impacted by sensory inputs.

Strengths of learners with autism

The strengths of learners with autism can be:

- attention to detail and observational skills
- concentration that is free from distraction
- an extraordinary memory
- expertise in particular areas of interest
- unique thought processes that support innovative solutions
- integrity, tenacity and acceptance of difference.

AUTISM ADJUSTMENTS



EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTMENTS



Setting tasks and activities

- Structure activities that are personalised to meet the specific needs of the learner.
- Provide clear start and finish points.
- Present tasks that can be done in different formats, for example electronic, pictures or words.
- Use interactive activities.



Talking to the learner

- Begin with the learner's name to make sure you have their attention (this won't always involve eye contact).
- Keep instructions simple and short.
- Express one idea at a time when giving instructions.
- Allow time for information to be processed and stay quiet during this time.



Rules

- Have clear and consistent rules – all learners are more likely to follow rules if they are stated clearly. Rules help autistic learners because social interactions based on learning rather than intuition provide certainty and order.



Social development and emotional wellbeing adjustments

- Allow access to a favourite sensory object, task or topic to help the learner focus, stay calm and concentrate.
- Identify triggers and plan strategies in advance. Analyse and support behaviours by testing the hypotheses and discussing with the learner's family to gain their perspective.
- Check in with the learner after breaks. Allow time to discuss their experiences and support them to process information.



Teaching adjustments

- Reinforce or reteach skills that support the transfer of information learned from one context to another (generalisation), for example home, learning environment, playground, therapy session.