Autism spectrum guideline

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

Overview

This is an introductory guide to the autism spectrum for Department for Education staff.
It gives awareness for teaching and learning for children and young people on the autism spectrum. It helps staff to understand children and young people’s autism and develop strength-based strategies.

Scope

This guideline applies to educators, early childhood development specialists, principals, directors and education support staff working in education and care.
It gives staff an understanding of the diversity of skills, strengths and support needs of children and young people on the autism spectrum.

What is the autism spectrum?

In May 2013 the terms aspergers, autism, classic autism, high-functioning autism (HFA), low-functioning autism (LFA), autistic disorder and pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) were replaced with the overarching diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. This is also known as the autistic or 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 autistic characteristics interact with each other and the environment varies from person to person. Strengths and support needs of people on the autistic spectrum vary across time and contexts.

The strengths and abilities of children and young people on the autistic spectrum are not always obvious. Some autistic children and young people 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. Autism spectrum children and young people may excel in one or more curriculum areas and have difficulties in others.

The autistic spectrum includes a wide range of strengths and difficulties. It’s important for preschools, schools and families to work together to develop strengths-based support for children and young people on the autistic spectrum.

Children and young people are able to achieve more easily when they feel valued, liked, cared about and can share their interests with others. Specific support strategies need to be tailored for each individual and may need to be changed over time.
Support plans

Autism spectrum support plan

Use the autism spectrum support plan HSP430 (DOC 298KB) to identify relevant information and key areas for consideration for the child or young person, including:

- communication strategies
- sensory sensitivities and strategies
- skills, strengths and interests
- learning preference (not all autistic children and young people are visual thinkers)
- support needs and types.

Sensory overview support plan

Use the sensory overview support plan HSP431 (DOC 389KB) to get a detailed understanding of the child or young person’s sensory issues. It helps you to develop strategies used to minimise sensory overload in the education or care service.

It should be reviewed every 6 months in preschools and primary schools, and every year in high schools.

Education staff, the child or young person and their family work together to develop and update the sensory overview.
What to do – a summary

- Complete the sensory overview support plan HSP431 (DOC 389KB) and the autism spectrum support plan HSP430 (DOC 298KB).
  - Work with the child and young person and their family to complete these.
  - Education staff helping to complete these should include teachers, student support officers working with the child and young person, as well as student support services.

- First contact between a child and young person and a new teacher or SSO must be positive.
  - Find out what the child or young person’s special interest is before meeting them.
  - Be genuinely pleased to meet the child or young person.
  - Talk about something they’re interested in or share a picture or object of something they’re interested in.

- Be patient. Spend time getting to know the child or young person.
  - Small details can be big signposts to their emotional state even when they’re 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 strategies from the sensory overview and autism spectrum support plan to respond to their strengths and support needs.
- Teach new skills and knowledge through current interests. For example, teaching counting using dinosaurs.
- Celebrate progress with the child and young person, their class and family.
- Provide positive role models that reflect the variety of positions that autistic spectrum adults 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 supports.

Information and support services

Go to autism spectrum for information and resources.
Department for Education disability policy

The children and students with disability policy makes sure 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 has supports for children and young people with disabilities, including psychology, speech pathology, behaviour coaches and consultative advice. Written referral to any support service requires signed consent from families.

Inclusive education support program (IESP)

Additional support can be applied for through the Inclusive education support program (IESP).

Special education resource unit (SERU)

Special education resource unit (SERU) has learning and teaching materials and specialised services for children and young people with disabilities and learning difficulties. They have information on highly structured teaching, such as visual timetables and supports for classroom routines and tasks.

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 free and fee for service supports for individual children and young people and training opportunities staff.
- Novita Children's Services provides a range of free and fee for service supports for individual children and young people.
- Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) runs autism specific schools.
- National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) supports connections to community services, including preschool and school.
Roles and responsibilities

All staff

Use this guideline to inform practice.
Complete autism training. Available at Special education resource unit (SERU)

Supporting information

Understanding the autism spectrum (PDF, 334.9 KB)
Autism spectrum
Rights, legislation and standards
Planning transition from preschool to school
Year 7 to 8 transition process
Inclusive Education Support Program (IESP)

Related policy documents

Children and students with disability policy

Related legislation

Education and Children’s Services Act 2019
Disability Discrimination Act 1992

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