

Understanding the autism spectrum

Prevalence rates

Autism spectrum prevalence rates in Australia for children aged under 7 years were found to be 2.5% or 1 in every 40 children (Randall, Sciberras, Brignell, et al, 2016). However, this is only for children who have already been through the diagnostic process before the age of 7 and many children are not diagnosed until they are older. Later diagnosis is more likely for girls on the autism spectrum as they can present quite differently to the typical diagnostic profile. In 2014 approximately 25% of children and young people with disabilities have a verified autism spectrum diagnosis in South Australia. Autism SA (2012) reported that people on the autism spectrum are more likely to experience additional mental health difficulties. This means that wellbeing strategies should be incorporated into plans for children and young people on the autism spectrum.

The autism spectrum diagnosis is based on observed behavioural characteristics, however the behaviours are known to be based in neurological (brain) differences that impact on how individuals experience and respond to themselves, their environment and the wider world around them. There are three main models in which to view the autism spectrum: the medical model, the social model and the neurodiversity model. Each of these explains the autism spectrum very differently.

The medical model

The medical model is the model used for diagnosis, which in South Australia requires two diagnoses from different professions/professionals. Professions able to diagnose in South Australia are speech pathologists, psychologists, paediatricians and psychiatrists, however, the diagnostician must also be registered as an approved diagnostician with Autism SA. To access services in DECD sites a further verification is required (from a DECD psychologist). This verification details the educational support needs of the child/children and young people, enabling support to be targeted to those support needs.

The diagnostic framework used is the DSM-5, which views the autism spectrum as a disability characterised by a number of deficits across two main areas. These issues must have been present from early childhood, even if they were not obvious until later:

- persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts
- restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities, which encompasses hyper- and/or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment.

The social model

The social model of disability applied to the autism spectrum says that people on the autism spectrum are not inherently disabled but that the way the environment is presented and the lack of appropriate supports can disable people. This model focuses on environmental modifications including social interaction modifications to facilitate success for people on the autism spectrum.

The neurodiversity model

The neurodiversity model takes the biological principle that human brains and minds have a variety of neurocognitive functioning. Therefore it can be said the autism spectrum is a natural and valuable variant of humanity, resulting from neurological differences and the resulting



different development of the brain which causes differences in behaviour, communication, learning, and social interaction. This model suggests that all humans have skills, strengths and areas of difficulty and resulting support needs. This model focuses on the individuality of all people and the need to understand an individual to ensure support is targeted for that individual. This model encompasses the idea of using areas of strength to provide supports for children to achieve their potential of becoming happy, confident adults.

Developmental trajectory

Children on the autism spectrum develop differently to typical children and may have associated motor skills, both gross and fine, language and literacy, executive functioning, speech, anxiety, dyspraxia, and dyslexia. The incidence of mental health difficulties is much higher amongst people on the autism spectrum than the general population. However, some autistic spectrum children and children and young people may have no other associated difficulties. Sensory sensitivities and personal passions/interests change as the child grows into an adult and educators need to revisit children and young people learning profiles and sensory overviews once or twice a year as a minimum. Children on the autism spectrum can hyperfocus when engaged in learning and are then able to learn deeply and broadly with enthusiasm.

Children on the autism spectrum may or may not have prosopagnosia (face blindness, which is an inability to recognise people by their faces), alexithymia (difficulty recognising their own and others' emotions) or be hyperempathetic, have memory difficulties or photographic memories of anything and everything, or be somewhere in and in between these. Even though the differences within the autism spectrum are vast, there are some strategies that are effective for ensuring good communication with children and young people on the autism spectrum. It is also important to try to minimize anxiety for these children/children and young people whilst maximising learning opportunities.

Families and/or children and young people may express a preference for the way that their child's diagnosis is referred to in conversations and written support plans. Using the word disorder in an educational context is problematic as the child/children and young people may worry that they are inherently disordered rather than being equally valid but different to their peers. It is important to respect the views of the child/children and young people and their family and understand that the autistic community does not always support person first language around autism.

Examples of preferred language:

- person first – children and young people on the autism spectrum
- identity first – autistic.

Collecting information

As children and young people on the autism spectrum are all different, it is important to get to know the children or young person's individual characteristics and how these impact on teaching and learning for them. It is impossible to know what their long term support needs will be in relation to the autistic spectrum as there is no typical developmental profile. For example, children and young people on the autistic spectrum may never develop speech, or they may start to speak when they are six or seven, or they may already speak confidently on arrival at preschool.

Progress overall tends to be non-linear and often children and young people on the autism spectrum have profiles of skills and needs both within and across curriculum and contexts. The skills have sometimes been referred to as splinter skills. As an indication of the complexity of autism, it used to be thought that around 75% of people with a diagnosis of autism also met the criteria for a diagnosis of an intellectual disability. With the changes in diagnostic criteria and the



introduction of the autism spectrum as the diagnosis, it is apparent that there are far fewer people diagnosed with an intellectual disability and autism spectrum (around 25%). Due to the nature of the autism spectrum, accurate assessment of intellectual capacity can be very difficult (Bishop, Farmer & Thurm, 2015), with some children and young people able to work years ahead, or at the same level as their peers, in one area and be struggling to cope in a number of other areas.

Information to inform the development of plans to support the effective engagement of children and young people with Autism in their education and learning should be sourced from a range of key stakeholders and sources. This includes the family and carers, the child or young person, prior records and support staff.

Families and carers are a vital source of information and support for educators as they know their individual child well. Collaborative information gathering is best practice for comprehensive and effective for planning. Children and young people on the autism spectrum may behave quite differently at home to school so open communication is important to find effective supports for these children and young people. This information should include their interests, passions and dislikes/fears as these can have a dramatic impact on behaviour and learning in the educational environment.

To ensure the **voice of children and young people** about their skills, interests and difficulties is captured, educators, support staff and families are encouraged to consider alternative methods than just verbal approaches. Approaches could include asking the child/young person to draw or write or tell you: 'What I wish my teacher knew...' or 'At preschool/school...'. More information about information sharing can be found at [Human Rights at School Gallery](#)

Read existing **assessment reports and plans** to understand the progress a child/student has already made as well as strategies that have been known to support or impede the individual's learning. If reports are not detailed enough to give you this information, seek out previous educators and ask if there are specific triggers that are problematic and strategies that were really helpful. Be aware that your personality and teaching style will interact with the child/students differently so the impact of their autism spectrum on teaching and learning may well be quite different to the impact last year.

Children and young people on the autism spectrum change, grow and develop over time. They may take much longer to acquire some skills, regress when under stress and/or learn some new things much more quickly than expected. DECD psychologists can help educators interpret and understand a child/student's existing assessments and reports. Educators, families, children and young people and support services staff should collaboratively develop a current overview of the individual, plans around support strategies and curriculum modifications to ensure access to learning for the children and young people.

Children and young people who meet the disability support program (DSP) eligibility criteria can be verified as a student with disability. The DSP provides access to targeted funding, resources and programs for these children and young people. Eligibility and access to the DSP is described in the [disability support program five-step process booklet \(PDF 529 KB, DECD staff login required\)](#). Autistic spectrum children and young people who have had their diagnosis verified by a DECD psychologist should have an NEP. Families and sites may find the sensory overview (appendix A) and the autism spectrum support plan (appendix B) a useful addition to the NEP process.

Staff are encouraged to access **professional development** to ensure their skills and their knowledge are up to date. The Special Education Resource unit (SERU) delivers some online autism spectrum training which can be accessed via Plink. Positive Partnerships offers federally funded (free) online training accessed via their website. The autism spectrum is an area of knowledge that is expanding and changing rapidly as old ideas and theories are disproved and new research uncovers more authentic information. Staff are also encouraged to read blogs and articles by adults on the autistic spectrum to get an understanding of the wide ranging potential of



children and young people on the autistic spectrum, so that you are able to hold up positive role models of the autism spectrum to help all children and young people understand that all people have potential.

Key foci for schools and/or preschools

Communication including social interactions

The autism spectrum encompasses children and young people who:

- appear to have fluent speech and those who do not use any formal speech
- are able to hold conversations and those who rely on echolalia (repetition of phrases or chunks of speech)
- use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), home-made visuals, Proloquo2go and other tablet/mobile based systems.

It is important to note that every child/young person who appears to have fluent speech will experience communication and social difficulties, for example by misinterpreting what others say or having auditory processing difficulties.

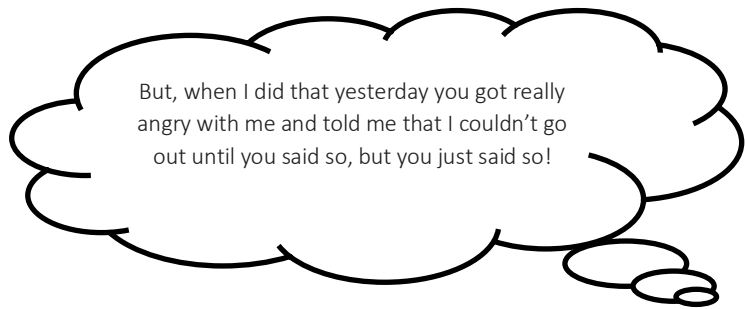
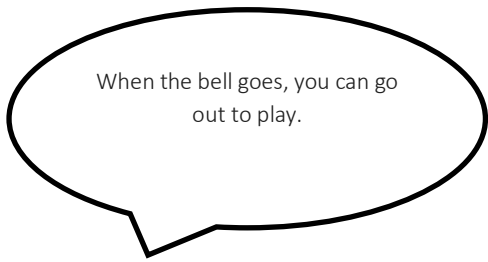
Communication is a two way process and when children and young people are not given opportunities to learn to communicate for themselves using their preferred method with their peers as well as their teacher and other adults, they may express their frustration through a range of behaviours of concern.

It is important to develop an overview of the child/young person communication skills and support needs, which can be done using the autism spectrum support plan. Key questions to look at are:

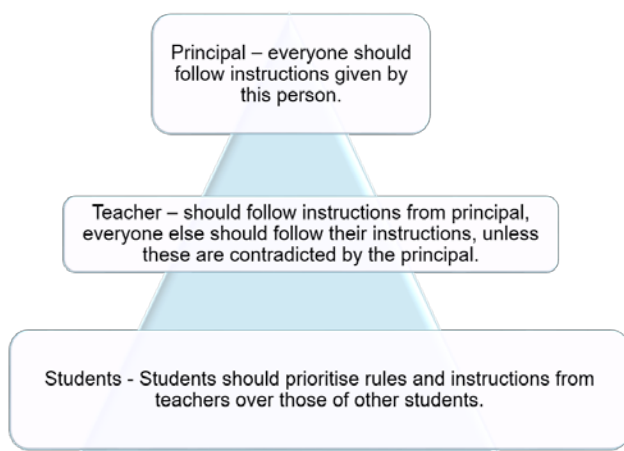
- Do children and young people have meaningful speech in all contexts?
- If the children and young people do not speak at preschool/school, do they speak in any other contexts?
- What supports are children and young people familiar with to express their needs and wants?
- What supports can be trialled with the children and young people and their peers to develop opportunities for social communication?

Although all interactions involve social communication, teaching and learning should be more instructional and therefore does not rely as heavily on social cues, especially when the educator adapts their language to ensure children and young people with communication difficulties can understand. Other social communication relies heavily on contextual clues such as body language, tone of voice, social and cultural contexts including metaphors and irony. Difficulties can be experienced with either closed and/or open questions and/or sequencing of thoughts in order to explain something. Many children and young people on the autism spectrum have a literal understanding of language and assume that others say what they mean and mean what they say. Unless educators do say what they mean and mean what they say, misunderstandings are likely to occur along with an increase in anxiety for children and young people on the autism spectrum.

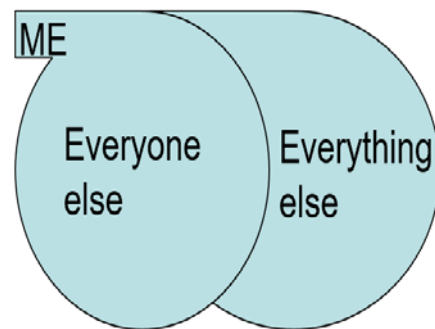




Social communication also relies on children and young people understanding and appropriately responding to the social hierarchy within the classroom and school context. However, this is very difficult for many children and young people on the autism spectrum as they rarely understand or recognise social status. The diagrams below illustrate the relative importance of themselves and others assigned by typical children and young people and those children and young people on the autism spectrum:



Typical understanding of social structure.



Autistic Spectrum children and young people's understanding of social structure.



Additional issues can arise when /children and young people on the autism spectrum respond honestly to questions from educators, due to the literal interpretation of language exhibited by these children and young people.

Question: “Would you like to do your maths now?” **Answer:** “No.”

It is important to NOT ask questions that you do not want an honest answer to. When a question is rhetorical, this is unlikely to be picked up or appropriately responded to, as in the above example. It is better to give short, clear instructions or choices such as:

Instruction: “Maths time now.”

Clear choice: “You can do addition or subtraction sums now.”

It is important for educators to be aware of the difference between receptive and expressive communication abilities in children and young people on the autism spectrum as these are not necessarily correlated. For example, children and young people with excellent expressive communication skills may have limited receptive communication skills and vice versa. Some children and young people will be able to process and accurately respond to multipart instructions whereas others can only process one or two part instructions. For other children and young people their abilities will further reduce when they are overwhelmed or stressed. During meltdowns/shutdowns it is common for children and young people to be unable to process any auditory input. This is why visuals are so useful in guiding children and young people to self-regulation strategies. These strategies are useful for all children and young people in the classroom.

Other common issues for social communication include:

- difficulty taking turn in conversations
- difficulty following conversations
- following the wrong conversation (one being held elsewhere in the room)
- responding honestly rather than tactfully
- not knowing how to start or end conversations.

A core skill to help children and young people succeed with social communication is politeness. It is relatively easy to teach politeness, such as saying please and thank you and these phrases help children and young people to be seen positively by peers and the wider community. These strategies are useful for all children and young people in the classroom.

Sensory issues, implications and strategies

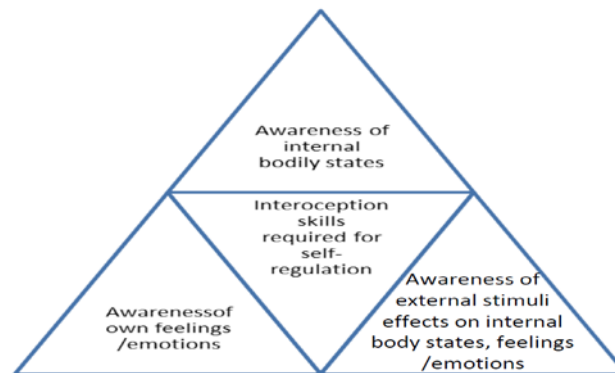
Sensory issues are a key precursor to many behaviours of concern and are often a factor in communication and social communication difficulties. Sensory issues have been misunderstood in previous years and it is now apparent that sensory sensitivities are not fixed from birth but evolve and change as children and young people grow up (Goodall, 2013). Sensory issues are extremely complex as they are both context dependent and integral to emotional regulation for children and young people on the autism spectrum. Reactions to sensory input are variable within people; context (place, time etc.) and state of wellbeing/emotion are important factors. What is a pleasurable sensation in one context can be horrendous in another. Emotional reactions to sensory input are common (Smith Myles et al, 2004).

There are 8 sensory domains used when gaining an overview of sensory issues for children and young people on the autism spectrum:

- taste
- touch/tactile
- smell
- sound/hearing
- visual/sight
- vestibular/sense of balance
- proprioception/sense of body in space



- interoception/ sense of physical and emotional internal bodily actions/reactions.



It is unknown whether sensory issues are due to differences in the way the sensory signals are inputted to the brain or the way the brain processes them. However, for children and young people on the autism spectrum even when vision is screened and found to be 20/20 they may experience issues such as:

- lack of peripheral vision
- poor depth perception.

Sensory input is perceived by children and young people on the autism spectrum as either muted and/or intensified compared to typical people – this is often referred to as hypo and hyper sensitivity. This leads to experiential differences as their environment is perceived differently. This muting and/or intensification of sensory experiences also helps explain sensory sensitivities and sensory seeking and/or avoiding behaviours. Children and young people with a hypersensitivity to people talking may hear the class next door as loudly as their own class, even if no-one else can hear much at all. Children and young people with hyposensitivity to people talking may not pick up when the teacher is talking as they are hearing the air conditioner, lights, street noise and wind.

It is clear that sensory issues can have a huge impact on teaching and learning, even leaving out the difficulties in communication that can occur when children and young people is overwhelmed sensorially and/or emotionally. Sensory overload usually leads to emotional overload, which results in shutdowns and/or meltdowns, which cannot be stopped once in progress. It is much better to prevent shutdowns and meltdowns through careful planning using a sensory overview which informs the autism spectrum support plan. These strategies are useful for all children and young people in the classroom. The [sensory overview](#) (DECD staff login required) can be used for any students as it does not contain the words ‘autism spectrum’, because of the wider range of children and young people who experience sensory issues.

The long term aim of a sensory plan is to enable children and young people to learn to self-regulate their emotions and responses to their environment. However, in the short to medium term, the plan is to help the adults around children and young people know what strategies are useful to enable children and young people to be engaged in learning and return to being happy or calm when they become distressed, overwhelmed or otherwise experiencing negative emotions.

Facial recognition is a sensory processing difficulty that may or may not be present. People on the autism spectrum do not process faces in the same way as their peers, who use the fusiform gyrus in the brain to process faces. However, people on the autism spectrum process faces with the same parts of the brain as they process all other objects (Damiano, Churches, Ring, & Baron-Cohen, 2011). This indicates that people on autism spectrum do not have a hardwired preference

for human faces and voices over other objects as sounds, which their peers tend to have. In conjunction with the difficulties that children and young people on the autism spectrum have in filtering and prioritising sensory input, this can have a significant impact on teaching and learning for these children and young people (Goodall, 2013). Instead of a preference for human faces people on the autism spectrum may find visual textures or specific colours and/or patterns fascinating.

Another aspect of the autism spectrum that can have a huge impact on sensory processing is hyper focus, which usually occurs when /children and young people is very interested in what they are learning/doing. When someone on the autism spectrum is hyper focused on a task or activity they can become so absorbed in the task that they are unaware of and/or unresponsive to both external and internal stimuli such as the bell ring for recess, their teacher talking, becoming hungry or needing to go to the toilet. Interrupting this hyper focus can cause distress to the children and young people.

Strategies to manage sensory issues need to be personalised to respond to the individual child/young person. A tactile toy may help one child/young people to be able to listen on the mat but be completely unsuitable for another. Examples of sensory strategies useful for some children and young people to self- regulate are:

- swinging
- bouncing
- reading
- listening to music
- being in a quiet space
- running
- being wrapped in a weighted blanket
- stroking a soft toy or piece of furry fabric.

Executive functioning and other co-existing issues

There are four domains of executive functioning; inhibition, working memory, cognitive flexibility, and planning. Many children/children and young peoples on the autism spectrum have difficulties with executive functioning in one way or another. These may be apparent or only become clear through careful observation. Sequencing actions or words requires executive functioning as does planning and doing task in class. For some children and young people their executive functioning difficulties are clear when they ask, “when is lunch time?” after lunch time has been and gone, or they find the acquisition of number skills such as counting problematic. Visual strategies can help these children and young people develop their executive functioning.

However, for other children and young peoples, it may be less obvious and be demonstrated through incomplete responses to classroom tasks or difficulties finding something to write with or the correct books in which to write. These difficulties can change over time and as with other children and young peoples, hormonal changes in puberty can exacerbate planning and thinking before starting and working on tasks. An expectation of flexibility can often be problematic for children/children and young peoples on the autism spectrum if it is suddenly imposed.

Fixations on routines are rarely about the ‘need for routine’, rather they are a need for control and predictability over an intense world. Where the need for routine has become so entrenched that the children and young people with autism has a meltdown whenever the routine is changed, this causes lots of difficulties. In this case signal changes well in advance – both verbally and visually.



Explain why the change is happening and what will happen next. Control/understanding is more important for some people than a need for routine. Routine is merely an easy in! If at all possible prevent this from occurring by varying things within the day from early infancy.

Interests can act as self-regulation tools and create an understandable world. They can be viewed as problematic by teachers who require flexibility (however, children and young peoples on the autism spectrum can view flexibility as illogical and assume that it is really a result of poor planning rather than an important life skill). Interests can be used to acquire new skills and/or knowledge in a stress free manner. They can be used to create bonds and trust. Don't forget what is routine for one person is not for another and is not required for another. (Goodall, 2013)

Strategies to support the development of executive functioning need to be individualised to respond to the skills and support needs of each child/young person. Visuals, whether icons/pictures or words, are often useful tools to help plan out tasks, section of the day or whole days. Many adults use calendars or electronic planners, which children and young people can learn to use as supports for themselves. Some high school young people on the spectrum are reluctant to accept help or use supports that identify them as different and are therefore unwilling to use visual pictures or icons. However, these same children and young people will use 'study journals' or 'school planners', especially if these are a regular part of the learning tool box and used by peers who would also benefit from support to organise their learning.

Skills, strengths and interests

Most people focus less if they are asked to do something they are not interested in, however, for children and young people on the autism spectrum, focus is intense (sometimes referred to as hyper focus) when they are interested and engaged and minimal or non-existent when they are not. This is because of the energy that it takes to manage day-to-day tasks and processing of the sensory and social environments for children and young people on the autism spectrum. This means that asking a child/young person to learn a new skill through a topic they are interested in is far more effective than using a topic they lack interest in or actively dislike.

Children and young people on the autism spectrum may be interested in things they are not skilled in, such as planes or astrophysics, however they may well have a huge knowledge bank related to their areas of interest. For example a child/young person may be interested in visual textures but has not spent time creating their own. On the other hand, children and young people on the autism spectrum rarely engage with things that they are not interested in and so have a much more limited knowledge in these areas, which can impact on skill development.

If an educator wants to help their children and young people learn to count using objects, it would be wise to choose objects which children and young people on the autism spectrum in the class like or are interested in. This will maximise engagement and focus, which will in turn maximise learning, skills and the development of new knowledge. Nearly everything children and young people learn can be linked to areas of interest even if this link is tangential and requires a step between to help demonstrate how they are linked.

Examples:

Minecraft:

- Maths – sums using characters from Minecraft or attributes of buildings etc.
- Literacy – retelling adventures from Minecraft, writing a play to re-enact an scenario
- Geography – designing a city for Minecraft, drafting and then building it. Mapping the final product.
- History – investigating when and why Minecraft was developed



- Science – design and create a Minecraft roller coaster, then create a scale model in real life. Do experiments on acceleration and velocity on both.
- Art and craft – make scale model creepers or creeper puppets

Thomas the Tank Engine:

- Maths – timetables for trains, costs to travel, distances
- Literacy – writing own stories for Thomas or new characters
- Geography – designing a train route, drafting, building models and mapping, including geographical features. Investigate bridges and tunnels.
- History – investigating changes in Thomas and other characters over the years, look at changes in trains in real life from steam trains to bullet trains. Compare and contrast with Thomas.
- Science – how do steam engines work? How do tracks help trains get from one place to another? What is the maximum speed different trains can go on different tracks? Why?
- Art and craft – design new features for Thomas or new seating designs for modern trains

Learning/thinking preferences

It is a myth that everyone on the autism spectrum is a visual thinker. Children and young people can learn through seeing (visually), hearing (auditory), and/or through touching or manipulating an object (kinaesthetic or 'hands-on' learning). For example, looking at a picture book or reading a textbook involves learning through vision; listening to a teacher talk involves learning through hearing; and manipulating blocks to learn quantity involves learning kinaesthetically. Most people can learn effectively using two or three learning styles but it is thought that most people on the autism spectrum rely more heavily on their preferred learning style.

Once a child/young person's learning preference is known, then using this modality to teach will maximise learning opportunities for children and young people on the autism spectrum. However, if a child/young person's learning style is unknown or the class has children and young people with different learning styles, then an effective strategy is to use all three styles together. For example, when teaching the concept 'in', one can display a box with a toy in it (visual), describe the position of the cat (auditory), and then let the child/young person put the cat in and out of the box (kinaesthetic).

Visual thinkers tend to see detailed images in their head when hearing words. This can be both beneficial and problematic. Visual puns can be a great source of amusement for many visual thinkers on the autism spectrum and can provide opportunities for positive interactions.

Logical thinkers will apply logic to all tasks, but their logic may not be the same as your logic. This does not make either of you wrong; it merely illustrates the different thinking styles used by children and young people on the autism spectrum. Other common autistic spectrum thinking types are verbal/word thinkers, perfectionist and/or perseverative thinking and pattern thinkers. In addition it is now understood that creativity can be an area of strength for some people on the autism spectrum. This creativity may be present typically in a range of different ideas or it may be revealed as a single highly creative response in each problem put to the child/young person.

Perfectionism can be extremely problematic in an educational environment and children/ and young people on the autism spectrum need support to develop an awareness of the benefits of making mistakes in a positive and supportive way. Perseverative thinking may or may not be apparent in the learning environment but is linked to poor sleep as well as the development of and worsening of anxiety and depression. Perseverative thinking is where the child/young person



replays a situation or conversation over and over again trying to make sense of it or fixating on what went wrong. This style of thinking usually occurs in a negative context rather than a celebratory way.

Motivation, behaviour and reactivity

Being autistic can be extremely tiring as it can require huge amounts of energy to do everyday tasks and respond to everyday environments due to sensory sensitivities, anxiety, perfectionism and autistic thinking styles. This is the main reason why children and young people on the autism spectrum do not engage well in tasks that are not meaningful or interesting to them. However, their lack of understanding of the social hierarchy contributes to this situation too. Overall, it is much easier and more effective to motivate any child/young person to learn new skills/knowledge through areas of interest.

The way that adults react to issues around engagement and on/off task behaviours of children and young people on the autism spectrum can either promote effective learning or create situations where meltdowns and behaviours of concern are more likely to happen. Meltdowns, shutdowns and tantrums are all different and children and young people on the autism spectrum can demonstrate both acceptable and unacceptable behaviour just like their peers. They can be funny and helpful as well as naughty.

Shutdowns and meltdowns are responses to overload whereas tantrums are usually a response to not wanting to do something or not being allowed to do something they want to do. Responding with a tantrum can happen throughout the lifespan where peers often learn to manage their emotional responses to these situations within a few years of starting school. With clear, logical and collaboratively set rules, children and young people on the spectrum can learn to manage their tantrums and respond more constructively. In contrast, adult control of the environment makes it more difficult for children and young people to learn to self-regulate and manage their emotional and sensory responses that drive shutdowns and meltdowns. Further information to assist in these areas is provided in the [School Discipline Policy \(PDF 73KB, DECD staff login required\)](#). In addition a lack of interoception can lead to increased numbers of meltdowns and/or shutdowns. More information can be found in the [Interoception 101](#) document on the SERU website.

It can be more difficult for children and young people to engage if they are anxious about a transition, whether this is an in-class transition or a larger between site transition. This anxiety can occur just before a transition or up to a year or so before,. Clear information around transitions can help to minimise this anxiety and enable children and young people to develop skills to self-manage change over time. Other relevant skills need to be specifically taught to ensure that children and young people are able to access the curriculum in new contexts. [Planning transition from preschool to school \(DECD staff login required\)](#) and the [Year 7/8 Transition Process \(DECD staff login required\)](#) provide further information to assist in this area. The [autism support plan](#) (DECD staff login required) has sections to cover transition supports.

Behaviours of concern

There are only three behaviours of concern for any child / young person:

- hurting self
- hurting others
- damaging/removing property.

These behaviours occur most frequently when a child / young person on the autism spectrum is disengaged from learning. This disengagement can occur through sensory and/or emotional overload, lack of interest in the topic/class, frustration because the work or social environment is



too difficult, or boredom because the work is too easy or not engaging. It can be very difficult to know when a child/young person on the autism spectrum is bored rather than frustrated because they can often use the same terminology to describe both. This can be because they are not yet able to discriminate between the two states of being or because they have misunderstood/misapplied the language being used.

For example, a year 4 child / young person on the autism spectrum used the phrase “I’m bored” three or four times a day, however his teacher said that after a few months it became clear that he had different body movements accompanying the phrase which helped the teacher to interpret when he was frustrated because the work was too hard and when he was bored because it was too easy. The teacher found that the child was not inherently refusing to work but that his perfectionism meant he struggled to cope with work that he perceived as too challenging unless it was clearly scaffolded for him. In contrast, he would not do work that he had already done before but if it was replaced with more challenging, but scaffolded tasks, he would engage really well. His teacher said that, ‘engagement is the key to preventing most behaviours of concern.’

Sensory and/or emotional overload is problematic for all people on the autism spectrum and as children and young people may not yet have learnt how to manage themselves and their environment, it can be more problematic for them. The [sensory overview \(DECD staff login required\)](#) will provide a detailed picture of the sensory and emotional needs and strengths of the child or young person. This will enable the educator to effectively plan and deliver the supports required for the child or young person to develop co and then self-regulation skills.

It is important to note that the support needs of most autistic spectrum children and young people will change over time and in the different educational contexts, different issues will arise. Transition into, out of and throughout all levels of education needs to be carefully planned to ensure that children and young people are successful, including ensuring that functional skills for adulthood are acquired before leaving school. Successful transition into adulthood requires thought prior to the children and young people’s final year at school in order to ensure that children and young people are equipped with all the skills that they need to either continue with study or enter the workforce. For other children and young people the focus may be on facilitating the achievement of as much independence as possible, which may require supports from an occupational therapist and/or speech therapist as well as access to their ongoing academic learning.

The diversity of skills, strengths and support needs demonstrated by both diagnosed and undiagnosed children and young people on the autistic spectrum can challenge educators as they work to provide programs that minimize anxiety, stress and distress but maximise academic, social and emotional development and wellbeing for all children and young people.



References

- Bishop, S., Farmer, L., & Thurm, C. (2015). Measurement of Nonverbal IQ in Autism Spectrum Disorder: Scores in Young Adulthood Compared to Early Childhood. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(4), 966-974.
- Bogdashina, O. (2003). *Sensory perceptual issues in autism and Asperger Syndrome: different sensory experiences, different perceptual worlds*. London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Chaplin, E., Hardy, S., and Underwood, L., (2013) *Autism Spectrum Conditions: A Guide*. East Sussex, GBR: Pavilion Publishing.
- Colvin, G., & Sheehan, Martin R. (2014). *Managing the Cycle of Meltdowns for Children and young peoples with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.
- Damiano, C, Churches, O, Ring, H & Baron-Cohen, S . (2011). The development of perceptual expertise for faces and objects in autism spectrum conditions. *Autism Research*, 4 (4), 297–301.
- DuCharme, R., & Gullotta, Thomas P. (2013). *Asperger Syndrome A Guide for Professionals and Families (2nd ed., Issues in Children's and Families' Lives)*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Fleury, V., Hedges, S., Hume, K., Browder, D., Thompson, J., Fallin, K., . . . Vaughn, S. (n.d.). Addressing the Academic Needs of Adolescents With Autism Spectrum Disorder in Secondary Education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 35(2), 68-79. Goodall, E. (2013) Understanding and facilitating the achievement of autistic potential, SC, CreateSpace.
- Goodall, E. (2013) *Understanding and facilitating the achievement of autistic potential (2nd ed.)* SC, Create Space.
- Hume, K., Boyd, B., Hamm, J., & Kucharczyk, S. (2014) Supporting Independence in Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum. *Remedial and Special Education*, 35(2), 102-113.
- Mahler, K. (2016) *Interoception – The eighth sensory system*, Kansas, AAPC.
- Myles, B. S., Hagiwara, T., Dunn, W., Rinner, L., Reese, M., Huggins, A., & Becker, S. (2004). Sensory issues in children with Asperger syndrome and autism. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 39(4), 283-290.
- Randall, M., Sciberras, E., Brignell, A., Ihsen, E., Efron, D., Dissanayake, C., & Williams, K. (2016). Autism spectrum disorder: Presentation and prevalence in a nationally representative Australian sample. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 50(3), 243-53.
- Silberman, S., (2015) *Neurotribes - The legacy of autism and how to think smarter about people who think differently*, NY, Avery.
- Test, D., Smith, L., & Carter, E. (2014). Equipping Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders for Adulthood. *Remedial and Special Education*, 35(2), 80-90.

