



Preparing an autism friendly classroom in secondary School

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Autism is lifelong, and affects a person's social communication, interaction, interests, and behaviour. Behaviour related to autism is usually present before the age of 3 years, although a diagnosis is often made later than this as the social demands exceed the person's capacity to cope.

What are major challenges for a child with Autism?

1. Movement between lessons (overstimulation).
2. Having up to six teachers a day (adjusting to their voice, subject matter, and style).
3. Being organised and on time for these lessons.
4. Doing homework.
5. Creating and maintaining social relationships.

Help in class:

- Implement a seating plan and maintain this. Allow the student to choose where they feel most comfortable (whether that be next to a friend, in a spot where they can see the main focus of the lesson, and/or near to the door).
- Allow the student time to settle, speak to them in a kind manner and remind them where they are and which class they are in.
- Build a rapport, get to know the student and their interests.
- Suggest to students who can be disorganised to colour code their timetable with the colour of their subject exercise books to help them remember which ones to bring to class.
- If possible, provide printed copy of texts to students and allow them to annotate these (highlighting and making note of key points) as copying off the board and switching attention can be difficult for students with autism.
- For those who have difficulty writing, find varied ways that the student can record their work. For example, having speech-to-text on their computer, dictating to a recording device, or typing up the notes themselves. Diagrams, pictures, and other visual recordings can be helpful.
- Keep in mind that students with autism can be intelligent and knowledgeable in particular subjects. They can easily become distracted and not understand why you need to go over information for other students.
- Homework is a significant issue. Is it possible for the student to complete it in school? Can it be shortened? Can they use different mediums to writing? If it is necessary, make sure homework is accurately noted down, you can print the homework onto sticky labels to stick into the student's planner. If

you utilise an electronic homework system, ensure the student and their family knows how to navigate this.

- Create pupil passports that display key information about each student to give to the subject teachers. Use these to read and plan strategies on how to structure whole-class teaching.
- Get to know your Teaching Assistants (TA's) and ensure that they are involved in departmental meetings. See Appendix A for accompanying leaflet.
- Autistic students commonly do not do well in group work. Alternatively, organise structured pair work to help students work collaboratively and build up to group work.

Classroom environment:

- It is important to have a comfortable but functional classroom that facilitates all year-groups utilising the room. Ensure your classroom is rid of clutter or distracting displays, as it can be difficult for children who get visually distracted to focus.
- Keep your whiteboard space clear to allow students to focus solely on the board. You could put key points or useful information on Velcro next to the board for those who do start to lose focus. Although, this will need to be changed depending on class and year-group.
- It is important to display visual pictures alongside key information.
- It is common for a student with autism not to have the right equipment for class. If possible, keep spares in the classroom so that the student can access these without a fuss during the lesson.
- Have simple class rules, such as: Be Safe. Be Kind.and ensure these are followed.

Help outside of class:

- Some students may benefit from being escorted between classes by a member of staff or by a peer.
- Some students may benefit from being allowed to leave class early to avoid sensory overload in the corridors.
- Having a buddy system so that students are not left behind after class.

Parents/carers:

- Good communication with parents/carers is key. Put in place a good communication, especially within the first half term to inform parents of how their child is settling in. Send an email or even a postcard. Ask them if there is anything they can share that would help teach their child in a subject. For example, keeping spare PE kit at school so that the child can participate in

PE, emailing ingredients for cooking class directly to parents to ensure the student has what they need, or studying a book they like in English.

- Ensure that you provide the school's SENCO or pastoral leader with good feedback to inform families, as they may have the most contact with parents and it's important to provide them with up-to-date information.
- Ensure that you discuss any problems with the school's SENCO or other subject teachers before informing parents to understand whether this behaviour is a common problem in other subjects and if there any patterns.

Behaviour:

- For the most part, any behaviour that is seen as disruptive is rooted in anxiety.
- Be mindful of any sensory sensitivities and needs as school can be overwhelming for students and they may need a break occasionally. A time-out card may be helpful for the student to step out and return to class when they are ready.
- Students often use low levels of disruption, such as acting silly or loudly, to communicate as this can get a reaction from others when they find it difficult to join a conversation. Structured pair work and public speaking skills can help with this.
- Similar behaviour to the above can occur when the student does not know what to do or is having difficulty completing the task, and they struggle to ask for help. Try and break the task up and explain clearly what needs to be done to make the task more manageable for the student.
- Be mindful of the students who do not like to be centre of attention as this can be overwhelming for them. Ask them to write their answers on a whiteboard, talk to them individually and try not to single them out in front of the class.
- Build a rapport, get to know the student and their interests, and their preferred classroom management style.
- It is important to remember that students can be very honest and shout obscenities when they are distressed. Do not to take these personally and use your skill to diffuse this distress.
- Be mindful that you can call for help when you are no longer able to prevent a situation and need to manage the response. Create a plan for when a student is upset or angry and follow this carefully. It can be helpful to have a visual card that you can show the student to reduce verbal language causing further stress.
- You can have high expectations for behaviour but be mindful that students with autism may need support with meeting these expectations or not be expected to. Try and write down your expectations as an alternative to telling the student off.

Top Ten Tips for Secondary Teachers

1. **Think about your seating plan.**

A pupil with autism needs to see the board clearly, They may need to be near the door, Can benefit from sitting next to a friend/good role model, Take into account sensory distractions.

2. **Cue the pupil into the lesson / instructions.**

Use their name and tell them it is time to listen, Be specific about what you are going to do. (Use First, then, next, finally).

3. **Summarise the main points and instructions.**

Can write main points on board. Ask pupil "Tell me what you have to do." rather than "Do you understand." Check understanding in smaller chunks rather than all together.

4. **Break the lesson tasks into a clear list.**

Use the board or individual list for pupil. Get pupil in the habit of ticking off each part of the task on their list. Add a reward/praise for completing task if possible.

5. **Use visual support and active learning wherever possible.**

Pupils with autism are more visual learners and will be more engaged in lessons. Help the pupil build a visual memory of the subject matter.

6. **Keep it Short and Simple (KISS) when giving instructions.**

Say what you want rather than what you don't want. Make it direct and literal. Be specific about what you want. (Use First, then, next, finally). Don't use sarcasm or expect them to get humour unless you know they will understand.

7. **Teach how to engage in class discussions.**

Use factual questions rather than asking for opinions or abstract ideas. Warn them that you will be asking them about '****' after ----.

8. **Teach how to work in a group.**

Start with a pair (see example) make it highly structured, clear roles and outcomes. Do not put pupil under stress by putting them in unstructured, open-ended tasks in a group, especially when pupils choose their group.

9. **Tasks and homework that work best have a clearly identified outcome.**

Use familiar, repetitive, and highly structured tasks wherever possible. Pupils will need support to plan out more open-ended or imaginative tasks. Let them use specialist interests do complete homework tasks when possible.

10. **Give the pupil a break!**

Understand that they are not 'doing it on purpose' – Autism is a difference in the way the brain works, and processing can take much longer. Let the pupil take a break if they are stressed. They can be very susceptible to sensory overload.

References

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MAKING BEST USE OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Summary of recommendations

The effective use of TAs under everyday classroom conditions

The effective use of TAs in delivering structured interventions out of class

Integrating learning from work led by teachers and TAs

Sections are colour coded for ease of reference

1 TAs should not be used as an informal teaching resource for low attaining pupils



The evidence on TA deployment suggests schools have drifted into a situation in which TAs are often used as an informal instructional resource for pupils in most need. This has the effect of separating pupils from the classroom, their teacher and their peers.

Although this has happened with the best of intentions, this evidence suggests that the status quo is no longer an option.

School leaders should systematically review the roles of both teachers and TAs and take a wider view of how TAs can support learning and improve attainment throughout the school.

2 Use TAs to add value to what teachers do, not replace them



If TAs have a direct instructional role it is important they add value to the work of the teacher, not replace them – the expectation should be that the needs of all pupils are addressed, first and foremost, through high quality classroom teaching. Schools should try and organise staff so that the pupils who struggle most have as much time with the teacher as others. Breaking away from a model of deployment where TAs are assigned to specific pupils for long periods requires more strategic approaches to classroom organisation. Instead, school leaders should develop effective teams of teachers and TAs, who understand their complementary roles in the classroom.

Where TAs are working individually with low attaining pupils the focus should be on relating access to high-quality teaching, for example by delivering brief, but intensive, structured interventions (see Recommendations 5 and 6).

3 Use TAs to help pupils develop independent learning skills and manage their own learning



Research has shown that improving the nature and quality of TAs' task to pupils can support the development of independent learning skills, which are associated with improved learning outcomes. TAs should, for example, be trained to avoid prioritising task completion and instead concentrate on helping pupils develop ownership of tasks.

TAs should aim to give pupils the least amount of help first. They should allow sufficient wait time, so pupils can respond to a question or attempt the stage of a task independently. TAs should intervene appropriately when pupils demonstrate they are unable to proceed.

4 Ensure TAs are fully prepared for their role in the classroom



Schools should provide sufficient time for TA training and for teachers and TAs to meet out of class to enable the necessary lesson preparation and feedback.

Creative ways of ensuring teachers and TAs have time to meet include adjusting TAs' working hours (start early, finish early), using assembly time and having TA join teachers for (part of) Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time.

During lesson preparation time ensure TAs have the essential 'need to know's':

- Concepts, facts, information being taught
- Skills to be learned, applied, practised or extended
- Intended learning outcomes
- Expected/required feedback.

5 Use TAs to deliver high quality one-to-one and small group support using structured interventions



Research on TAs delivering targeted interventions in one-to-one or small group settings shows a consistent impact on attainment of approximately three to four additional months' progress (effect size 0.2–0.3). Crucially, these positive effects are only observed when TAs work in structured settings with high quality support and training. When TAs are deployed in more informal, unsupported instructional roles, they can impact negatively on pupils' learning outcomes.

6 Adopt evidence-based interventions to support TAs in their small group and one-to-one instruction



Schools should use structured interventions with reliable evidence of effectiveness. There are presently only a handful of programmes in the UK for which there is a secure evidence base, so if schools are using programmes that are 'unproven', they should try and replicate some common elements of effective interventions:

- Sessions are often brief (20–50 mins, occur regularly (3–5 times per week) and are maintained over a sustained period (8–20 weeks). Careful timetabling is in place to enable this consistent delivery
- TAs receive extensive training from experienced trainers and/or teachers (5–30 hours per intervention)
- The intervention has structured supporting resources and lesson plans, with clear objectives
- TAs closely follow the plan and structure of the intervention
- Assessments are used to identify appropriate pupils, guide areas for focus and track pupil progress. Effective interventions ensure the right support is being provided to the right child
- Connections are made between the out-of-class learning in the intervention and classroom teaching (see Rec 7).

7 Ensure explicit connections are made between learning from everyday classroom teaching and structured interventions



Interventions are often quite separate from classroom activities. Lack of time for teachers and TAs to liaise allows relatively little connection between what pupils experience in, and away from, the classroom. The key is to ensure that learning in interventions is consistent with, and extends, work inside the classroom and that pupils understand the links between them. It should not be assumed that pupils can consistently identify and make sense of these links on their own.

Appendices

Appendix A: