

# WORKING WITH AUTISTIC CHILDREN

## TALK TO THE CHILD AND THEIR PARENTS

Like every child, autistic children have their own unique strengths and challenges – find out from the child’s parents what they like and dislike, what they’re good at, and what they struggle with. Have a chat with the child about what school is like for them and what sorts of things help them learn.

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## AVOID STRESS OR OVERLOAD

Watch for signs that the child is getting tired or anxious. You’ll get better at spotting these the more you get to know the child, but some common ones are hand wringing, increased fidgeting, or rocking back and forth. Many autistic people have heightened senses, meaning that sounds, smells, touch, and visual input can feel like they’re turned up too high. Having a quiet space where children can retreat from all of this overwhelming sensory input can really help.

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## USE CLEAR LANGUAGE

Autistic children may struggle to interpret body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. They may need to be explicitly told things that other children will pick up through non-verbal cues. Try to put as much as possible of what you are communicating into words, and use visual supports (like written schedules or instructions) to help children process what you’re saying.

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## GIVE SPECIFIC, CONCRETE INSTRUCTIONS

Interpreting instructions can be difficult for some autistic children, and providing specifics can be helpful. If an autistic child struggles to follow instructions like “Can you clean up this area?” or “Grab everything you need for lunchtime”, try breaking the big task down into specific smaller tasks (pick up all the paper off the floor, then put the paintbrushes away, then put the paint away, etc.).

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## LISTEN TO THE WORDS, NOT THE BODY LANGUAGE

Autistic children are often accused of being rude, disrespectful, or aggressive when they don’t mean to be. They can have no or very little use of gesture or body language; or their body language might be difficult for you to interpret. They may speak too loudly and/or in a monotone, and they may have no or very little facial expression. All of these can be misinterpreted as rudeness or hostility, but this is not the intent – autistic children’s natural non-verbal cues are just different. If the words they’re saying seem to be communicating something different from their non-verbal cues or attitude, the words are almost always what they actually mean.

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## LET THEM PAY ATTENTION THE WAY THEY NEED TO

For many autistic children, eye contact can be difficult, uncomfortable, or overly intense. It can be hard to concentrate on what someone is saying if you’re busy concentrating on looking at their eyes or sitting still and suppressing the movements that help you pay attention. Autistic children often pay attention by looking at their hands or the floor and sometimes making repetitive movements or fidgeting. This can look like a distracted or inattentive child, but they are taking in much more than they would be able to if they were forcing themselves to sit still and look you in the eye.

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## LET THEM KNOW ABOUT CHANGES AND TRANSITIONS IN ADVANCE

Routine and predictability are really important to many autistic people. The world can be chaotic and stressful, and knowing exactly what’s coming up next is vital. Changes in routine or unexpected surprises can feel like the whole world has just been turned upside down, and lead to huge amounts of stress. To help with this, let children know as soon as possible when their routine will change (and be prepared to answer lots of questions!).

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Transitioning between activities can be hard too – autistic children will often become very involved and settled in a particular activity and struggle to switch their attention to the next thing. You can help by providing visual timers to show when the next transition will happen; giving verbal time updates (“Five minutes until break time”); and giving the autistic child as much time as they need to adjust to the new task.

