

Setting up a classroom

Every autistic child is different – what works for one child may make no difference for another, and it's often impossible to put together a classroom that works perfectly for every child. The best way to work out how you can set up your classroom to accommodate an autistic student is to talk to that student and their parents or caregivers, and find out what's worked in the past, and what their particular sensory experience is like. It helps to keep this going over the school year, and to check in with the child and their parents/caregivers every so often to see how they feel things are going.

Below are some suggestions of ways to make a classroom more autistic-friendly – if you haven't met your autistic student yet, or if the student isn't sure what will work for them, this list is a good place to start.

- Use natural light rather than overhead lighting wherever possible, especially if your classroom has fluorescent lights. Many autistic children are more sensitive to the flickering and humming of overhead lights, and can find it distracting and annoying.
- Look for sources of unexpected light in the classroom – glare off a whiteboard or computer screens can be much brighter and even painful for some autistic children.
- Classrooms are often very visually cluttered, which can be overwhelming for some children. Make sure there's a space somewhere in the classroom without decoration on the walls, with somewhere blank that a child can look at to reduce the amount of visual processing they need to do.

- Try to have at least some time every day with minimal background noise in the classroom – devices on silent, no background music, students reading or working quietly, etc. Many autistic children find it difficult or impossible to filter out background noise, and cannot concentrate in an environment with multiple sources of sound to keep track of.
- Give children a chance to take a break from sensory input. This could be a smaller space within your classroom that is visually blank and silent (or that has noise-cancelling headphones available), or it could be another space within the school that children can get to easily. Even just sitting out in a hallway or just outside for a few minutes can be a good way for an overwhelmed child to calm themselves and recover from sensory overwhelm.
- Minimise scents in the classroom. Many autistic children are very sensitive to smell, and even something like a scented candle or a staff member wearing strong perfume can be distressing.
- Consider letting your autistic student finish messy activities like art a bit early, so that they can be first to clean up and don't have to wait for other children. Some autistic children will have textures that they refuse to touch at all, and others will be fine during an activity but become increasingly distressed the longer they're expected to wait with messy or wet hands afterwards. Knowing that they get to clean themselves up as soon as the activity is done can really help.
- Having an easily visible timetable for the day is helpful for many autistic children, who need to know what's coming up next. Easily visible clocks for older children, or visual timers for younger children can also help with transitioning between tasks. It can also help to have a longer-term timetable up somewhere in the classroom, or a list of changes and routine-breaking events (athletics day, school trips, etc.) so that children can prepare themselves for big changes.

- Look into flexible seating options. Many autistic children have some difficulties or differences with their motor skills, and being able to sit on a yoga ball, wobble cushion (like these: <https://www.exploresensory.co.nz/wobblecushion>), or other sensory-friendly seat can really help with their concentration and comfort.
- Movement breaks are helpful for all children, but can be especially necessary for autistic children. Scheduling multiple times during the day when children can get up and move around, go outside for a while, or do whatever they need to do with their bodies can really help them concentrate for the rest of the day.
- Some autistic children need a lot more personal space than others – either because they need to move their bodies more than other children, and will get in their neighbour’s way, because they have a teacher aide or other support who needs space, or because they are particularly sensitive to other children being in their space. Keep an eye on how your autistic student is coping with the personal space they have, and consider having some options available to give them more space if they need it.