



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

# Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools

## Supporting Children and Young People





# **Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools**

## **Supporting Children and Young People**

Published April 2022

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# Foreword

I am delighted to see the publication of this important guidance resource for schools and others involved in the education of children and young people with autism.

The guidance will help school leaders, teachers, SNAs and other school staff to respond to the needs of students with autism. It will be of particular use to school staff working in specialist education roles and settings.

The guidance provides information on evidence-based whole-school and individualised approaches to effective intervention.

In the years ahead, the guidance will inform school policy and practice and will be reviewed in the light of experience.

The guidance will be an essential reference point for all those involved in teacher education and professional development programmes.

The publication of the guidance is another important step in supporting the inclusion of children and young people with special educational needs in education, which is critical to supporting them to achieve good education and life outcomes.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the valuable work being done in schools and classrooms, and the dedication of our school staff to creating a school environment that supports the wellbeing, learning and participation of autistic students.

We are fortunate in Ireland that our educators are deeply committed to ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed and achieve to his or her fullest potential.

In developing this guidance, the Department aims to ensure that all our schools have the knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence to adapt their culture, provision and environment so that our students with autism can fully participate in school life.

It is my strong view that our schools and educators must be fully supported in this journey towards greater inclusion.

The publication of this guidance document is one step in this journey and will be complimented by a range of resources and other supports over time.

**Josepha Madigan TD,**

**Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion**

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# Glossary

<b>AAC</b>	<b>Augmentative and Alternative Communication</b> includes a range of strategies and tools to help people who struggle with speech. These may be letter or picture boards or computer-based systems. AAC helps someone to communicate as effectively as possible, in as many situations as possible.
<b>Behaviours of concern</b>	<b>Behaviours of concern</b> replaces the term 'challenging behaviour' which has over time served to stigmatise those who engage in such behaviours. Behaviours of concern imply that there is a risk to the safety or wellbeing of the people who display these behaviours as well as to other people.
<b>DARE</b>	The <b>Disability Access Route to Education</b> is a third level alternative admissions scheme for school leavers whose disabilities have had a negative impact on their second level education.
<b>Double Empathy Problem</b>	The theory of the <b>Double Empathy Problem</b> suggests that when autistic and non-autistic people, who have very different experiences of the world, interact with one another, they will struggle to empathise with and understand each other.
<b>Functional communication</b>	<b>Functional communication</b> represents the way in which an individual spontaneously and independently communicates their needs and socially interacts with others.
<b>Interoception</b>	<b>Interoception</b> is part of the sensory system which detects internal body messages, such as hunger, temperature, need for the toilet and emotions.
<b>Joint/shared attention</b>	<b>Joint attention</b> or <b>shared attention</b> involves using eye contact and gestures to share experiences with others.
<b>Low Arousal Approach</b>	The <b>Low Arousal Approach</b> is a person-centred, non-confrontational, multi-component crisis management strategy. This approach recognises that anxiety is an ever-present part of the lives of individuals with autism and considers how best the supporting adults can intervene early using a range of proactive and reactive strategies to defuse and de-escalate before behaviour becomes problematic.
<b>Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs</b>	Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological theory that proposes all people are motivated to fulfil their needs in a hierarchical order, by attempting to first satisfy basic needs before moving on to more advanced needs. The needs included in Maslow's hierarchy are physiological, safety, love and belonging needs, esteem, and self-actualisation.

<b>PBS</b>	<b>Positive Behaviour Support</b> is a tiered approach to understanding behaviour. It is based on an assessment of the social and physical environment in which the behaviour happens. This approach includes the views of the individual and everyone involved and uses this understanding to develop supports that improve the quality of life for the person and others involved with them.
<b>PCP</b>	<b>Person-Centred Planning</b> approaches promote the active participation of students in educational planning and decision-making which helps to ensure that their specific learning and wellbeing needs are addressed.
<b>PECS</b>	The <b>Picture Exchange Communication System</b> is an alternative/ augmentative communication system that enables students with significant communication difficulties to communicate using pictures.
<b>Proactive strategies</b>	<b>Proactive strategies</b> refer to approaches that may be employed to promote positive behaviour as well as to prevent or reduce the likelihood of behaviours of concern. This requires an understanding of the possible underlying reasons as to why the behaviour is occurring and then making adjustments to the environment and interpersonal supports, teaching new skills and using positive reinforcement to address the student's needs.
<b>Proprioception</b>	<b>Proprioception</b> is part of the sensory system located in muscles and joints which gives information about body position and the force/ grading of movement. It also has a regulating impact on other sensory responses.
<b>RACE</b>	The scheme of <b>Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations</b> facilitates access to the certificate examinations for students with a variety of complex special educational needs (SEN), including learning difficulties, as well as permanent or temporary physical, visual, hearing, medical, sensory, emotional, behavioural or other conditions.
<b>Reactive strategies</b>	<b>Reactive strategies</b> are used to respond to behaviours of concern during and after the time they have occurred to keep people safe and to support them to return to a calm state as soon as is possible. Reactive strategies may help to prevent the situation from escalating and/or causing harm, and to reduce the likelihood that the behaviour will occur in the future.
<b>RSE</b>	<b>Relationships and Sexuality Education</b> is a programme within the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum, which enables students to acquire knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality.
<b>SCERTS®</b>	<b>Social-Communication, Emotional Regulation, and Transactional Support</b> is an evidence-based framework aimed at enhancing the communication and socio-emotional abilities of children with autism.



<b>Sensory diet</b>	A <b>sensory diet</b> is an individualised intervention programme designed to meet the daily sensory needs of a student. It incorporates scheduled sensory breaks (e.g. movement activities) or calm breaks.
<b>Sensory over-reactivity</b>	<b>Sensory over-reactivity</b> is characterised by a negative response or avoidance of sensory input as it is interpreted as intolerable, uncomfortable and even painful. The student has heightened sensitivity to specific stimuli.
<b>Sensory profile</b>	A <b>sensory profile</b> is an individualised description of a student's unique sensory needs, including their sensitivities and their sensory preferences. The term can also be used to refer to the 'Sensory Profile' (Dunn, 2014) which is a standardised assessment of sensory needs carried out by an occupational therapist (OT) or other professional trained in Sensory Integration.
<b>Sensory under-reactivity</b>	<b>Sensory under-reactivity</b> is characterised by delayed or absent response to sensory input. The student requires increased levels of sensory stimulation before a response is initiated.
<b>Sensory processing</b>	<b>Sensory processing</b> is a neurological process in which sensory input from the environment and within the body is received, registered and integrated resulting in an appropriate motor response.
<b>Social/pragmatic language</b>	<b>Social/pragmatic language</b> refers to an individual's social language skills, how they integrate what they say and how they say it, together with their nonverbal communication to interact appropriately in a given situation.
<b>SOCCSS</b>	<b>Situation, Options, Consequences, Choices, Strategies, Simulations</b> is designed to help individuals understand social situations and interactions, and includes a step-by-step problem-solving process teaching that choices have consequences. It provides an individual with decision-making techniques, including questioning and choice making.
<b>TEACCH</b>	<b>TEACCH</b> is an evidence-based educational and clinical programme developed in the USA to support the needs of students with autism and those with communication difficulties through structured teaching and visual methodologies.
<b>Vestibular system</b>	The <b>vestibular system</b> is located in the inner ear. It detects the speed and direction of movement and influences balance and response to gravity.



# Introduction - Context and User Guide



This guidance document has been developed as a resource for schools to support the needs of students with autism. It aims to assist practitioners to understand the varied nature of those needs, as well as to identify whole-school and individualised approaches to intervention.

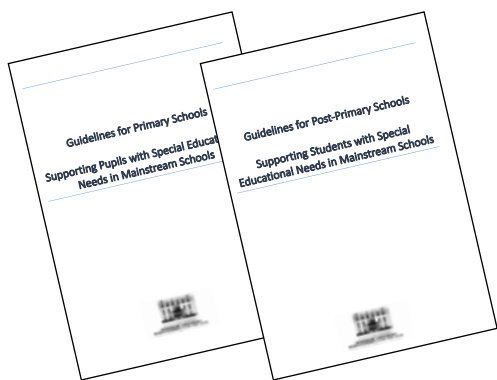
The guidance is organised to provide information across eight key areas of practice to support the wellbeing, learning and participation of students with autism. The content is relevant to supporting students across a range of educational environments including mainstream, special class and special school settings. It is envisaged that the guidance will have wider utility. For example, it may be helpful to parents and others working with students with autism. Many of the strategies may also be adapted to support students with differing special educational needs (SEN), including learning, social or behavioural needs. Furthermore, many of the approaches outlined in the guidance (e.g. visual-structured teaching approaches and positive interactional environments) can benefit all students.

This guidance document is not intended to address all aspects of practice. All approaches, both general and autism specific, must be tailored to individual circumstances, strengths and needs across educational and family contexts. This process should involve consultation between teachers and parents, and may be supported by external professionals and additional professional learning, as necessary.

In recent years the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has commissioned research related to educational provision for students with autism (e.g. Bond *et al.*, 2016; Daly *et al.*, 2016). Informed by this research, the NCSE provided policy advice to the Minister of Education and Skills (NCSE, 2015). Drawing on these reports and international research, this document provides guidance and support for school staff on meeting the varied needs of students with autism. A companion resource to this guidance document, *Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools: Indicators of Effective Practice*, is also provided to enable schools to engage in a whole-school reflective process to optimise the learning and participation of students with autism. This guidance document and companion resource are informed by and reflect key Department of Education policies and frameworks, including:



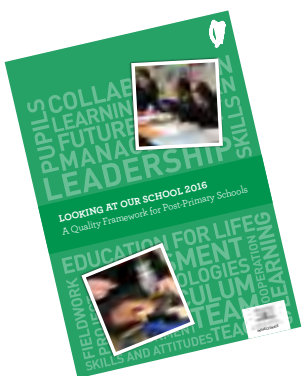
**The Continuum of Support (2007; 2010)** is a problem-solving process of assessment, intervention and review that enables schools to identify need, to plan interventions and to monitor the progress of individual students with special educational needs (SEN). The framework recognises that SEN occur along a continuum, ranging from mild to severe and from transient to long term.



**Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (2017)** sets out a dynamic three-step process to guide the identification of needs, intervention planning and monitoring of outcomes for students with SEN. Whole-school planning and effective engagement and collaboration with parents, students and support services are also emphasised.



**The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)** outlines a whole-school, multi-component approach to the provision of support for all children and young people to build a sense of connectedness, belonging and success in the school environment.



**Looking at our School [LAOS] (2016)** emphasises a whole-school planning and review process to enhance teaching and learning for all students. The *Domain of Leading Learning and Teaching* assists those with leadership and management roles, in promoting an inclusive school community. The standards and statements within the *Domain of Teachers' Collective/ Collaborative Practice* are particularly relevant to teaching students with autism and highlight the need for careful differentiation by teachers to address the needs of students.



# USER GUIDE

This guidance document has been developed as a resource for school leaders, teachers and support staff to respond to the needs of all students with autism across the continuum of provision (i.e. mainstream, special classes and special school settings). It is provided for class teachers/subject teachers and for those in specialist roles and settings. While developed for students with autism, many of the strategies can be adapted for those with differing special educational needs (e.g. learning, social or behavioural needs).

A companion resource *Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools: Indicators of Effective Practice* is provided to support whole-school inclusive practice and to assist staff review their provision for students with autism

## OUTLINE

**Chapter 1** sets out the background context for the guidance document



**Chapter 2** outlines factors relating to understanding and identifying autism

**Chapter 3** sets out key practices and principles, as part of a whole-school inclusive approach to enhancing provision for students with autism

**Chapter 4** provides guidance on meeting the needs of students with autism across eight domains of support as part of a dynamic process of identifying needs, meeting needs and monitoring outcomes



**A Closer Look** – this section focuses on specific areas of practice relating to Anxiety, Transition Across Settings, Relationships and Sexuality Education, Digital Learning and Assistive Technology, and Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

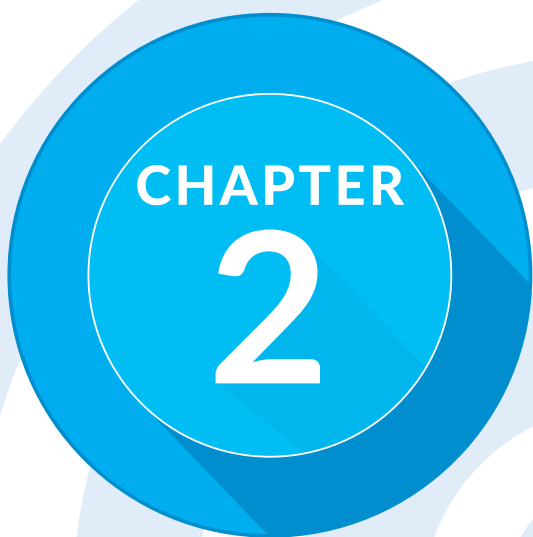
- Click on the  icon to access a related section or domain for further information
- Click on the  icon to access a related “Closer Look” section.
- Resource Boxes within the document and Appendices contain references and links to access further information<sup>1</sup>

## Readers are asked to:

- Use the information in the domains of support in a holistic and interconnected way when identifying and responding to needs
- Promote the active engagement of students and include their perspective and preferences
- Collaborate with parents<sup>2</sup>, and other professionals as necessary, in building a profile of strengths and needs and in planning interventions
- Use the *Indicators of Effective Practice* in the companion document to engage in a whole-school reflective process to create environments that optimise the wellbeing, learning and participation of students with autism

<sup>1</sup> While every effort has been made to ensure that the information in this Guidance document is of high quality and has been obtained from reliable sources, the Department of Education cannot guarantee the completeness or accuracy of all information published herein.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘parents’ as used in this guidance document refers to parent, parents, guardian or carer.



# Understanding Autism

## Terminology

There are differing views on the terminology to use when describing autism. Person-first language (e.g. a student with autism or on the autism spectrum) is used by many organisations when referring to students with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The term 'spectrum' highlights that the presentation of autism can vary greatly from person to person. Some young people and adults have indicated that they prefer to use the term 'autistic' as they believe this embraces their neurological difference (AsIAm, 2019). These terms are used interchangeably in this document to reflect an understanding of autism as a neuro-developmental difference characterised by difficulties and or differences in social interaction, social communication, and patterns of restricted or repetitive behaviour. Importantly, teachers and other professionals can acknowledge individual preferences by asking parents and students their preferred term and applying this in their communication.

Any understanding of autism should not be approached from a position of 'deficit', but rather from a position of 'difference'. Autistic people are not neuro-typical people with something missing or something extra added on. They are different. If we are serious about equality and inclusion within any area, then we must first of all understand that difference.  
(Breakey, 2006, p.123)

In recent years the term *neurodiversity* has been increasingly used to acknowledge that some people 'may find that their experiences of the world and of other people do not align with the norm, and this is attributed to basic, underlying neurological differences' (Watson & Happé, 2019, p.23). It emphasises the importance of respecting, valuing and celebrating such differences. The debate about 'neurodiversity' suggests the need for 'a framework that does not pathologise and focus disproportionately on what the person struggles with, and instead takes a more balanced view, to give equal attention to what the person can do' (Baron-Cohen, 2017, p.747).

In terms of the assessment and diagnosis of autism, both the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (11th ed.; ICD-11; World Health Organization, 2020) have replaced previous diagnostic terms with the collective term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Characteristics of autism are outlined below:

## Characteristics of autism

Autism is a complex developmental condition that involves persistent challenges in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and restricted/repetitive behaviours.

Autism differs from person to person in severity and in the combination of symptoms. There is a great range of abilities and characteristics among children with autism spectrum disorder - no two children appear or behave the same way. Presentation can range from mild to severe and often changes over time.

Adapted from *What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?* - American Psychiatric Association

### Also see:

<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/autism/what-is-autism-spectrum-disorder>

*Core Differences in Autism* - Middletown Centre for Autism

<https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/what-is-autism/core-differences-in-autism/>

*A Pocket Guide to Autism* - AsIAM

<https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Pocket-Guide-to-Autism.pdf>

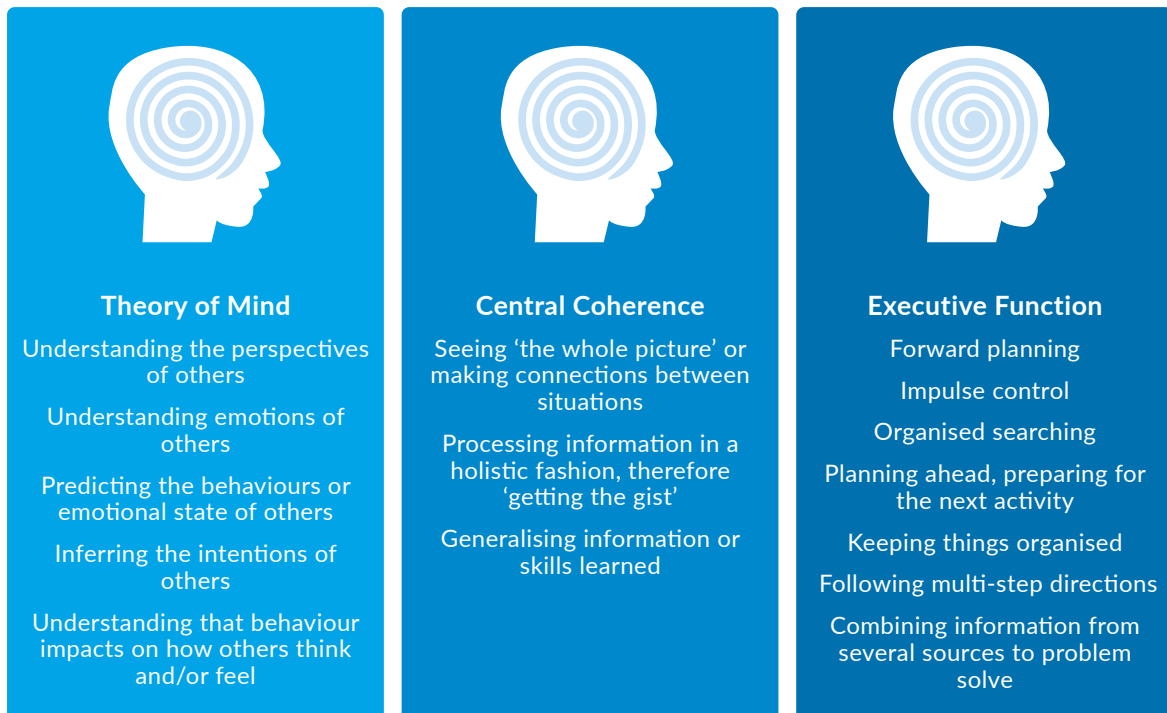
## Prevalence of autism

Autism is one of the most common childhood neurological conditions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) with an estimated 1.55% of children attending primary schools in Ireland having a diagnosis of autism (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2015).

## Psychological theories and autism

No single perspective can explain the wide range of behaviours displayed by individuals with autism. Psychological theory can provide an important lens through which the strengths and challenges associated with autism can be viewed and help inform the most appropriate intervention strategies. The three specific theories outlined below are commonly used to support our understanding of the needs of individuals with autism.





## Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985)

*Theory of Mind* is a process that enables individuals to understand and appreciate that others have thoughts, feelings, beliefs and experiences that are different to their own. A difficulty with *Theory of Mind* can affect communication and engagement with others. It can impact a student's ability to understand that others may have a very different perspective from their own, which may lead to difficulty interpreting social situations. More recently, some in the autism community have argued for a move from 'a deficit in *Theory of Mind*' approach to a recognition that communication and social difficulties experienced by those with autism are always relational and reflect mutual challenges with reciprocal engagement. This is referred to as a 'double-empathy problem' (Milton, Heasman & Sheppard, 2018). This theory has important implications for how we understand autism (e.g. that difficulties in social interaction and empathy are bidirectional between autistic and non-autistic individuals) and how we respond (that non-autistic individuals need to reach out to facilitate a mutual understanding).

## Central Coherence (Happé & Frith, 2006)

*Central Coherence* is a perceptual process that enables a person to understand context and to 'see the bigger picture' when making judgements or decisions. A difficulty with Central Coherence may lead to a student over-focusing on detail, paying attention to less relevant parts of the task or environment, or having difficulty understanding the hidden, implied or unspoken meaning in a situation.

## Executive Functioning (Ozonoff, Pennington & Rogers, 1991)

*Executive Functioning* refers to a group of cognitive processes that allow a person to initiate and sustain engagement, and to think and respond in flexible ways. It is a process that involves the ability to plan and, sequence tasks and manage time effectively. A difficulty with Executive Functioning may manifest in the school setting for a student with autism as reduced initiation and organisational skills, poor time management and resistance to change.

## Additional theories

The *Empathising-Systemising* theory (Baron-Cohen, 2002) suggests that individuals with autism present with unique cognitive styles across two dimensions: empathising and systemising. Empathising is the drive to identify another person's perspective and emotions and generate an appropriate socio-emotional response, while systemising is the tendency to analyse and explore a system and extract underlying rules that govern its behaviour. This two-factor theory helps explain the social and communication difficulties experienced by individuals with autism, while also accounting for areas of strength and skills.

*Context Blindness* theory (Vermeulen, 2012; 2014a) refers to using contextual clues to understand and navigate the world. This theory proposes that a reduced reliance on the context for meaning-making is common in individuals with autism, and that this can affect social understanding, language, and adapting thoughts to the situation.

## Identification and diagnosis of autism

Autism may be recognised at an early stage of a young child's development. In Ireland, the Health Service Executive (HSE) Public Health Nurses (PHN) carry out assessments to monitor children's developmental progress at various stages. Where a parent notices differences in their child's language, behaviour or social development they can discuss their concerns with the PHN or their general practitioner (GP), who may then refer the child to a local health professional or to a children's disability service. While many children with autism are identified prior to starting school, for others, concerns about socialisation and behavioural difficulties may emerge later in the context of the school environment. Where such difficulties arise, schools are advised to consult with parents and put a support plan in place in response to identified needs, as part of the continuum of support process. Teachers may also consult with relevant support services (e.g. the National Educational Psychological Service [NEPS] and the NCSE) and/or parents may wish to seek advice on further diagnostic assessment from their GP, PHN or local HSE Disability Service. Further information on referral pathways can be found at <https://www2.hse.ie/services/disability-support-and-services/childrens-disability-services/get-a-referral-for-childrens-disability-services.html>

While individual clinicians with appropriate training and experience can diagnose autism, in line with national and international best practice it is the position of the Department of Education that a multidisciplinary assessment represents best practice in the diagnosis of autism. The primary goal of such assessments is to establish a profile of strengths and needs to inform a multi-element intervention plan for the child and family.



## Understanding and discussing a diagnosis of autism

Some parents choose to explain to their child about their diagnosis of autism, often supported by professionals involved in the diagnostic process. Some may prefer to delay sharing this information while others may find this information difficult to share due to cultural and social sensitivities. The parents' decision must be respected by school staff. Schools can support both the parents and students by creating a culture where difference is accepted and celebrated, by fostering an inclusive school ethos and sense of community, and a positive attitude towards autism.

In general, sharing information about autism can be of benefit to the child and help their understanding and growing sense of identity. Many adults with autism report that they valued receiving information about their diagnosis as it helped explain why they experience the world differently to their peers. Young children may be especially open to accepting difference and this can have a positive impact on the child with autism and their peers.

There are a number of resources available to support parents to discuss a diagnosis of autism with their child and to support teachers to develop peer awareness. Any sharing of information about a student's diagnosis with peers must only be undertaken with the consent and collaboration of the student and their parents, and in the context of the student's wellbeing and learning needs.

Siblings of children and young people with autism may also benefit from information, advice and support. This can include opportunities to share positive experiences of having a brother or sister with autism. The following resources may be helpful in explaining autism to children and young people:

## RESOURCE BOX 1

### EXPLAINING AUTISM TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

#### For parents and teachers

- *The Little Book of Autism FAQs – How to Talk to Your Child about their Diagnosis and other Conversations.* Hartman, D. (2019). London: Jessica Kingsley
- *Autism: Talking about a Diagnosis.* Pike, R. (2016). UK: NAS
- *About Autism – AsIAm* <https://asiam.ie/>

#### For very young children

- *Woodfer’s World: A Peer Awareness Programme for Understanding and Valuing Hidden Differences - A Teacher’s Handbook incl. CD.* Ambitious about Autism (2012)
- *My Friend Sam.* Hannah, L. (2014). NAS

#### For primary students

- *The Superhero Brain: Explaining Autism to Empower Kids.* Land, C. (2017)
- *The Superhero Heart: Explaining Autism to Family and Friends.* Land, C. (2017)

#### Autism awareness

- *Autism Awareness in a Primary School.* Riverside: AP Gang  
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/autism-awareness-school>
- *What is Autism?* Autism Education Trust  
<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/about/what-is-autism>

#### For post-primary students

- *Freaks, Geeks, and Asperger Syndrome: A User Guide to Adolescence.* Jackson, L. (2002). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- *Information for Teenagers and Young Adults with Autism.* AsIAm <https://asiam.ie/>

#### Autism and sibling relationships

- *My Brother has Autism.* Morreale, M. & Morreale, V. (2020). Kentucky: Academy Arts Press
- *Autism in my Family: A Journal for Siblings of Children with ASD.* Tucker, S. (2017). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- *Autism and Siblings - Research Bulletin Issue No. 6.* Middletown Centre for Autism  
<https://www.middletownautism.com/files/uploads/604325c9c450c18490d1201eb57c0630.pdf>
- *Autism and Siblings Vol. 2. - Research Bulletin Issue No. 33.* Middletown Centre for Autism  
<https://www.middletownautism.com/files/uploads/0a4a5b917bdea85f3d3064c26abb0824.pdf>





## Gender differences in autism

Research suggests that the diagnosis of autism is seen more frequently in males than in females, with a male to female ratio of 3:1 reported (Loomes et al., 2017). There is some evidence to suggest that autism presents differently in girls compared to boys (Gulberg et al., 2019). While both groups experience difficulties in developing and maintaining friendships, girls may show more of a desire to have friends and to fit in with their peer group. Girls may also mask social and imaginative play differences by imitating their typically developing peers. They may show less apparent signs of restrictive behaviours and interests than their male counterparts and their interests may appear more socially acceptable. The literature suggests a tendency for females to internalise their difficulties, and as a consequence, the diagnosis of autism amongst females may be delayed or masked by overlapping difficulties or considerations (e.g. anxiety, selective mutism, depression, obsessive behaviour, poor appetite/disordered eating or sleep difficulties). Due to a different presentation amongst some girls, there is a need for whole-school awareness around the diversity of presentations of autism. The following resources provide further information on autism and girls:

### RESOURCE BOX 2 INFORMATION ON AUTISM AND GIRLS

- *Spotlight on Girls with Autism*. Yellow Ladybugs and the Department of Education and Training, Victoria <https://www.yellowladybugs.com.au/school>
- *What Every Autistic Girl Wishes Her Parents Knew*. Washington: Autism Women's Network (2017)
- *The Curly Hair Project*  
[www.thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk](http://www.thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk)
- *Girls and Autism: Flying Under the Radar*. NASEN  
<https://nasen.org.uk/resources/girls-and-autism-flying-under-radar>
- *Girls and Autism - Educational, Family and Personal perspectives*. Carpenter, B., Happe, F., & Egerton, J. (Eds) (2019). Abington: Routledge

## Autism and associated co-occurring difficulties

Many students with autism present with co-occurring difficulties that should be considered carefully when planning educational interventions. Co-occurring difficulties may include:

- General learning difficulties and/or specific difficulties relating to language and literacy
- Functional/adaptive problems, including feeding difficulties (e.g. restricted diet), toileting and sleep problems
- Anxiety and other mental health difficulties and disorders
- Attention difficulties including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)



Teacher  
Professional  
Learning  
(TPL)

Early identification of co-occurring difficulties supports a holistic understanding of needs and helps inform decisions around the most appropriate interventions for individual students.

CHAPTER

3

# Whole-School Inclusive Practice Across the Continuum of Need

## Context for inclusive practice

It is the policy of the Department of Education that students with special educational needs (SEN), including those with autism, are educated within an inclusive whole-school framework which emphasises effective teaching and learning for all students and good collaboration between schools, parents and students. The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) supports the move towards a more inclusive education system while also recognising the need for a continuum of provision. It outlines that students with SEN should be educated in an inclusive environment with those who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of their needs is inconsistent with the best interests of the child or the effective provision of education for students with whom the child is to be educated.

The continuum of provision includes:

- Primary and post-primary schools where they can access a range of additional supports
- A special class for students who experience particular difficulty accessing the curriculum in a mainstream class, with support, for most or all of their school day
- A special school for students with more complex SEN

This guidance document stresses that the quality of teaching and learning is the most critical factor in determining positive outcomes for students with autism.

The *Inclusive Education Framework* (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2011) describes inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners. The framework has been designed for use across mainstream schools, special classes and special schools and is relevant for working with students at all levels of ability. An inclusive whole-school approach enables all students to experience inclusion to the greatest extent and is supported through whole-school understanding and appreciation of difference. It involves removing barriers so that each learner is enabled to participate in and benefit, to the greatest extent possible, from their education. The majority of students with autism can access the curriculum in mainstream primary and post-primary schools with additional support from the special education team within the school. Other students require the support of more specialised education settings (i.e. a special class or special school). In special class settings, inclusive practice may be promoted by means of integration and reverse integration with mainstream classes and peers. In addition to fostering inclusion within the school environment, special schools may establish links with their community and other schools to provide opportunities to promote social interaction and independence. This supports students with autism to develop and embed the use of functional life skills in preparation for adulthood and their life after school.



This guidance document focuses on supporting students with autism across all settings. All schools, including mainstream primary, post-primary and special settings, are resourced to cater for the diverse needs of students with SEN. The Continuum of Support enables schools to respond to needs in a flexible way. The principle that *pupils with the greatest level of need have access to the greatest levels of support* is of key importance. Schools use the continuum framework to ensure that students are educated within the least restrictive environment. As learning needs change over time, students may require different levels of support. The student's individual needs are central to the decision-making process when considering placement. Decisions around placement in special settings should be informed by the process of assessment, intervention and review over time; and supported by relevant professionals and guided by parental choice and the views of the student.

For all students with autism, including those enrolled in special classes and special schools, a review of their response to interventions in that environment should be conducted on a regular basis, with an overall review taking place annually. This will involve a review of how the current placement could be enhanced to maximise the student's inclusion, engagement, participation and wellbeing. Consideration of how the current setting is meeting the student's needs, or whether these needs might be better met in an inclusive mainstream setting may also form part of this process. Careful planning and sharing of information regarding the student's profile and intervention approaches are required to support inclusion and transitions into and out of specialist settings. In addition, support plans may include specific goals and strategies to develop skills in communication and self-advocacy, and record necessary adaptations to the teaching and learning environment. Opportunities for integration and reverse integration should also be identified as part of the preparation of students for transition to inclusive settings.

## Intervention across the Continuum of Support

Interventions for all students with additional needs, including those with autism, are guided by the Continuum of Support process. This begins with *Whole-School/Support for All* approaches that focus on early intervention and prevention using evidence-informed programmes, to provide the optimum learning environment for all students. *Support for Some* involves targeted intervention for individuals or small groups. *Support for a Few* involves more intensive, individualised supports, often including external professionals, for those with the most significant needs. Intervention should be put in place at the earliest possible time, be comprehensive in nature, and focus on students' unique strengths and family contexts.

The pedagogical principles that are common in mainstream contexts are also applied in special settings, while teaching approaches and strategies in a special class or school may require greater levels of differentiation and individualisation in line with students' strengths and needs. Characteristics of individualised teaching and learning approaches for students with more significant needs include enhanced:

**Adaptations to teaching approaches, including**

- Pacing
- Visual teaching methodologies
- Opportunities to master skills development
- Coaching and practice to support generalisation of skills across settings

**Focus on one-to-one and small-group teaching using**

- Modelling
- Rehearsal
- Consolidation of skills through one-to-one and small-group teaching

**Identification of needs and individualised planning to**

- Build a comprehensive profile of strengths and needs
- Address needs through evidence-informed intervention
- Engage the student in this process taking into account their developmental and communication skills
- Plan and prepare for transition well in advance
- Increase meaningful participation in the community

**Collaboration with**

- Parents
- HSE
- Educational support services

**Provision of supports for students with significant communication needs, including**

- Visual approaches and concrete strategies
- Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) strategies as appropriate

**Environmental adaptations in class and across the school, including**

- A quiet space
- A space to accommodate workstations and special equipment

**Engagement in professional learning opportunities** so that class/subject teachers and support staff build their capacity to support students with complex needs, including those with co-occurring difficulties.

## The cornerstones of whole-school inclusive practice

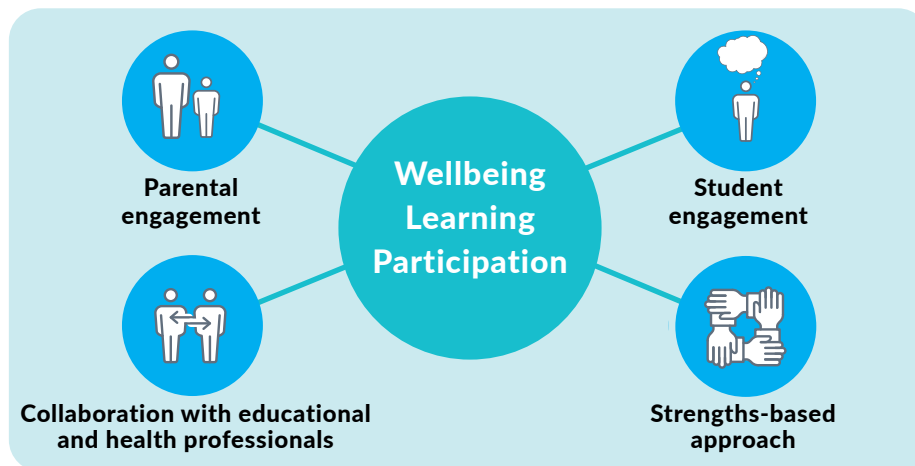


Figure 1: Cornerstones of whole-school inclusive practice

This guidance document emphasises that interventions should be embedded in a dynamic, inclusive whole-school planning process. Policies and practices should be developed and reviewed to provide the best environment to promote the wellbeing, learning and participation of students with autism. The Department of Education articulates a holistic approach to learning in schools and emphasises the need for students to develop a broad range of skills and capabilities in preparation for adulthood and lifelong learning. Students' wellbeing, personal happiness and independence are promoted in learning environments that are responsive and sensitive to individual needs. The *Wellbeing Policy and Framework for Practice 2018-23* (Department of Education and Skills, 2018) places emphasis on creating a whole-school environment that nurtures the wellbeing of all students. A focus on wellbeing is particularly important for students with autism, as they have a heightened vulnerability to mental health difficulties which can impact on their participation in learning and in everyday activities.



### Student engagement

In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), the views of children and young people must be considered and taken into account on all matters that affect them. This involves understanding how children and young people with autism process and experience the world, and finding ways to promote their sense of agency. Students can be empowered and motivated when they are involved in decision-making about their education, for example, in identifying their own strengths and needs, in setting learning targets and in monitoring their progress in a shared assessment for learning process.

It is important to understand the world from the perspective of students with autism, by moving away from a narrow focus on how a person with autism behaves, to understanding autism from within.

(Guldberg *et al.*, 2019, p.20)

Engagement is supported by building close, trusting relationships and actively listening to the views of students on such issues as their day-to-day activities, the use of technology to support their learning, organisation of the school day, the social aspects of their education (working as part of a group, peer relationships), understanding and managing their emotional state, managing sensory needs and coping with transition or change. Students' views on the nature and level of adult support they require should also be sought, especially for older students, so that such supports are delivered in a sensitive and discrete way. Opportunities may also be provided for students, as appropriate, to develop their understanding of their own experience of autism (with the consent of students and their parents).

**Advice to teachers - 'Know that:**

- *We might experience things differently to you*
- *Certain environments might not be comfortable*
- *Anxiety can be internal and result in a loss of concentration*
- *Frustration is not being bold'*

19 year old autistic person's experience of school

Due to language and communication difficulties, it is important to identify the most appropriate and developmentally relevant means for students to communicate their views (e.g. use of visual supports including object, picture exchange, social scripts or assistive technology). Person-Centred Planning (PCP) approaches promote the active participation of students in educational planning and decision-making and helps ensure that their specific learning and wellbeing needs are identified and addressed (Appendix 1).

As PCP is based around the individual it is ideal for people who are on the autism spectrum as their needs, preferences and support requirements are often very specific to each individual... [PCP] must take into consideration all aspects of autism, including addressing sensory needs, allowing time spent on special interests (where appropriate), and avoiding situations that cause unnecessary distress.

(Autism Education Trust, 2012, p.5)







## Strengths-based approach

Strengths-based approaches shift the focus from a deficit orientation to an emphasis on abilities, personal accomplishments, talents and preferences. A focus on strengths and interests provides not only affirming experiences and opportunities for enjoyment but also avenues for personal development and potential future work opportunities. In adopting a strengths-based approach it is important that all staff have high aspirations for students with autism, including those with complex needs.

Information on interests, abilities and learning styles can be gathered directly from students themselves and by eliciting the views of those who know them well. Prizant (2021) advised that it can be helpful to consider:

- What captures the student's attention?
- Are there particular toys, topics, books or sensory experiences that help to keep the student engaged?
- When does the student demonstrate or express positive emotion, excitement, contentment, or a particular heightened focus of attention?
- Does the student frequently request particular activities or ask many questions about a subject of interest?

Some of the specific strengths and aptitudes displayed by students with autism include:

- A facility for recalling factual information and for attending to detail
- Strong visual-spatial skills
- A capacity to maintain a deep focus
- Well-developed nonverbal problem-solving skills
- Strong visual memory
- In-depth knowledge in certain topics

Students with autism can often display advanced skills and knowledge in their areas of interest. It is important that teachers are aware of students' unique strengths and interests and utilise these when planning interventions and teaching approaches.

It is important for teachers to know about their students' interests and build on these existing strengths. Using these topics as the centrepiece of students' academic work helps to keep them focused, engaged and motivated and can also serve as a bridge to new topics and skills.  
(Shore, 2003, p.298)



## Parental engagement

Research indicates that all children and young people, including those with autism, have better academic and social outcomes when teachers and parents work in partnership with each other. There may be significant variation in the way a student with autism communicates, interacts and expresses their emotional state between the home and school setting as the demands are often very different. Being aware of and acknowledging these differences is important for both parents and staff.

Establishing mutually trusting relationships where there is effective two-way communication helps to promote home-school collaboration. Parents hold unique insights into their children's strengths and needs, and greatly value being consulted on key educational decisions about their child. Involvement in the intervention planning process provides an important means for enhancing parental engagement. Ongoing sharing of information through effective home-school communication, such as a home-school diary and regular meetings enables parents to notify schools of any significant events that might have an impact on their child at school (e.g. sleep pattern, change of medication, homework completion). Sharing of information about school-based activities enables parents to embed and reinforce skills in the home context. Home-school links and relationships are greatly enhanced when schools focus on strengths and positively report and celebrate students' progress on a regular basis. It is also important for teachers to appreciate that while parenting a child with autism can be positive and life-affirming, some families may also experience higher levels of stress. Being aware and sensitive to such needs, and signposting educational and community resources, including local support groups, especially around times of transition, is hugely supportive for parents. The following resources provide further information on building effective parent-teacher collaboration:

### RESOURCE BOX 3 BUILDING EFFECTIVE PARENT-TEACHER COLLABORATION

- Including Parents Right from the Start. In E. Ring, P. Daly, P. & E. Wall, (Eds.) *Autism From the Inside Out: A Handbook for Parents, Early Childhood, Primary, Post Primary and Special School Settings* (pp 139-160). O'Byrne, A. (2018). Oxford: Peter Lang AG
  - *Working Together with your Child's School*. Bradley, R., Jones, G. & Milton, D. (2014). London: Autism Education Trust
- [https://www.plymouthias.org.uk/resources/files/publication\\_57\\_AET-Working-Together-With-Childs-School.pdf](https://www.plymouthias.org.uk/resources/files/publication_57_AET-Working-Together-With-Childs-School.pdf)





## Collaboration and engagement with educational and health professionals

Adopting a team approach can enhance the quality of educational planning and help to maximise positive outcomes for students. Many students with autism benefit from engagement with health and educational professionals to enhance their communication, to manage sensory issues, and support wellbeing and social-emotional development. It is important for schools to establish effective procedures and protocols for liaising with relevant services, especially when supporting students with more significant needs. These services may include the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), Health Service Executive (HSE) and Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA). This may also involve developing collaborative partnerships and joint working where feasible. Effective teamwork and collaborative problem-solving supports a consistent approach to intervention planning, and facilitates the generalisation and maintenance of skills across contexts. Support teams typically comprise of class or subject teachers, special education teachers, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), home school community liaison coordinator and guidance counsellor, depending on school type. These teams, in consultation with parents and students, and external professionals enable schools to provide a planned, coordinated response to need.

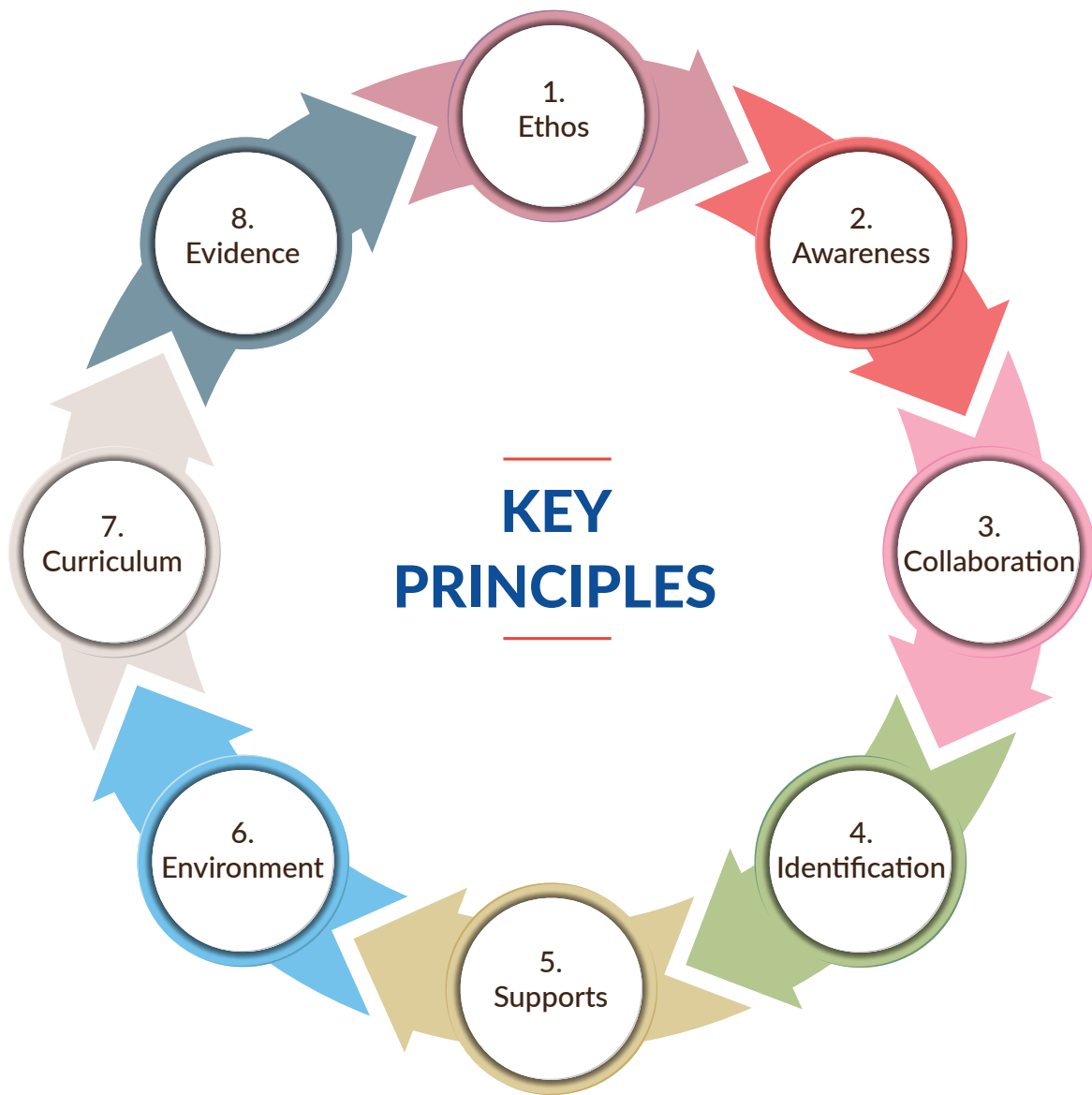


Figure 2: Key principles to support whole-school inclusive practice

## Principles to support whole-school inclusive practice

The following **key principles** have been identified to support best practice for the inclusive provision for students with autism:

- Positive inclusive **ethos** that is responsive to the diversity of needs of learners and is actively promoted by leadership within the school
- **Awareness** and understanding of the strengths and needs of students with autism across the entire school community, supported by relevant professional learning
- Effective **collaboration** between school staff, parents and students, supported by external professionals as required
- Comprehensive **identification** of strengths and needs that is informed by an understanding of autism and associated difficulties, linked to a process of planning, teaching and review
- Allocation of appropriate teaching **supports** to ensure that students with the greatest level of need have access to the greatest level of support
- Consideration of the needs of students with autism that relate to the school's learning, social and physical **environment**
- Access to a **broad curriculum** that is relevant and appropriate to students' needs, including the development of communication, social, emotional and life skills
- Use of **evidence-informed practice** to enhance the educational experience and lifelong learning outcomes for all students, including effective transition planning within and between settings

Whole-school reflective practice is a critical process in enhancing provision for students with autism. To support this, **indicators of effective practice** for each of the key principles and domains of support are set out in the accompanying document: *Autism Good Practice for Schools: Indicators of Effective Practice*. These indicators aim to assist staff in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, special classes and special schools to review their provision for students with autism and to prioritise areas for development. Initially, schools should identify and plan to work on a small number of priority areas that are realistic and relevant to their context.



# Meeting the Educational Needs of Children and Young People with Autism

This guidance document is structured around eight domains to support the wellbeing, learning and participation of children and young people with autism as depicted in [Figure 3](#). This chapter sets out a structured problem-solving approach using a three-step process to support teachers across each domain with:

- Identification of need
- Intervention and planning
- Monitoring and review

A short overview of core elements of effective practice in relation to each of these steps, which can be applied across the domains of support, is outlined.



Figure 3: Eight domains of support



## Step 1: How can we identify needs?

The profile of strengths and needs of students with autism changes over time and across settings. Accordingly, the process of identifying strengths and needs should be tailored to the individual student; it should take place at regular intervals and be embedded in an ongoing cycle of assessment, intervention and review.

Students with autism can present with strengths and needs across multiple areas of functioning related to academic development, language and communication, social and emotional development and life skills. Accordingly, assessment should be comprehensive and cover all domains relevant to the individual student.

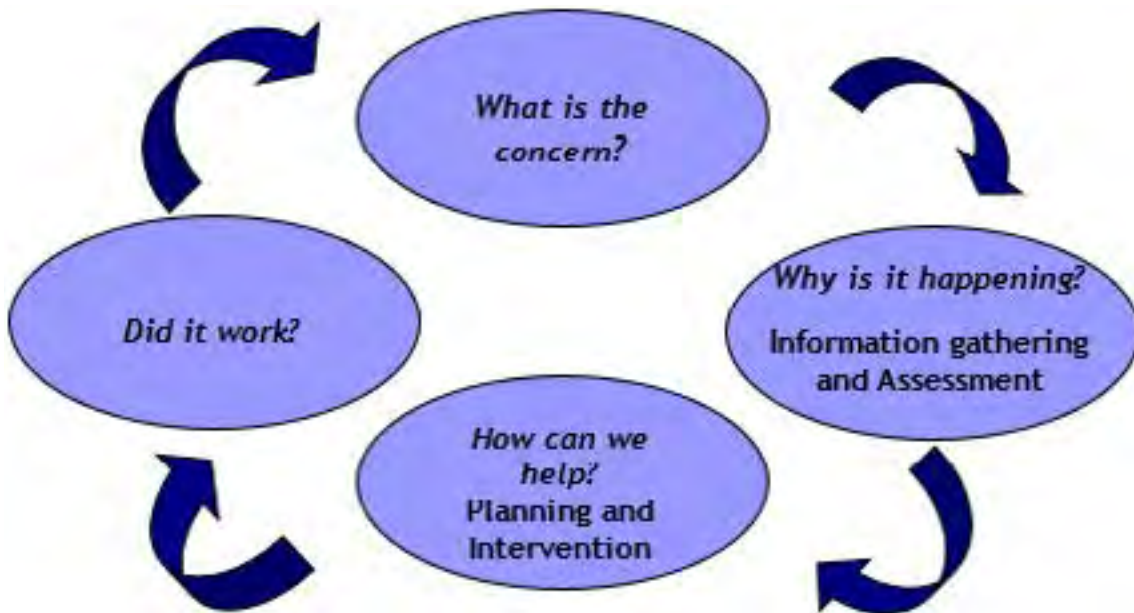


Figure 4: Problem-solving process: Continuum of Support Guidelines (2007)



## Information gathering

Gathering information from a variety of sources, including school staff, students and parents, helps to build a comprehensive profile of strengths and needs. This process is enhanced through the involvement of external professionals, especially for those students with more complex needs. Many students with autism will have been involved in an assessment and intervention process involving various professionals. It is important to gather and review all relevant information when planning interventions.

School-based assessment, involving curricular assessment and the use of formal and informal assessment approaches, helps to establish a detailed profile of student's educational needs. The use of standardised assessments provides information on a student's skill development and progress in comparison with same age peers. Due to language and communication needs, it may be necessary to make accommodations or adjustments to the administration of some tests in order to ensure that the assessment yields an accurate profile of strengths and needs. For details on possible adaptations to the assessment process see [Appendix 2](#).

## Step 2: How can we meet these needs?

### Effective educational provision for students with autism

Students with autism can be expected to make significant progress when exposed to highly supportive learning environments involving planned, consistent, structured teaching approaches together with opportunities to interact with peers. They benefit from inclusive school environments where supporting adults demonstrate a sensitivity and responsiveness to their pattern of communication and interaction. It is important that all staff have high aspirations for students with autism, including those with complex needs.

Successful interventions are those which take account of the core features of autism and are tailored to meet the unique needs of students across their school and family environments. Effective interventions emanate from different theoretical perspectives, and include behavioural, developmental and educational approaches. The National Council for Special Education [NCSE] (2015) recommends that a range of educational interventions are needed as any one approach is unlikely to lead to best outcomes for all students with autism. The selection of interventions should be part of a collaborative process and include the views of school staff, students, parents, and external professionals and be informed by the research evidence, and data from school-based assessments. It should also consider the experience and training requirements of teachers and support staff. There is a need to regularly review educational practices, to monitor the response of the student to the intervention and to adapt support plans accordingly. A list of interventions shown to be effective for students with autism (NCSE, 2015) can be found here: [https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/1\\_NCSE-Supporting-Students-ASD-Schools.pdf](https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/1_NCSE-Supporting-Students-ASD-Schools.pdf).



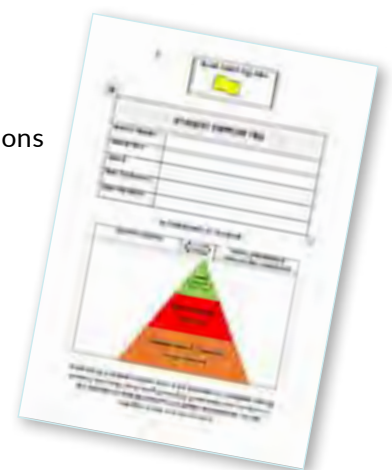
Research highlights that the development of functional communication and spoken language, social-emotional understanding, regulation, peer interaction, relationships and attention is fundamental to meeting the educational needs of students with autism (Guldborg *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, well-structured, positive enabling environments with visual cues help students navigate their social and learning environment and manage sensory needs. Positive behaviour supports should be adopted when responding to behaviours of concern. In addition, most students with autism require support around transitioning to enable them to successfully negotiate a change of activities and/or environments (Guldborg *et al.*, 2019).

Interventions should be developmentally appropriate; their duration and intensity should be based on the student's assessed strengths and needs and involve ongoing and systematic evaluation of outcomes, leading to modifications of the Student Support Plan.

## Educational planning

The Student Support Plan enables schools to plan and document interventions and to evaluate students' progress over time. The Student Support Plan is available on the Department of Education website: <http://www.gov.ie/education>

Also, see [Appendix 3](#) for an additional template that can be used with the Student Support Plan to support the co-ordination of information and identification of priority learning targets for students with autism across the eight domains of support.



## Target setting

Following a comprehensive process of identification of strengths and needs, priority learning targets should be agreed and set out in the Student Support Plan. Targets should be responsive to the core needs associated with autism (e.g. functioning in social communication, social-emotional competence, life skills and skills in flexible thinking), take account of any co-occurring difficulties and include adaptations to the social and learning environment. Agreed targets must be tailored to the student's strengths, needs and circumstances. It is important that they are realistic and achievable; that they are meaningful for the individual student and will make a qualitative difference to their engagement in learning and participation in the life of the school. Targets should contribute to a longer-term focus on fostering independence and supporting students to reach their potential, in preparation for life beyond school.

Effective target setting requires a collaborative approach, involving consultation between teachers, parents, the student, support staff and external professionals where appropriate. It includes identifying evidence-informed teaching approaches and clarifying the role of all involved in implementing the Student Support Plan.



This **template** (Appendix 3) is provided to support effective target setting and educational planning.

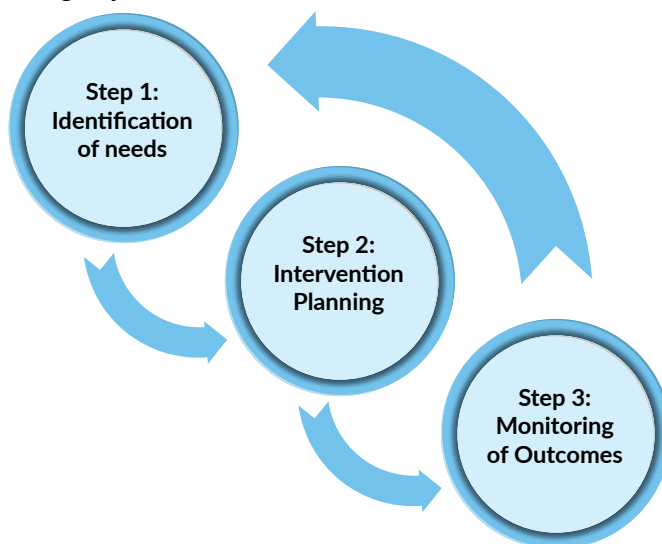
Areas Assessed	Strengths and Needs Identified
Learning Environment	
Language and Communication Development	
Social Development	
Emotional Development	
Sensory Processing	
Functional Skills for Daily Living	
Academic Development	
Behavioural Development	



Figure 5: Template to support effective target setting and educational planning

### Step 3: How can we record and monitor outcomes?

Ongoing monitoring helps teachers to evaluate progress in attaining agreed learning targets and to determine whether intervention strategies are effective. Where targets are not being met, learning objectives may need to be broken into smaller incremental steps; teaching approaches may need to be adapted and/or the targets themselves may need to change. In this way, support plans should demonstrate a clear progression in targets over time, and include modifications to teaching approaches and learning objectives.



Effective monitoring of outcomes is achieved through:

Establishing a baseline of performance using a variety of assessment approaches
Linking targets to priority needs identified through the assessment process
Setting targets that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound (SMART)
Agreeing on how to evaluate progress specific to individual targets and level of independence when performing a skill
Ensuring clear evidence of progression in targets over time
Establishing performance of skills across different settings
Monitoring of individual outcomes across all levels of the Continuum of Support
Setting a timeline for review

Recording and sharing achievements and celebrating success (both big steps and little ones) with relevant school staff, the student and his/her parents increase motivation and commitment. The use of formal approaches to share information on progress is important as students with autism may not always communicate what they have accomplished.

Ongoing review of the Student Support Plan is advised with a more formal review taking place on an annual basis.





## Learning Environment

Providing a learning environment that is responsive to the individual strengths and needs of the student with autism is crucial in enabling access to the curriculum and in promoting engagement and participation in the life of the school. Quality learning environments play a central role in supporting the diverse learning, communication, social, emotional and wellbeing needs of students with autism. In recognition of the potential to support positive outcomes, the learning environment is sometimes referred to as the 'third teacher', alongside the influence of the adults and students themselves (Gandini, 2012).

A student with autism may encounter challenges in the school environment for various reasons, including sensory sensitivities and social communication difficulties. Feeling comfortable and calm within the school and classroom environment promotes engagement in learning and supports positive emotional and behavioural outcomes. Key considerations in this area include:

Providing visual timetables and schedules to enhance the students' understanding of the structure and sequence of the school day

Creating an environment that is sensitive to the language, social and emotional needs of the student, including the provision of a calming space

Accommodating the sensory differences of the student

Supporting the individual learning strengths and needs of the student

Differentiating the supports to enhance students' access to the curriculum

Planning transitions to support students to change activity or location

Environmental adaptations need to reflect the developing and changing needs of students for increased independence, to make choices and to express themselves. Accommodations to create an autism-friendly environment work best in the context of positive, supportive, and caring relationships, between students and teachers and between students and their peers.



## Step 1: How can we identify needs?

### What information is gathered?

For students with autism, reviewing the environment is necessary to provide a responsive and supportive setting to address their identified needs. This section provides guidance for identifying those needs in relation to the following aspects of the learning environment: the physical environment, visual supports, transitions, and having clear behavioural and task expectations.

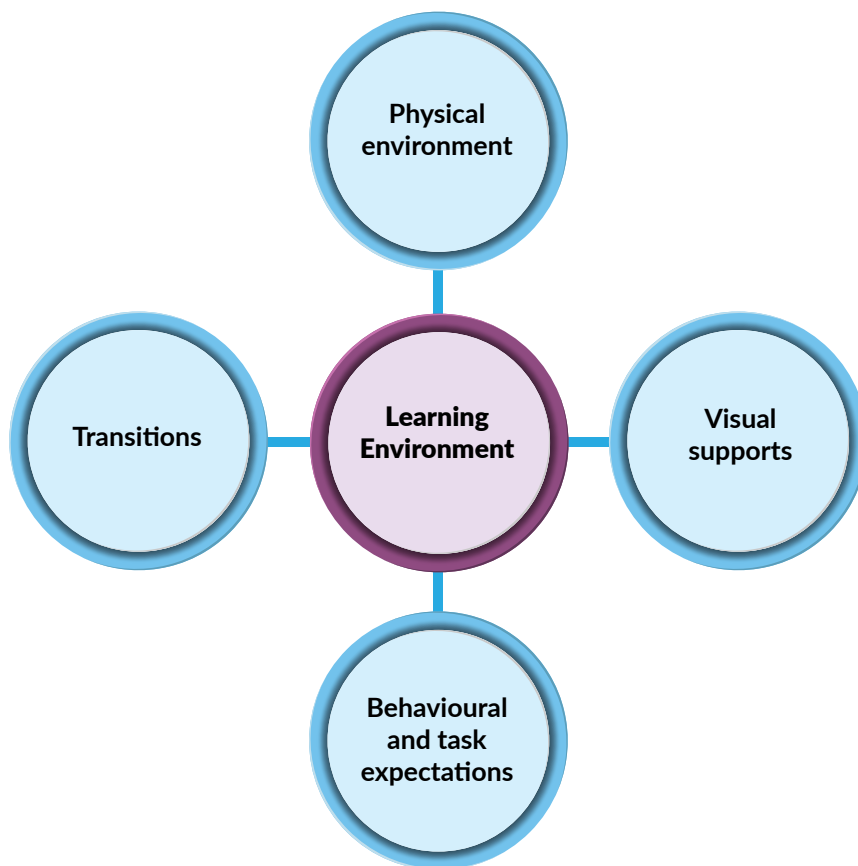


Figure 6: Key aspects of the learning environment



## How is this information gathered?

Drawing on an understanding of students' language, social, emotional and sensory needs, teachers gather information on aspects of the learning and social environment in collaboration with the student, parent and other relevant professionals. The use of observation, interview and checklists referenced in [Resource Box 4](#) helps guide the identification of need process relating to the learning environment. Key points to reflect on when considering aspects of the learning environment, include:

**Physical environment:** The access to, navigation and organisation of the school environment (including work, social and relaxation spaces) in addition to the establishment of routines to create predictability, lessen anxiety and optimise task engagement and social participation

**Visual supports:** The effective use of individualised visual supports, schedules, and communication systems throughout the school to support the student's needs

**Behavioural and task expectations:** The explicit teaching, reinforcing, and sharing of classroom behavioural and task expectations in an autism-friendly way

**Transitions:** The careful planning and support of transitions across the school day

Some examples of assessment approaches to identifying needs relating to the learning environment are outlined in the following resource box:

## RESOURCE BOX 4 SUPPORTING IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS - LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

### Checklists

- *Positive Partnerships with Parents to Identify Student's Strengths and Needs*  
<http://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/effective-partnerships-and-communication>
- *Pupil Profile Template*  
<https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/links-and-resources/>
- *Learning Environment Checklist (Primary)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40645/20f442fa414940f894506ed717d7f635.pdf>
- *Learning Environment Checklist (Post-Primary)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40658/f896b4d014464ad1b9241e91c5405370.pdf>



- *Learning Environment Checklist*  
<http://capacity-resource.middletownautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/03/learning-environment-checklist.pdf>
- *Checklist for Autism Friendly Environments*  
<https://www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Checklist-for-autism-friendly-environments.pdf>
- *Autism Friendly Schools*  
<https://capacity-resource.middletownautism.com/strategies/building-capacity-within-a-school-setting/confidence-and-attitude-improving-knowledge-and-training/an-autism-friendly-school-may-wish-to-consider-the-following-where-possible/>
- *TEACCH Principles of Structured Teaching and Environmental Planning*  
<https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/the-teacch-autism-programme/>

### Interviews

- *My Thoughts about School Checklist; How Do You Feel? Rating Scale (Primary)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *My Thoughts About School Checklist (Post-Primary)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40658/f896b4d014464ad1b9241e91c5405370.pdf>

### Observations

- *Guidelines for Observation and Templates*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>

### Autism-specific assessment tools

- *Psychoeducational Profile (PEP-3)\**
- *TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (T-TAP)\**

\*See Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) section for more information.





## Step 2: How can we meet these needs?

Having identified needs relating to the learning environment, the next step is to set out priority accommodations and supports for students. Examples of learning environment interventions that can be used to support students related to aspects of the physical environment, visual supports, transitions, and behavioural and task expectation are outlined below.

### Physical environment

Distractions in the physical environment can contribute to a student's anxiety and sensory processing difficulties. A structured autism-friendly environment provides a calm and comfortable space to support learning and participation.

#### Physical layout and organisation

The use of visual displays and labelling in the classroom environment promotes consistency and predictability for students with autism. It is helpful to delineate and label areas for different activities (e.g. the reading corner, calm space, group and individual work area). All areas of the classroom should be accessible, free from obstructions and allowing students to move freely. Arrangement of materials should be carefully planned to allow accessibility and easy management. Additional organisational supports, such as colour coding and labelled trays can help make activities more accessible and predictable and promote student engagement.



Accessible materials with designated areas to illustrate purpose.  
© St Joseph's Primary School, Bessbrook, County Armagh





An example of a simulated classroom which illustrates designated areas for activities with visual supports to provide meaning and context.  
Source: MCA

### Workspace/workstation

While all students should be included in the broader classroom with their peers to the greatest extent possible, some students benefit from having access to an individual workspace or workstation area for completing certain tasks. Many classrooms employ the *TEACCH* approach to setting up a workstation. Within the workstation, visual supports, a visual activity system, and visual reward systems can be used as appropriate. Some students respond well to the use of work baskets or trays, for example, a green tray may contain their assigned work which they then post in the red tray upon completion. The use of a highly structured and predictable approach, including step-by-step guidance, facilitates task engagement. The *TEACCH* method typically outlines task expectations in a sequential and explicit way by clearly setting out:

1. What work is to be done?
2. How much is to be done?
3. When will it be finished?
4. What to do next?





### Low arousal

In a behavioural support context, a low-arousal environment refers to the use of calm, non-confrontational, positive behavioural approaches, beginning with the least intrusive intervention. The premise is that a low-arousal, well-structured learning environment promotes learning and helps to reduce anxiety and the emergence of behaviours of concern. This is supported when the classroom learning environment is calm and organised in a way that maximises students' ability to concentrate (e.g. locating a student's workspace in an area with reduced visual and auditory stimuli and distractions). Allowing students more time to process information, especially verbal instructions, helps them to remain calm and self-regulated. Clear information should be given in the format best suited to the student, with care taken to avoid them feeling overloaded. Appropriate adaptations to the sensory environment, involving limiting or reducing sensory input and/or providing access to pleasant sensory experiences, are central to providing a low arousal environment for students with autism.



Sensory Processing





These calming spaces can provide students with a designated area to relax and reduce their anxiety.  
©TEACCH

### Calming space

It may be helpful to have a calming space that the student may choose to access in order to take a break and to help with regulation. This space may involve an area of the classroom set up with cushions or a tent to limit sensory stimuli or a space with calming activities and materials. Calming activities are made available to the student depending on their individual needs and preferences, and may include items such as stress balls, books, soft toys, and/or noise cancelling headphones. A break card (or object, photo, symbol) may be used by students to indicate the need for a break and access to a calming space. Teaching students how to request a break, in addition to coaching on ways to maintain calm (e.g. deep breathing, counting to ten, use of feelings/emotions thermometer) supports the effective use of calming spaces.





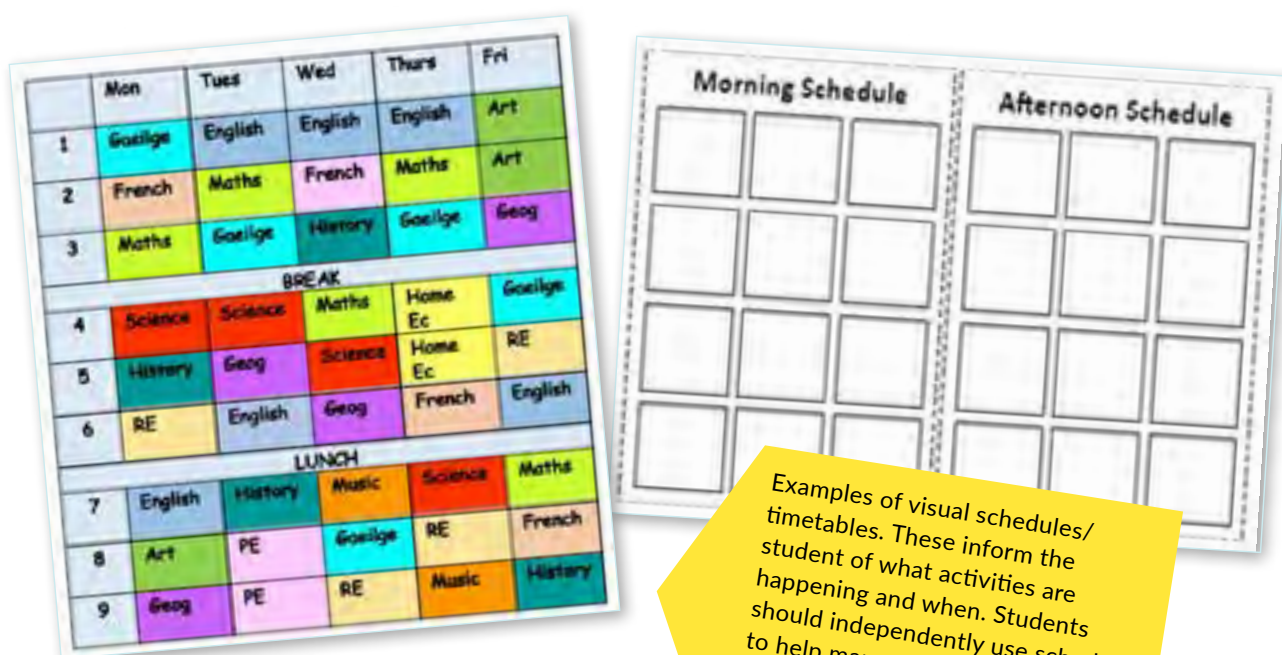
## Visual supports

Many individuals with autism are visual learners, therefore, visual supports are an effective intervention suitable from early years (0-2 years) up to and including adulthood (Hume, 2013). Visual supports can be used to provide information, to facilitate choice-making, and/or to explicitly teach an activity, routine, system or expectation through the use of photographs, icons, drawings, written words, objects, schedules, graphic organisers, organisational systems and scripts. Following individual assessment, visual supports should be used to teach and reinforce new skills and activities, to enhance students' understanding of the sequence and structure of the day, and to support the student in accessing both the classroom and whole-school environment.

### Visual schedules/timetables

Visual schedules or timetables can help students to be aware of and prepare for upcoming lessons, activities, and events. A weekly timetable helps to ease uncertainty about upcoming events (e.g. a play, book fair or sports day). Pictures or colour coding are helpful to all students, while students with more advanced literacy skills may use written schedules based on the general class or school timetable with adaptations as required.

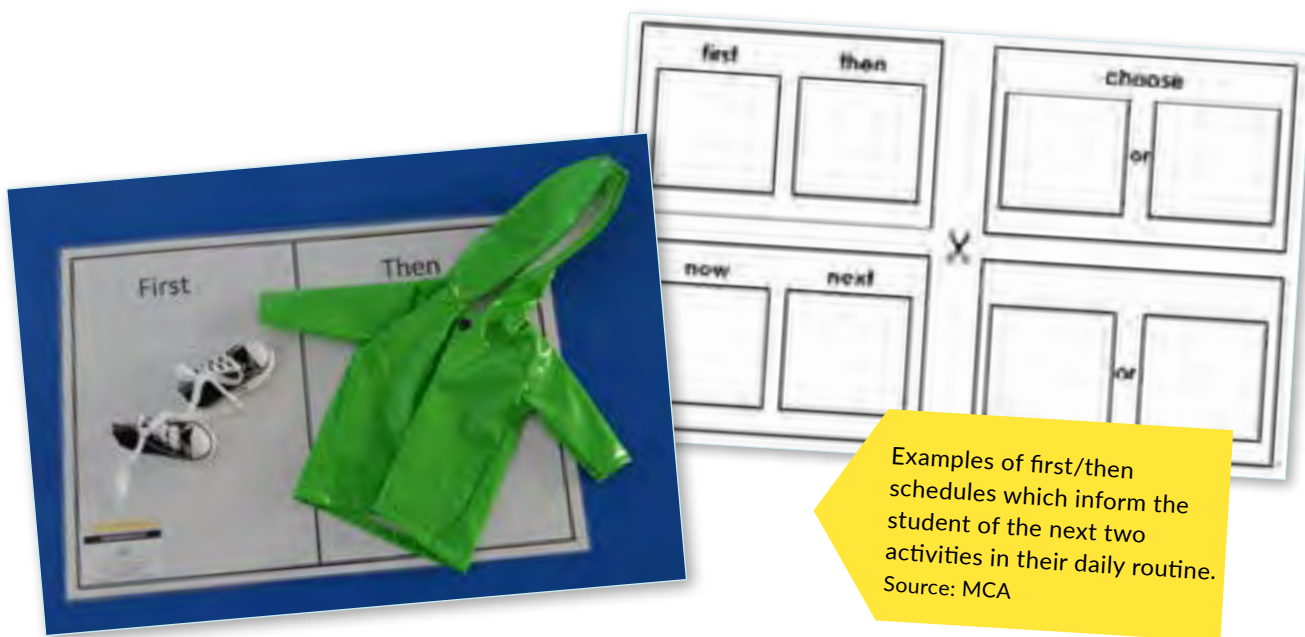
Daily visual timetables can make the day more predictable and reduce students' level of anxiety. Visual timetables may vary in length, level of detail, and format (e.g. use written language, pictures, photos or drawings) and should be adapted in line with the individual strengths and needs of the student. It is important to remember that it is more beneficial to the student if they can use schedules and timetables independently. Therefore the student may require explicit instruction and support so that they have a clear understanding of the expectations provided by a visual support.



Examples of visual schedules/timetables. These inform the student of what activities are happening and when. Students should independently use schedules to help manage expectations and increase predictability across their daily routine.

Source: MCA





Examples of first/then schedules which inform the student of the next two activities in their daily routine. Source: MCA

**Visual support systems**

A first/then sequence of information is a simple schedule that allows students to see what activity they are completing first and what activity will occur next. A first/then sequence can act as a motivator to encourage a student to engage with a less preferred task. It can also help a student transition to an activity or location. When teaching this concept, it is important that the 'then' activity acts as a reinforcer for the individual student. Flexible thinking concepts such as changing a task, having an unknown element included in the timetable, and/or having to add or omit a task, should be introduced once the visual support system has been established with the student.

**Timekeeping**



Language and Communication Development

Understanding the passage of time can be difficult for many students with autism. Providing a strategy to indicate the length of an activity can support task engagement, independent working and help reduce anxiety.

It can be useful for students with autism to 'see' how much time remains for an activity before they will be expected to transition to a new location or task. A visual timer such as a clock, stopwatch, alarm and/or hour/minute glass can be provided to an individual student or class for this purpose.



This is an example of a visual timer which can support the student's concrete understanding of time concepts. Source: MCA



### Visual countdown

Similar to the visual timer, a visual countdown enables a student to 'see' how much time is remaining in an activity. The countdown differs, however, in that there is no specific time increment used. This tool is beneficial if the timing of the transition needs to be flexible. A countdown tool can be numbered or involve coloured squares, or any shape or style that is meaningful to the student. A supporting adult removes or marks off completed items so that the student can clearly see the number of activities/tasks that remain. The student is taught that it is time to transition once the final task/activity item has been removed. With practice students learn to use these systems independently.



This countdown strip may be used with students with pre-numeracy skills to support their understanding of a vertical countdown.  
Source: MCA

This countdown strip supports the student's expectation of how long the computer is available for; tick references can be used if the student is working at a pre-number level.  
Source: MCA



## Behavioural and task expectations

Clear behavioural and task expectations help to promote consistency and predictability for students and support positive relationships with adults and peers. Behavioural and task expectations should be kept to a minimum and be clearly displayed in a format that is readily accessible and understood by the student. This may include the use of pictures, drawings and/or words. They should be developmentally appropriate with the aim of supporting students' social-emotional competence and wellbeing.



Social  
Development

### Teaching behavioural expectations

Students with autism may not implicitly understand what is required of them behaviourally.

Therefore, it is important to explicitly outline and teach the core classroom and school behavioural expectations to students in early years through to post-primary school settings, with opportunities to generalise their understanding.

It is important that behavioural expectations are taught and reinforced using visual cues (e.g. using visuals for 'wait', 'stop' 'hands to yourself'). Social narratives, comic strip conversations and *Social Stories™* are also effective strategies for teaching and clarifying expectations, and for modelling responses in a variety of settings. Key considerations when teaching rules and expectations include:

- Applying rules flexibly across contexts and allowing for individual differences
- Adopting a collaborative home/school approach to ensure consistent use of strategies
- Using visual supports to show the student why some rules require flexibility and why allowances may need to be made

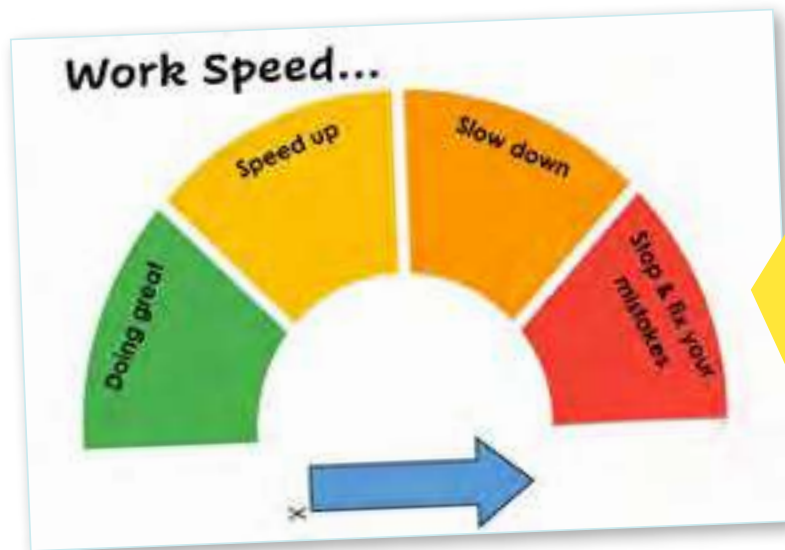


Providing the student with a visual reminder of daily jobs both in school and home supports the development of functional skills across both environments.

Source: MCA







This resource provides the student with a set of visual reminders to support them independently staying on task and in monitoring the quality of their work.  
Source: MCA

Behavioural expectations should be presented in positive language such as, 'we walk in the classroom' rather than 'we do not run in the classroom'. These expectations should be taught and reinforced in order to ensure that students can understand and apply them in a variety of situations. This may include modelling, role-play and practising responses in different settings. Behavioural expectations should also be developmentally appropriate and meaningful for the student. For example, a rule such as 'we must follow directions the first time they are given', may be an unreasonable expectation for students who need more time to process information and to understand directions.

### Teaching task expectations

Setting out clear expectations for task completion is important for students with autism as they may have difficulty retaining or understanding verbal instructions and may not be able to, or feel comfortable, seeking clarification. Step-by-step instructions may be useful for some students, including direction on how to initiate a task and what to do when they are finished. This could be provided in written or pictorial form depending on the needs of the student. It is important that students are encouraged to generalise their skills in task completion, and in seeking clarification, so that they can engage in tasks with growing levels of independence.



## Transitions



Transition Across Settings

A transition may involve a move from one activity to another, from one location to another and/or from one stage of life to another. While preparing for and negotiating change is important for all students, it is particularly crucial for students with autism as they may become overwhelmed or distressed by changes to their environment and routine. Therefore, transitions should be carefully and sensitively managed in collaboration with parents and professionals.

There are two main types of transition that are particularly significant for students with autism. The first involves movement between activities during the course of a normal day (horizontal transitions). The second type involves transition across settings, such as moving between schools (vertical transition). This is discussed further in the section *Transition Across Settings: A Closer Look*. When managing transitions across the school day, the use of visual strategies is advised, for example, timetables, schedules and timers. These strategies let students know when and/or how change is going to happen. Social scripts or *Social Stories*<sup>TM</sup> are also a useful way of helping students to understand transitions and what is expected of them in different contexts and settings.



Social Development

### Transition objects, photos or words

To facilitate change from one activity to another, it can be helpful to present the student with a photo of the location of the next activity. This allows the student to see where they are expected to go and provides additional predictability to them during the school day. Information can be presented in a range of formats, such as, black-line drawings/illustrations, written words or the use of an object. It is often helpful for the student to carry the transition object with them to the assigned location.



This allows the student to reference the information regarding where they are going during the transition itself.

Creating a designated 'place' for the student to place the item (e.g. an envelope or small box) upon arrival at the next location supports their understanding of transitioning by indicating to the student that they have arrived at the correct destination.



Transition cards are used by the student as a visual prompt to indicate moving from one activity to another or to return to check what is the next activity on the schedule.  
©TEACCH





Finish box.  
Source: MCA

### Finished box or space

The finished box is a designated location where students place items/activities when the task is completed and/or when it is time to transition to another activity. The box may be located in the student's work area or in another place in the classroom, and labelled using words or a visual cue to indicate its purpose. Similarly, a 'To Finish Later' box may be used for transition situations when a student has not fully completed an assigned activity. Often, students with autism may prefer to complete an activity before moving on and this may not be possible due to time constraints. In these cases, establishing a location where the student knows they can find the materials to finish up at a later time or date may be helpful.

Finished areas are also often built into a student's workstation usually on the right-hand side, or at an agreed location where the student gets the materials. Students travel to this location to get their work and to leave it back (preparation for future working life).



Finish box.  
Source: MCA



The following are examples of resources that can support intervention planning in relation to the learning environment.

## RESOURCE BOX 5

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

#### Physical environment

- *The TEACCH Autism Programme\**  
<http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/the-teacch-autism-programme/>
- *Accessing the Curriculum for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (2nd Ed.)*. Mesibov, G., Howley, M. & Naftel, S. (2016). Oxfordshire: Routledge
- *The Reflective Journey: A Practitioner's Guide to the Low Arousal Approach*. McDonnell, A. (2019). Alcester: Studio III.

#### Visual support

- *Best Practice Resource Videos: Change and First/Then*: <https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/links-and-resources/videos/>
- *The Autism Inclusion Toolkit*. Bowen, M. & Plimley, L. (2008). London: Sage Publications
- *Tasks Galore Series*. Eckenrode, L., Fennell, P., Hearsey, K. & Reynolds, B.  
[www.tasksgalore.com](http://www.tasksgalore.com)

#### Transitions

- *Best Practice Resource Videos: Timer and Countdown Strip*  
<https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/links-and-resources/videos/>

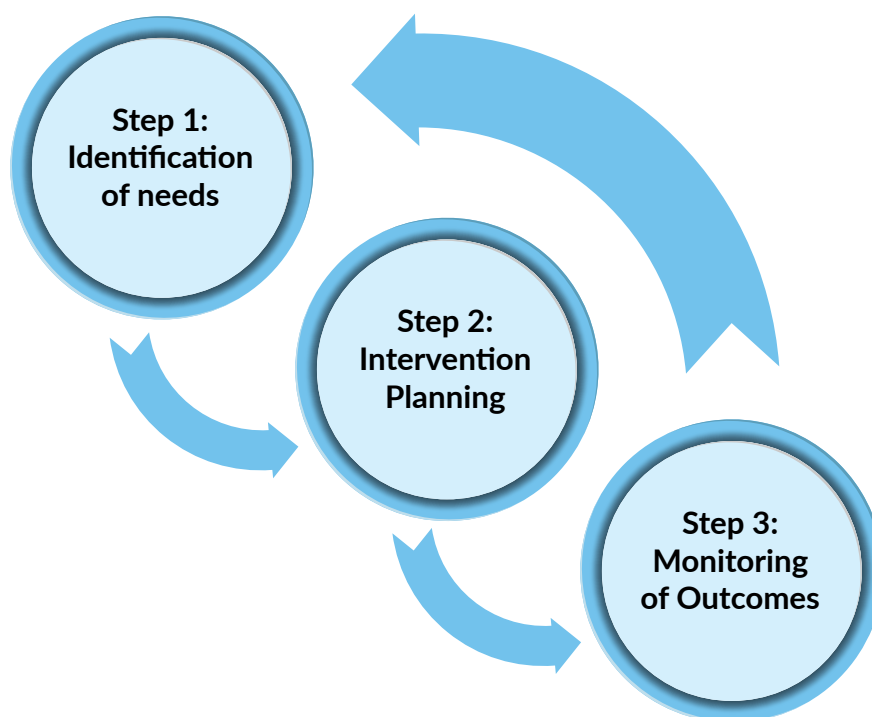
\*See Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) section for more information.



## Step 3: How can we monitor and record outcomes?

The Student Support Plan is used to record targets, together with strategies/intervention approaches to address priority needs in the learning environment. The monitoring of outcomes, including the student's response to intervention, should consider how effective learning environment strategies and adaptations are in promoting the academic, social and emotional development and independence for the student.

The checklists and/or observational schedules used in the identification of needs process provide important baseline information that will help teachers gauge how effective the strategies have been in addressing individual needs. The views of the student, parents and teachers are central when considering the effectiveness of intervention approaches. The students' level of engagement within the classroom with respect to learning and participation (including their emotional/behavioural presentation) offers a good indicator of how supportive adaptations have been in meeting their needs.







## LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

### Points to Remember

#### STEP 1 - IDENTIFY NEEDS

Identify the learning style, strengths, and needs of students and adapt the environment to ensure that it is responsive to their individual social, communicative, learning and sensory requirements.

#### STEP 2 - MEET NEEDS

Label and delineate areas for different activities to enhance the organisation of work and social areas within the physical environment.

Adapt school environments in collaboration with students, parents and professionals to enhance participation in learning and social activities

Use individualised visual schedules to enhance students' understanding of their school day.

Optimise opportunities for learning through the use of visual teaching approaches and by allowing students adequate time to process information.

Teach, reinforce and clarify behavioural and, task expectations and rules, and make adaptations to address identified sensory differences.

Use individualised visual supports such as Social Stories™, checklists and countdown strips to plan for transitions involving changes to activities or locations that prepare students' to effectively change activities and settings.

Make adaptations to address identified sensory differences.

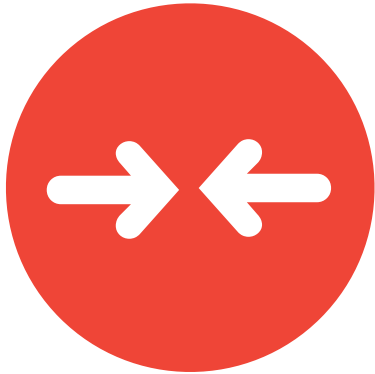
Promote a sense of calm by adopting low of visual teaching approaches and by allowing students adequate time to process information.

#### STEP 3 - RECORD AND MONITOR OUTCOMES

Monitor student participation and engagement in learning activities, and consider how effective the adaptations to the social, communicative, learning and sensory environments have been in meeting their needs.

Please see *Indicators of Effective Practice* to assist schools to reflect on their practice relating to **Learning Environment** and to help identify areas for further development.





## Language and Communication Development

Language and communication differences are a core feature of autism. There can be a wide variation in how these differences present for individual students. Some students with autism will have strengths in aspects of their language and communication while others may have limited language skills.

The language and communication profiles of each student with autism will be unique. Some students will be preverbal as outlined for Jamie below.

Jamie is four. He has no verbal language but seems to understand some words and very simple instructions. The speech and language therapist (SLT) has been working with Jamie to introduce him to a visual communication system, to make basic choices and follow a visual schedule and know what is happening NOW and NEXT.

Students with autism may have rich vocabularies and also display differences in how they engage in two-way conversation. Some may be able to read words from an early age, but struggle to comprehend what they have read.

Cathal is ten and attends a mainstream school. He is very talkative but has little interest in conversations outside of animals, his current passion. He responds when people ask him questions, but he quickly turns the conversation around to animals, and maintains a one-sided conversation regardless of what has been asked.





Social  
Development

Language and communication development is inextricably linked to a person's social development. Accordingly, this chapter should be read in conjunction with the social development chapter.

Autistic students whose first/preferred language is Irish or who attend Irish medium schools, should be taught through Irish as this is the language which is used in their school environment.

Many students with autism interpret language literally and may display differences in their ability to recognise and understand nonverbal communication such as body language and tone of voice. Some students make limited use of gestures to give meaning to their speech (e.g. pointing to an object). Others may avoid eye contact, which can be misunderstood and misinterpreted. Without meaningful social/pragmatic language, including gestures or other nonverbal skills to enhance their oral language, students with autism can become frustrated in their attempts to make their feelings, knowledge or needs known to others. Some students may attempt to communicate or act out their frustrations through vocalisations or other behaviours. Taken together, this range of difficulties can affect emotional wellbeing and the ability of a student with autism to interact successfully with others, particularly with peers.

## Step 1: How can we identify needs?

Language and communication are central to engagement in learning and socialisation. All students require a means of communication in order to have their basic needs met, to express emotion and to communicate their views and preferences.

### What information is gathered?

A student's speech, language and communication abilities, assessed in context, are important for the development of an effective Student Support Plan. The following key areas are relevant when gathering information on students' language and communication skills:





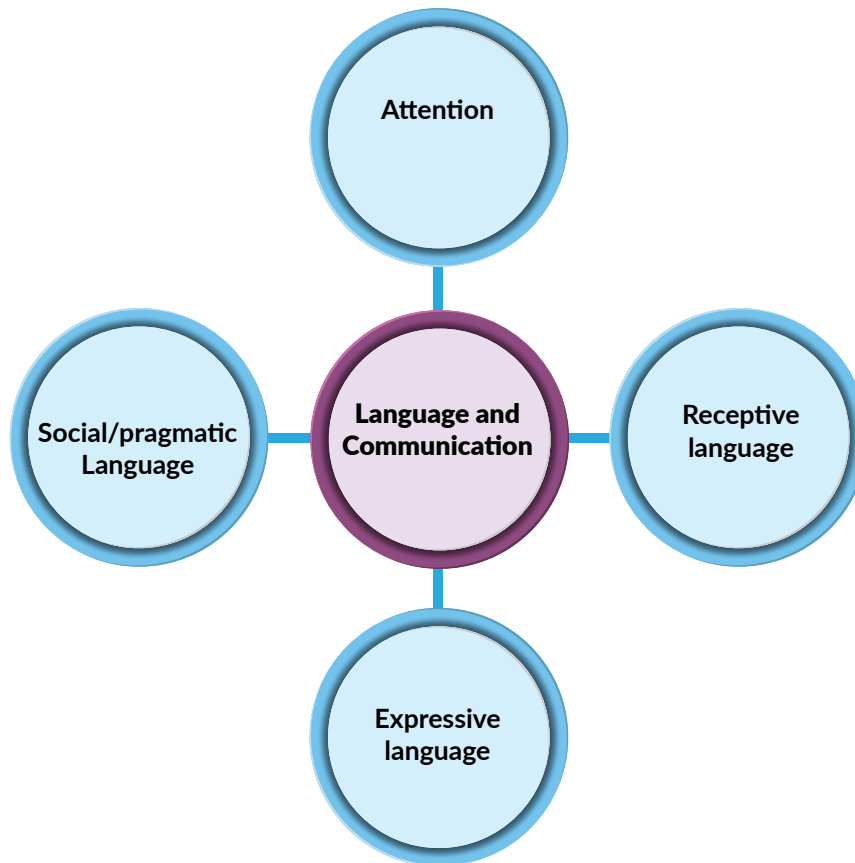


Figure 7: Key aspects of language and communication

## How is this information gathered?

In order to create an effective communication system, it is necessary to gather information about a student's functional language and communication style. The following prompt questions can guide teachers when reflecting on an autistic student's language and communication:

### Attention

Does the student demonstrate joint attention? For example, both the teacher and the student looking at something and then looking at each other? Does the student initiate joint attention by calling attention to something?

### Receptive language

How does the student respond to verbal direction or instruction? Can they follow an instruction when aided by a visual prompt such as a written list or picture indicating what they are supposed to do?



**Expressive language**

How does the student express their needs and wants? Do they use gestures? Do they use an exchange system, for example, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)? What motivates the student to smile and to express joy, and how is this used to create opportunities to extend their expressive language?

**Social/pragmatic language**

How does the student interact as part of a group? For a student who is preverbal how do they communicate their functional needs? For a student who is verbal, how do they initiate a conversation? Can they take turns in a conversation? Do they need explicit instructions to maintain and repair conversations?

Assessment of language and communication can be formal and/or informal in nature and is often guided by a SLT, either directly or with reference to previous SLT assessment and intervention reports. The involvement of an SLT helps to ensure that those working with the child base intervention decisions on a comprehensive profile of the student's individual language and communication strengths and needs. Pitching intervention either too high or too low for a student can lead to an increase in their frustration.

Formal assessment involves the use of standardised tests. Informal assessment of how a student communicates may include gathering information through structured observation, interviews with a significant adult, the use of screening checklists, or an analysis of video or audio data. Assessment should include taking note of where the student communicates most often (i.e. the environment and the purpose of the communication). It is also helpful to record how much of the communication is spontaneous and how much is elicited or prompted by others.

Further information on assessment tools is available in [Appendix 4 - Assessment tools for language and communication, social and emotional development, and life skills](#). The following are examples of resources that can be used to identify needs related to language and communication development:



## RESOURCE BOX 6

### SUPPORTING IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS – LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

#### Checklists

- *Language Resource*  
<https://www.sess.ie/resources/language-and-literacy/language>
- *Curriculum Access Tool (CAT-GLD) - Communication and Language Skills* <https://www.sess.ie/about-cat-gld-and-guidelines-use>
- *The Access and Inclusion Model Profile (AIM) - Early Communication Skills* <https://aim.gov.ie>
- *Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)*  
<https://agesandstages.com/>

#### Observations

- *My Child's Stage of Communication Development*  
[http://www.hanen.org/SiteAssets/\\_10\\_Special-Pages/soc-checklist.aspx](http://www.hanen.org/SiteAssets/_10_Special-Pages/soc-checklist.aspx)

#### Autism-specific assessment tools

- Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support. SCERTS® Model Volume I Assessment
- *Psychoeducational Profile (PEP-3)* \*
- *Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS)* \*
- *Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP)* \*

#### Standardised assessment tools

- *Bracken Basic Concepts Scale (BBCS 3) Receptive and Expressive* (age 3-6:11 years)
- *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT)* (age 2:06-90+ years)
- *British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS)* (age 3-16 years)
- *The Belfield Infant Assessment Profile (BIAP)* (age 4-7 years)

\*See Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) section for more information.



## Step 2: How can we meet these needs?

Access to relevant and appropriate curricula is crucial to the development of language and communication skills. The Primary Language Curriculum is for all students in primary and special schools. It contains learning outcomes and progression continua to support students in reaching language learning outcomes at a level and pace appropriate to their abilities. The Primary Language Curriculum contains support materials for special educational needs (SEN) pathways. This aims to support students with complex needs to engage with appropriate and relevant language learning experiences and recognises that some students with complex needs may require additional time and support to make progress with and develop their language skills.

Each student with autism will have a unique communication profile. Accordingly, assessment of individual strengths and needs is essential to intervention planning. Teaching goals may then be established in some of the following areas:

### Attention

Attention and listening skills are key components of social engagement, language development and group learning. Consideration should therefore be given to a student's developmental stage of attention including their ability to display joint attention or share attention. Enjoyable and meaningful activities can embed positive memorable experiences of interaction and joint/shared attention for students with autism. Approaches to developing attention skills may involve the use of role play, music or using the student's strengths and interests. Intervention approaches and strategies to consider when engaging attention include: *Attention Autism*, *Intensive Interaction* and the *Hanan: More than Words* programme.

### Receptive language

Supporting adults should aim to keep instructional language clear and concrete for a student with autism. Ambiguous language and idioms can be difficult for autistic students to understand. Teachers may need to reduce the overall amount of language being used in the learning environment. Communication is enhanced when the student with autism is seated in a position that supports the use of nonverbal interaction from adults, such as gestural prompts, visual aids and verbal cues (e.g. saying the pupil's name before giving an individual or group instruction).

I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures.

(Grandin, 2006, p.3)



Many children and young people with autism have difficulties processing language (verbal and nonverbal). Since spoken or sign language can be experienced as transient, students often benefit from having visual supports to help them in processing and understanding language. Visual approaches should match the student's level of symbolic understanding, and be based on careful assessment, irrespective of their chronological age. Visual and concrete strategies such as objects, pictures, visual schedules, TEACCH task boxes/structured tasks, or the use of written language instruction where appropriate, can support understanding and the development of functional receptive vocabulary. Activity systems, timers, wait systems and social scripts or *Social Stories™* can also help address difficulties related to processing receptive information.



See Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) video explaining the use of a first/then schedule <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PlaDqDmGEI>



Learning  
Environment

Where appropriate, receptive understanding and comprehension of more complex information presented during a lesson can be supported by visual approaches such as visual organisers or mind maps.





The explicit teaching of comprehension strategies can be promoted using *Effective Literacy Interventions for Struggling Readers* (National Educational Psychological Service [NEPS], 2019) and *A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years* (NEPS, 2016) along with the following resources which are detailed in [Resource Box 7](#).

- Primary Language Curriculum
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE) language, literacy and learning resources for post-primary schools
- *Building Bridges of Understanding* programme

See [Appendix 7](#) for more information on supporting reading comprehension for students with autism.

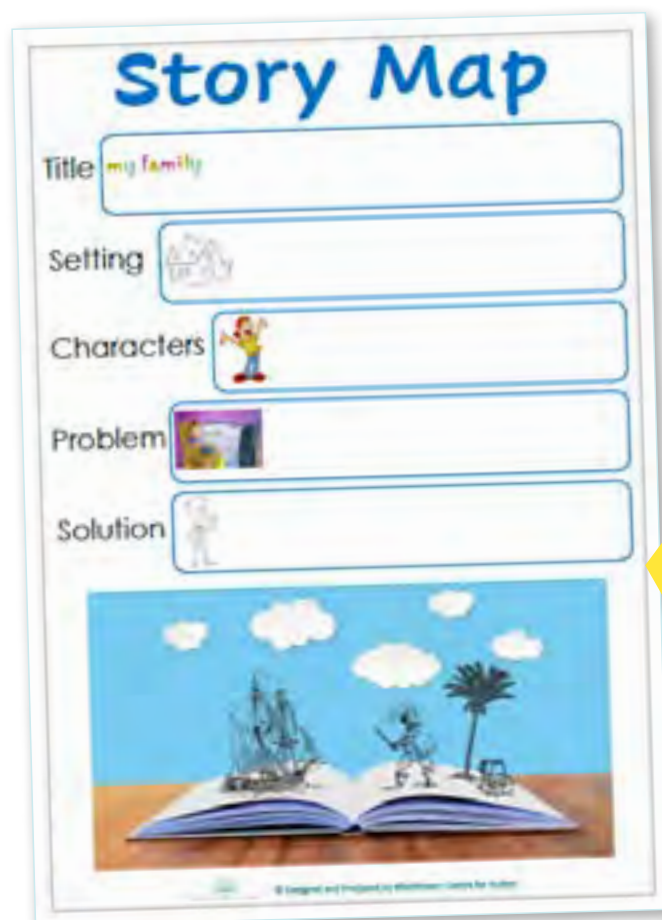


## Expressive language

Expressive communication encompasses the use of both verbal and nonverbal skills. Intervention approaches and strategies should include functional expressive language goals, focused on verbal language, and/or Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC).

Functional communication skills targets should promote a student's independence, engagement and wellbeing. These skills include seeking clarification, expressing preferences and views and making requests related to basic needs (e.g. for food or a toilet break). Vocabulary targets should be developed for activities that focus on communication exchange (e.g. snack time, or times when a student needs to express choice or express emotion at school). For preverbal students, an AAC system that supports functional communication development, will need to be explicitly taught and generalised across classroom, support room and home settings.

While expressive communication is often characterised by verbal language skills, it can take many forms that may not include speech. A student's development of written expressive language through, for example, the use of writing frameworks, story maps or alternative forms of expressive communication may need to be considered, based on a student's individual assessment profile.



An example of a story map.  
Source: MCA







Digital Learning and Assistive Technology

AAC strategies can be low-tech or high-tech and include universal or targeted interventions. The Digital Learning and Assistive Technology section of the guidelines has more information and advice on AAC. Examples of AAC strategies include:

- **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)**, where the person exchanges a picture to request or express something



An example of a PECS communication strip.  
Source: MCA

- **LÁMH, Sign-supported English, or a combination of methods** whereby a student expresses themselves using signs and symbols
- **Communication boards and communication books**, where the student can express their knowledge through gesture or pointing to words, photos and/or symbols

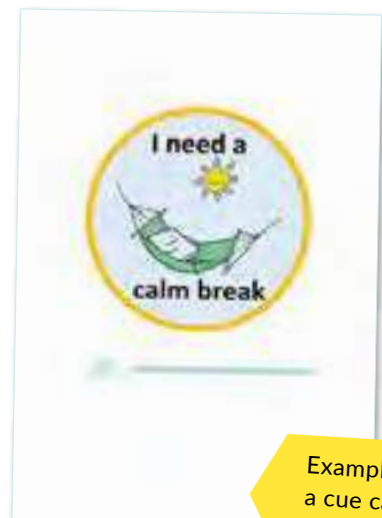


Example of a communication board.  
Source: MCA

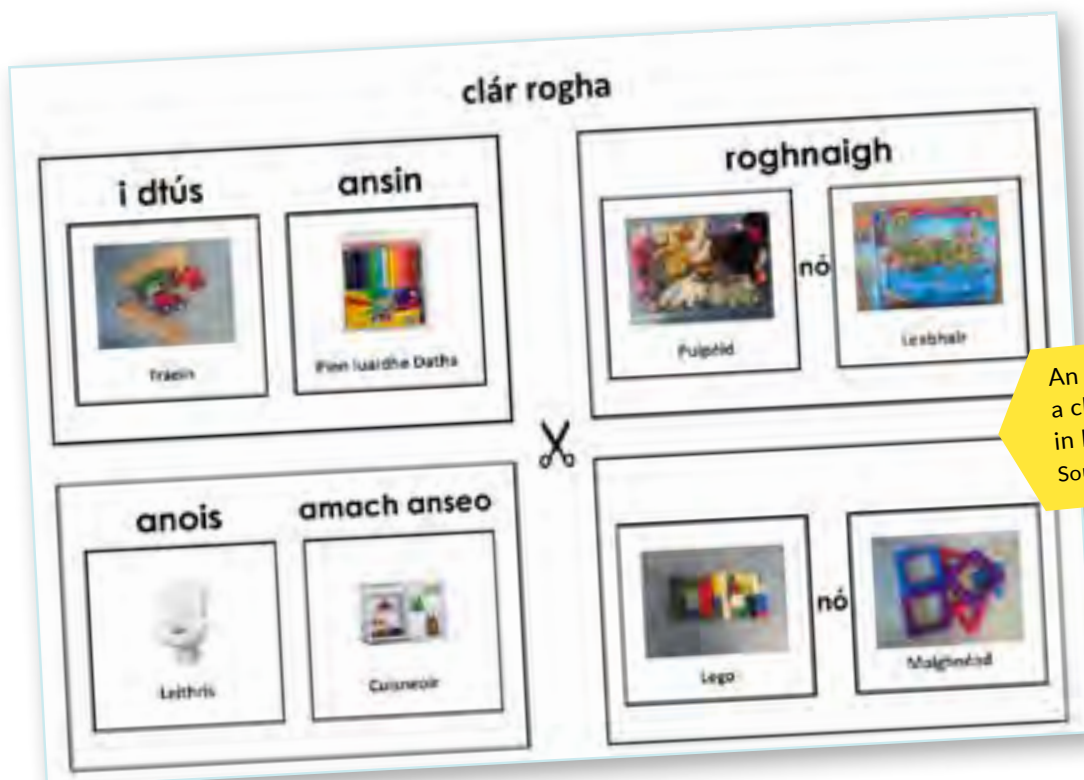




- A **core vocabulary inventor (sometimes called a core board)** is a visual support system that can help preverbal students to communicate requests, responses and comments. It is essential that specific concepts are assessed individually for understanding and then taught explicitly across various scenarios and environments before it is available for independent use.
- **Assistive technology** tools such as speech to text software may be useful for students who can express their knowledge fluently with verbal language, yet struggle to express their knowledge in writing
- **Communication cue cards** are used primarily with students who are verbal. They can be a reminder of what to say and provide an alternative means of communication in stressful situations
- **Conversation books** can use text, pictures or photographs to support the development of conversation skills
- **Voice output communication** aids such as BIGmack or Proloquo2Go or Grace app can generate digitised speech when the student presses a symbol or button. The student will need an understanding of cause and effect to use these devices effectively. SLTs can advise on the use of these aids
- **Choice boards:** A choice board is a visual tool that allows a student to select between two or more choices. It helps the student to visualise their decision-making process



Example of  
a cue card.  
Source: MCA



An example of  
a choice board  
in Irish.  
Source: MCA

## Social/pragmatic language

The effective use of social/pragmatic language can be a core area of difficulty for students with autism. Intervention should promote student confidence in the use of social language across situations and contexts. For students who are preverbal, intervention should focus on functional communication to support them to communicate throughout the day. Students who express themselves verbally will benefit from explicit instruction in social communication with visual supports used as needed. An example of one straightforward strategy is the use of symbols or concrete objects to indicate who the 'speaker' is at any one time. This can be used to enhance a student's capacity to contribute to classroom discussion or promote turn-taking in oral language lessons.

Autistic students often require supports to assist with their initiation of communication with others. Many students require explicit teaching of social skills individualised to their area of need and/or environmental support strategies to facilitate peer and/or adult interactions.



Explicitly teach students key communication skills for group work such as sharing attention and taking turns

In order to support an autistic student's participation in group work, adults should consider assigning the student a specific role within the group (e.g. note taker, timekeeper, spokesperson). Students with autism benefit from having a clear understanding of the purpose of the group task and an explicit description of their role within the group as well as clarity on the roles of others. Careful structuring of the group activity and providing frequent practice and reinforcement of key group language skills such as listening, sharing attention, turn-taking, and role play can also support the student's participation. It is also important that students are supported to use strategies to seek clarification or request assistance during group learning in the classroom.



Examples of visual aids to support group work and learning in a group. Source: MCA



Examples of visual aids to support group work and learning in a group.  
Source: MCA



The following are examples of resources that can support language and communication interventions for students with autism:

## RESOURCE BOX 7

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT.

#### Attention

- *MCA Best Practice Resources: Attention Autism*  
<http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/attention-autism>
- *Communicating - Communication Tips*. National Autistic Society [www.autism.org.uk/about/communication/communicating.aspx](http://www.autism.org.uk/about/communication/communicating.aspx)
- *More Than Words*<sup>®</sup>  
<http://www.hanen.org/Programs/For-Parents/More-Than-Words.aspx>
- *Developing the Fundamentals of Communication*  
<https://www.intensiveinteraction.org/>

#### Receptive/expressive language

- *Tasks Galore Series*  
[www.tasksgalore.com](http://www.tasksgalore.com)
- *Visual Strategies for Improving Communication: Practical Supports for School and Home*. Hodgdon, L. (1995). Troy, MI: QuirkRoberts Pub.
- *It Takes Two to Talk*<sup>®</sup>  
<http://www.hanen.org/Programs/For-Parents/It-Takes-Two-to-Talk.aspx>
- *TalkAbility*<sup>™</sup>  
<http://www.hanen.org/Programs/For-Parents/TalkAbility.aspx>
- *Elklan Language Builders*  
[www.elklan.co.uk](http://www.elklan.co.uk)
- *Behaviour Resource Pack. Resource No 38 Visual Aids, Cues and Messages*  
<https://www.sess.ie/resources/behaviour-management>
- *Language Skills Resources, including:*
  - *Language Difficulties Primary and Post-Primary Classroom Support*
  - *Activities to Develop Receptive and Expressive Language Skills (primary 7 years+)*
  - *Language Group Activities (primary 4-10 years)*
  - *Language Difficulties: Guidelines for teachers and strategies for in-class support*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/84e52e-national-educational-psychological-service-neps-guidelines-tips-and-/#language-skills>



- *Primary Language Curriculum*  
<https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Primary-Language>
- *Resources for Teachers on Speech Language and Communication*  
<https://ncse.ie/resources-for-teachers-on-speech-language-and-communication>
- *Resources for Literacy in Primary School: Oral Language and English as an Additional Language*  
<https://www.pdst.ie/primary>
- *Resources for Literacy in Post-Primary School: Enhancing Learning Through Classroom Talk*  
[www.pdst.ie/postprimary](http://www.pdst.ie/postprimary)
- *Building Bridges of Understanding*  
[www.curriculumdevelopmentunit.com/store/p12/Building\\_Bridges\\_of\\_Understanding.html](http://www.curriculumdevelopmentunit.com/store/p12/Building_Bridges_of_Understanding.html)
- *Language, Literacy and Learning Resources, including:*
  - *Comprehension Strategies for Instruction*
  - *Speech, Language & Communication Interventions*
  - *Vocabulary Enrichment*  
<https://www.nbss.ie/interventions-and-projects/language-literacy-and-learning>
- *Resources to Create a Core Board*
  - *Teaching with Core Words: Building Blocks for Communication- AssistiveWare*  
<https://www.assistiveware.com/blog/teaching-core-words-building-blocks-communication-and-curriculum>
  - *Core First Communication Book - Tobii Dynavox*  
<https://uk.tobiidynavox.com/products/core-first-communication-boards>

### Social/pragmatic language

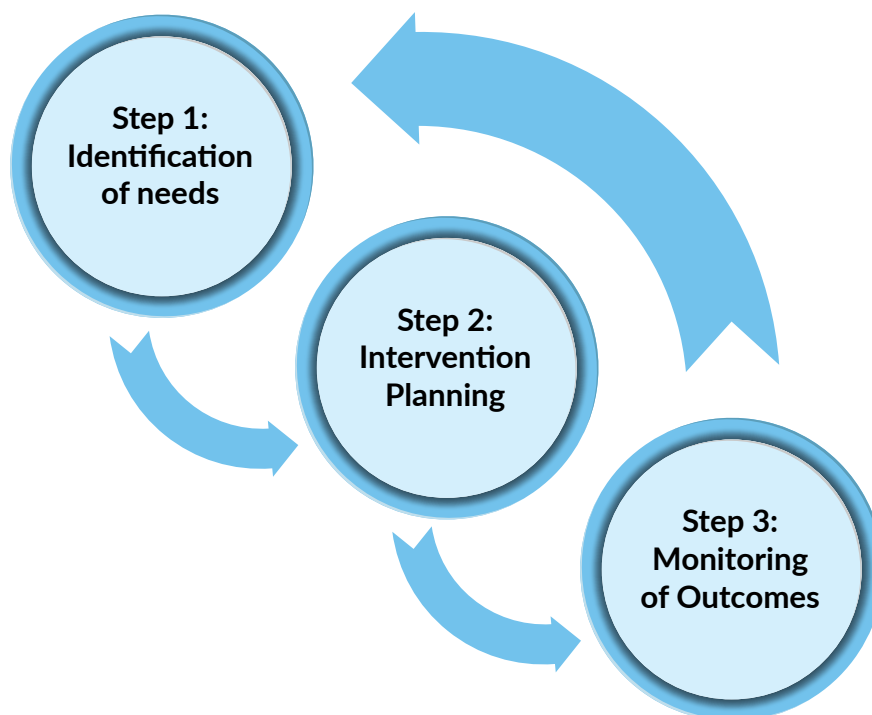
- *Behaviour Resource Pack: Resource No. 31 Social Stories™*  
[www.sess.ie/resources/behaviour-management](http://www.sess.ie/resources/behaviour-management)
- *Building Capacity Resources: How Can you Provide a Supportive Environment and Assign Individual Roles for Groupwork*  
<https://capacity-resource.middletownautism.com/strategies/building-capacity-within-a-school-setting/how-can-you-provide-a-supportive-environment/assign-individual-roles-for-group-work/>
- *The Social Use of Language Programme: Enhancing the Social Communication of Children and Teenagers with Special Educational Needs.* Rinaldi, W. (1992). UK: NFER Nelson



### Step 3: How can we monitor and record outcomes?

Following the identification of strengths and needs and the implementation of evidence-informed approaches and interventions, it is important to establish if the intervention(s) chosen have been successful. Where interventions are not effective, or only partially effective, it may be necessary to return to Step 1 and to repeat the process. It also may be necessary to review the student's needs through another lens (e.g. the lens of sensory needs or medical needs).

Ongoing monitoring of language and communication outcomes is best carried out as a collaborative process, involving the student, their family, teachers and support staff. Information arising from in-school assessment and/or speech and language therapy assessment should be considered alongside observations of the student's everyday use of language. This review process should take into account the student's ability to generalise language skills taught in a variety of environments.







# LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

## Points to Remember

### STEP 1 - IDENTIFY NEEDS

Learning objectives to support language and communication development should be linked to a careful assessment of the student's language profile in collaboration with a speech and language therapist and parents

### STEP 2 - MEET NEEDS

Due to language and communication differences, students with autism may have difficulty in understanding others and can become frustrated in their attempts to communicate their feelings, knowledge or needs.

Develop attention and listening skills by following the student's lead and using preferred objects/activities.

Get the student's attention, simplify your language, avoid ambiguities and idioms and allow students' additional processing time when giving instructions.

Where deemed appropriate, following detailed assessment, use Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) systems to support students' ability to communicate.

Provide opportunities to practise language concepts across home and school to support generalisation in the use of skills.

Explicitly teach social communication/ pragmatic skills with opportunities for practice across contexts.

Expressive language targets should prioritise functional skills that allow students to express their needs (e.g. food, toilet, rest) and support their wellbeing (e.g. language related to expressing emotion and problem-solving).

Support students' understanding by using visual teaching methodologies.

### STEP 3 - RECORD AND MONITOR OUTCOMES

In collaboration with parents, carefully monitor the impact of interventions on students' language and communication skills. Consider their ability to understand and use language to communicate across various environments the adaptations to the social, communicative, learning and sensory environments have been in meeting their needs.

Please see *Indicators of Effective Practice* to assist schools to reflect on their practice relating to **Language and Communication Development** and to help identify areas for further development.





## Social Development

Social communication and interaction difficulties and/or differences are core features of autism. Consequently, students with autism may experience challenges in relating to and communicating with peers, imitating others, and engaging in reciprocal play. These difficulties are compounded as others without autism can have difficulty in understanding and processing the intentions of individuals with autism.

### The 'Double Empathy Problem'

Studies have shown that those without autism can struggle to make sense of the behaviour of autistic individuals and this could negatively impact on their intentions to pursue social interactions with them. The theory of double empathy proposes that both autistic and non-autistic people experience a lack of understanding for the other group. Milton et al. (2018, p.1) referred to problems with empathy as a 'double problem' as both people experience it, and so it is not a singular problem located in any one person.



It is important to understand that an individual's social development is inextricably linked to their language and communication development.

Language and  
Communication  
Development





## Step 1: How can we identify needs?

Social communication and interaction difficulties have a fundamental impact on how students with autism navigate their social world. Accordingly, developing social understanding as well as explicit teaching of social skills should be prioritised.

### What information is gathered?

Information about a student's social communication and social interaction may be gathered across the following areas:

<b>Nonverbal interaction</b> e.g. use of gesture, eye contact, observance of personal space
<b>Functional use of language and communication skills in social situations</b> e.g. greeting and introducing oneself
<b>Social interaction</b> e.g. recognising and responding to social cues, using and understanding facial expressions, starting conversation with others and engaging in reciprocal conversation
<b>Friendship, play skills and engagement in leisure activities and special interests</b> e.g. sharing, taking turns, listening to others
<b>Participation</b> e.g. understanding and following social rules of learning within a group
<b>Attention</b> e.g. attending to social cues, engaging in joint attention and sharing experiences

For autistic students, difficulties in these areas can affect their ability to engage in social experiences, which often leads to withdrawal from social activities. Recreation and leisure activities provide an important context for learning and developing social skills and help to promote general wellbeing and happiness. Therefore, it is important to identify students' strengths and needs in relation to their engagement and involvement in leisure activities.

I did not know how to make friends so I would stand there calling this girl every four-letter word that I knew. Eventually the girl would take to her feet and chase me several blocks. When she decided at last to ask me why I tormented her so persistently for so long - 'I wanted to be your friend' I blurted out furiously. (Williams, 1992, pp. 33-4)



Due to difficulties in social communication and interaction, students with autism can be more vulnerable to bullying in comparison to their peers. They may not understand a social situation and have difficulty gauging the perspective or intentions of others. This can affect their capacity to identify bullying behaviour. For example, they may think that someone is trying to be a friend when they are actually taking advantage of them, or interpret a disagreement or row with another student as bullying.

## How is this information gathered?

Observation of the student across school contexts can provide important information about their strengths and needs with regard to social understanding and social skills. The focus of observation should not only be the quality of the student's interaction with others, but also on how the broader physical and social environment is structured to support social engagement, play and leisure activities. Information with regard to a student's social interaction across settings, and at different points in time, can be gathered from interviews with parents and others who know the student well (e.g. support staff). Data-gathering may be informal in the student's environment or be guided by a structured observation profile. The use of checklists, standardised assessment tools and autism-specific assessment instruments can provide additional data to help build a profile of the student's social understanding and social skills. This information can be used to identify priority learning needs and targets for intervention.

It is important to obtain the personal views of students with autism with regard to their social understanding and social skills. Information can be gathered through informal discussions with students and through the use of more formal interview schedules, such as *My Thoughts about School* or Person-Centred Planning (PCP) tools/approaches ([Appendix 1](#)). Students with autism can also be supported to reflect on their own social behaviour using a range of techniques including Situation, Options, Consequences, Choices, Strategies, and Simulations (SOCCSS), video modelling and comic strip conversations. The student's own perspective is important in identifying areas of strengths and needs that may be targeted for intervention.

Identification of need in relation to difficulties in social interaction, including any concerns about bullying, can be facilitated by regular communication with the student, school staff, parents, and external professionals as necessary. Anonymous questionnaires or a 'worry box' can be used by students to inform teachers about behaviours that concern them. Ongoing monitoring and observation by school staff across settings is important as research indicates that negative social experiences are most likely to occur in the playground, canteen or during transitions.

Further information on assessment tools is available in [Appendix 4 - Assessment tools for language and communication, social and emotional development, and life skills](#). The following are examples of measures that may be used to identify needs in relation to social communication and social interaction:



## RESOURCE BOX 8

### SUPPORTING IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS - SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

#### Checklists

- *Social Communication Skills; Playground Behaviour; Social Factors/Relationships and School Environment*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>

#### Interviews

- *My Thoughts about School Checklist; How Do You Feel Rating Scale*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *Situation, Options, Consequences, Choices, Strategies and Simulations - SOCCSS*  
[https://teenage-resource.middletownautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/09/3-SOCCSS\\_Worksheet.pdf](https://teenage-resource.middletownautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/09/3-SOCCSS_Worksheet.pdf)
- *Relationship Circles*  
<http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-thinking-tools/relationship-circle/>

#### Observations

- *Social Skills Observation Profile (Assessment Document AD5)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>

#### Autism-specific assessment tools

- *Social Reciprocity Subscale - The Psychoeducational Profile (PEP -3)\**
- *Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Supports (SCERTS®) Model Volume I Assessment\**
- *TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP)\**

#### Standardised assessment tools

- *Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scale (SSIS) (age range 3 -18 years)*
- *The Assessment of Functional Living Skills (AFLS), including Community Participation Skills Assessment Protocol, School Skills Assessment Protocol, Independent Living Skills Assessment Protocol*

\*See Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) section for more information.



## Step 2: How can we meet these needs?

Following comprehensive assessment of the student's needs in relation to social communication and interaction, the next step is to set out priority learning targets for intervention. These target areas should be agreed between parents, teachers and the student, and reflect the individual's identified strengths and needs.

### Social development and wellbeing, learning and participation

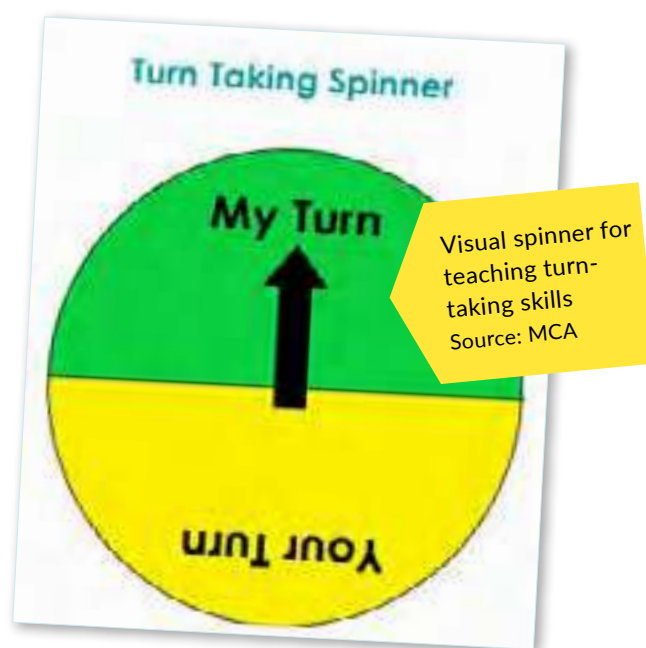


Emotional  
Development

The promotion of social development should be located within a school's broader whole-school plan to support the wellbeing, learning and participation of all students. Schools provide a valuable context for the development of social skills and social relationships for students with autism. Central to this are the quality of the relationships between teachers and students, and between students themselves.

Recreation and leisure are important for general wellbeing and happiness, and provide vital opportunities to promote and develop social interaction, shared interests, and friendships. Friendships are crucial in helping to protect against social isolation, reduce vulnerability to bullying, and provide students with sources of support and help. Developing friendships is a complex social skill that can be difficult for individuals with autism. It is supported by shared interests, buddy systems, and building on the student's strengths. See Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) for further information ([Resource Box 9](#)). A person-centred approach, which builds upon the student's strengths and interests, should be adopted when planning recreation and leisure opportunities. Students with autism may need encouragement and support to engage in new activities and to explore options for recreation.

Play is a key leisure activity that provides a context for students to develop joint attention, self-regulation and social communication skills. Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework, highlights the importance of play in helping all children to develop as competent and confident learners (NCCA, 2009). Autistic children engage in play, including imaginative play, but can experience greater difficulty with spontaneous play, pretend and social play, and often require additional guidance and support in this regard. Good quality play opportunities require careful planning, preparation and pacing. Teachers and parents can support the development of play by providing opportunities for the student to engage in structured play activities and by using pictures/visuals to clarify play instructions and ground rules. Visual supports can be effective for teaching skills such as turn-taking in games.



Using a student's interests as the basis for play opportunities can be highly motivating (e.g. group play using LEGO to help develop students' social skills and ability to work in groups). Video modelling and the use of visual teaching approaches can support and enhance play skills and promote students' inclusion in playground games or physical education lessons. Environmental adaptations to support participation can include creating a quieter area designated within the playground, which the student may choose to use, along with the availability of structured games or preferred activities. Where possible, coaches or leaders involved in community leisure activities should be made aware of potential difficulties, including sensory needs, for the student with autism, when organising activities.

Meaningful inclusion means being included in everything, it means recognising that people with autism don't JUST want to learn or be cared for. Like everyone else, we want to be involved in our communities, be out and about and have fun. Doing these things can be just as challenging as going to school or accessing support but sometimes they are overlooked.  
(Middletown Centre for Autism, 2017, p.6)

In supporting positive relationships and meaningful inclusion, all schools are required to have an anti-bullying policy within their code of behaviour (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). This should take into consideration the needs and vulnerabilities of all students with special educational needs (SEN) including those with autism. The following strategies help to promote social inclusion and reduce the risk of bullying:

Ensure all school staff have a good understanding of autism and the increased vulnerability of these students to bullying

Adopt approaches that raise awareness of autism and develop mutual understanding and support between students with autism and their peers e.g. peer mentoring programmes, autism awareness events, or shared interest lunchtime clubs

Provide effective supervision during unstructured periods of the school day

Ensure all members of the school community are aware of the school's anti-bullying policy and procedures, including adaptations to support the particular needs of students with autism

Support students with autism to develop social understanding and to recognise social cues that will help them identify positive and negative social experiences

Provide social skills training and support to help students to advocate for themselves within the situation and/or by informing supporting adults



## Interventions for developing social understanding and social skills

Explicit teaching of social skills is required for many students with autism. Skills taught need to be appropriate to the developmental age of the student and should take account of their communicative ability. Furthermore, skills development should be oriented to meeting an individual's functional needs, thereby promoting their independence and enhancing their quality of life. Linking skills to actual situations and incorporating individual interests and preferences can enhance motivation and engagement. Skills that need to be directly targeted may include conversation skills, friendship skills, understanding facial expressions, and gestures and rules about personal space. Interventions should focus on the school and class contexts in order to ensure that the student's social communication and interaction needs are taken into account and skills generalised across environments.

Generalisation is an important principle when teaching social skills to students with autism as they often have difficulty in applying skills that they have learned in new and novel situations.  
(Virginia Department of Education, 2011)

Students' ability to determine what social skills are appropriate in different contexts and to consider the needs and perspectives of different audiences is central to the development of social competence. Opportunities to generalise learning allow the student to maintain the skill learned in different settings and with different people. When planning for generalisation, the following factors should be identified and considered within the Student Support Plan:

Involving family members to support the practice of social skills in the home and community

Supporting peers to respond to interaction attempts by the student with autism and to understand the difficulties experienced by those with autism

Monitoring skill development across a variety of settings and with different people

Organising social interventions in everyday situations and activities (school, home and community)

Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all supporting adults in reinforcing and generalising social skills



Interventions that can be used to support students in developing their social understanding and social skills are outlined below. The selection of intervention(s), is informed by assessment and the priority learning needs of the individual, and also based on input from the student, school staff, parents, and external professionals as necessary. A number of resources associated with the interventions below are highlighted in [Resource Box 9](#).

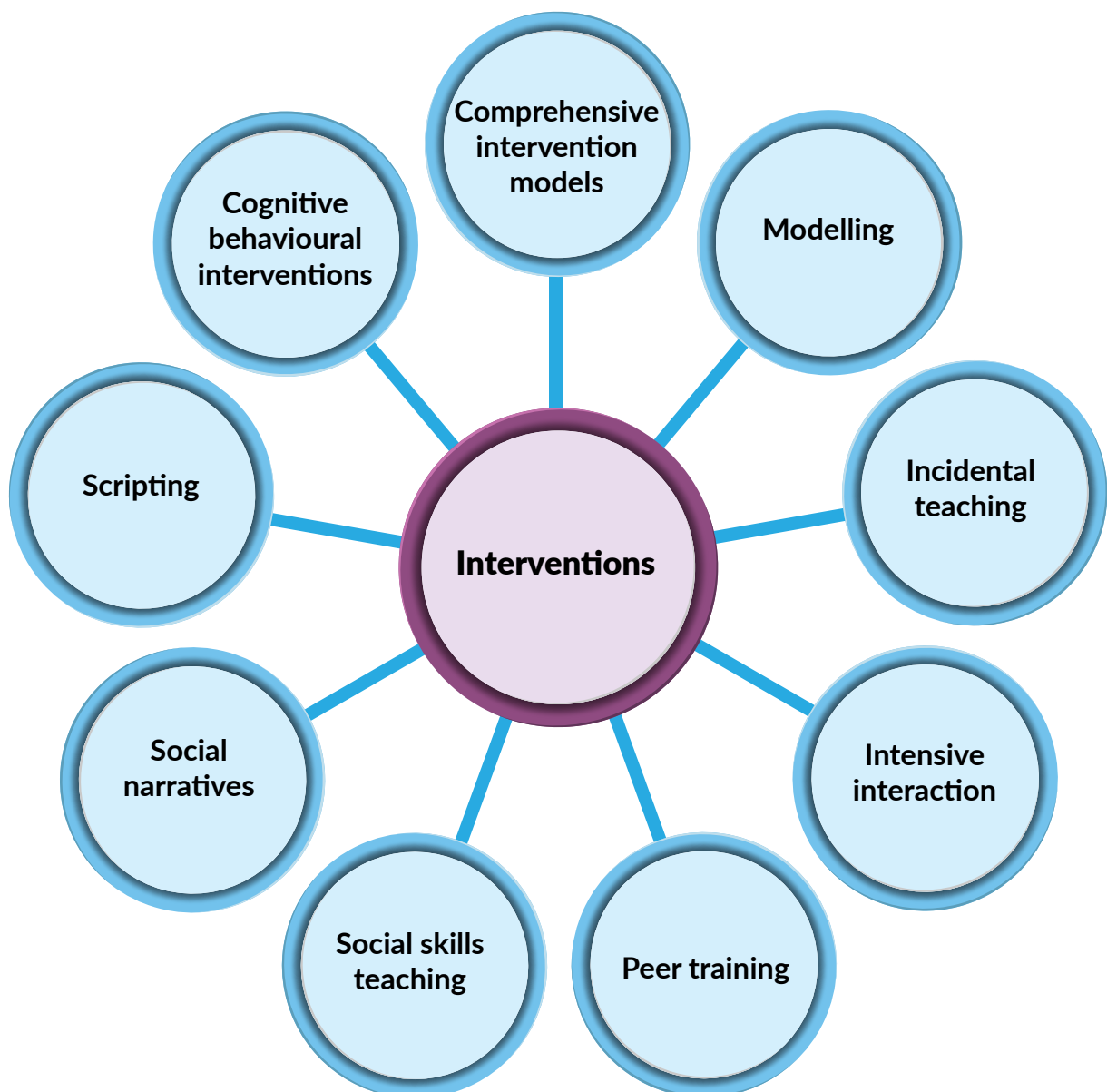


Figure 8: Approaches to promote social development



## Modelling and role play

Modelling and demonstrating a target behaviour is effective in promoting the student's ability to imitate and learn new skills. Role play can facilitate practice and consolidation of skills in different contexts. Feedback helps to refine the performance of the skill in specific situations. Additionally, video modelling and video feedback can help to reinforce students' positive use of social skills and apply new skills in real-life situations.

## Incidental teaching

Incidental teaching strategies involve teaching a student a social skill using opportunities, activities and materials that occur naturally in the learning environment. Target skills taught incidentally support generalisation and are more likely to be meaningful to the student.

Daily activities such as lunchtime provide opportunities to teach and reinforce social skills

## Intensive interaction

Intensive interaction is a teaching approach developed to promote the social communication skills of individuals with complex learning disabilities, including students with autism and those who are preverbal. In using this approach, the teacher acts as a communication partner who explicitly follows the student's lead. The communication partner views the student's actions as communication efforts and attempts to maintain the interaction by mirroring the student's actions using timing and rhythm. This approach can support the student's foundational social skills, such as sharing personal space, enjoying interaction with others, turn-taking, and increasing their use of vocalisations and reciprocal communication.





## Peer training and coaching

Peer training and coaching supports peers to engage with students with autism and enhances the opportunities these students have to use and apply their social skills. These approaches aim to improve peer knowledge and understanding of autism and guide peers to use specific skills in initiating and responding during social interactions (e.g. getting the attention of the student with autism, modelling appropriate play skills, organising play activities, encouraging and using prompts). This process is facilitated and supported by the teacher. Peers are then encouraged to apply their skills when interacting with the student with autism in natural environments (e.g. classroom, playground). Peer training and coaching promotes inclusion and enhances peers' understanding of the perspective of individuals with autism. This also supports mutual understanding of neurodiversity. *Circle of Friends* is one example of a peer training/coaching intervention.



Peers can be an important support to students with autism.

## Social skills teaching

Social skills teaching involves explicit instruction in a range of social skills. This intervention can be provided in one to one, paired or group settings. Effective teaching strategies include modelling, prompting and reinforcement. The inclusion of typically developing peers in group settings provides positive role models and increases opportunities for reciprocal social interaction. Generalisation is enhanced through the involvement of peers, parents and supporting adults within the school and beyond. McKeown (2015) references the *Attention Autism Post-Primary Programme* as an example of social skills training for students with autism in post-primary settings. This programme supports students' ability to follow an adult lead, take instructions, and develop social, friendship and work skills in a natural group setting. It also focuses on problem-solving and emotional regulation.



Group settings can provide opportunities to have fun while teaching social skills





Teacher  
Professional  
Learning

## Social narratives

Social narratives use a story format to explain commonly occurring events in order to help students to understand, manage and participate in social situations. Alongside the generic stories available, teachers can create stories in response to specific situations in the student's life. These can create clarity and predictability, and can improve the ability of the student to cope in situations they find challenging. Social narratives should be developmentally appropriate and individualised using visuals, photographs and language relevant to the student and the situation. Stories can be written in a comic strip format using speech and thought bubbles to illustrate what people are saying and thinking in particular scenarios. Well-known social narrative interventions include *Social Stories™* and *Comic Strip Conversations* (Gray, 2015, 1994). The latter use a specific structure to clearly communicate information about a context, skill or behaviour in a way that is meaningful to an individual with autism. A guide to writing a social narrative on the topic of 'It's OK not to win' is included in [Resource Box 9](#).

## Scripting

Scripting involves providing explicit instructions to the student with autism on the language needed to initiate or respond in certain situations. A verbal and/or written script is developed for a particular situation (e.g. independently ordering food in a restaurant). Scripts are modelled and practised before being used in real-life situations. A planned approach to phasing out the use of a script is needed to help increase independence and the generalised use of the target skill.



Snack Time Social Script.  
Source: MCA



## Cognitive behavioural interventions

Cognitive behavioural Interventions have been shown to be an effective strategy for some students with autism (NCSE, 2015). As with all interventions, the selection of this approach should be based on a student's individual learning profile. Students are taught to identify their own thoughts and emotions, to recognise how these affect their behaviour, and to use strategies to change their thinking and behaviour in social situations.

## Comprehensive intervention models

A comprehensive intervention model is a set of practices, organised around a conceptual framework, that is designed to support the learning and development of students with autism. *Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support (SCERTS®)* is an example of a comprehensive intervention model that can be used to help target improvements in a student's social understanding and social skills. It is developed for individuals with a developmental age of between eight months and 10 years but can be appropriate for older students depending on their individual needs. The social communication aspect of SCERTS® focuses on strategies to help students become increasingly competent, confident and active participants in social activities. The emotional regulation aspect of SCERTS® aims to develop students' ability to maintain a well-regulated emotional state, which helps enhance their ability to interact with others and learn. The transactional elements support adults to respond to the students' needs and interests, modify and adapt the environment and provide tools to enhance learning.



Emotional  
Development

The following are examples of resources that can support interventions relating to social development:

## RESOURCE BOX 9

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

- *The SCERTS® Model: A Comprehensive Educational Approach for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Prizant, B.M., Wetherby, A.M., Rubin, E., Laurent, A.M., & Rydell, P.J. (2007). USA: Paul Brookes <http://scerts.com/>
- *Social and Leisure Skills - Research Bulletin Issue No. 24*. Middletown Centre for Autism <https://www.middletownautism.com/research/research-bulletin/download/25>
- *Sport Ireland Participation Unit* <https://www.sportireland.ie/participation>
- A Right to Play. In E. Ring, P. Daly, & E. Wall, (Eds). *Autism from the Inside Out: A handbook for parents, early childhood, primary, post-primary and special school settings*. (pp. 45-65). O'Sullivan, L. (2018). Oxford: Peter Lang
- *Play and Autism - Research Bulletin Issue No. 9*. Middletown Centre for Autism <https://www.middletownautism.com/research/research-bulletin/download/10>



- *Autism and Play, Volume 2 - Research Bulletin Issue No. 21.* Middletown Centre for Autism <https://www.middletownautism.com/research/research-bulletin/download/22>
- *Recommendations for Developing Friendships.* Middletown Centre for Autism <http://life-skills.middletownautism.com/strategies/leisure/social-skills/friendship-skills/>
- *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cb6966-anti-bullying-procedures-for-primary-and-post-primary-schools/>
- *Bullying and Autistic Pupils* <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/bullying/bullying>
- *Safe Online Engagement - Research Bulletin No. 34.* Middletown Centre for Autism <https://www.middletownautism.com/files/uploads/15470be529ce4a8b17da7a8f32b88131.pdf>

### Modelling

- *Video Modelling* <https://life-skills.middletownautism.com/background/teaching-life-skills/video-modelling>

### Intensive interaction

- *Developing the Fundamentals of Communication* <https://www.intensiveinteraction.org/>
- *Intensive interaction* <https://www.sess.ie/intensive-interaction-4>

### Peer training and coaching

- *Circle of Friends* <https://inclusive-solutions.com/circles/circle-of-friends/>
- *Promoting Autism Inclusive Attitudes: Ideas to use in Primary and Secondary Schools; Developed in Collaboration with Autistic Young People* [https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/aet\\_promoting-autism-inclusive-attitudes.pdf](https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/aet_promoting-autism-inclusive-attitudes.pdf)

### Social skills teaching

- *Setting up a Social Skills Training Group: Primary and Post-Primary Information Pack* <https://assets.gov.ie/41317/119b6d462c8c43ee809b352f91670aa9.pdf>
- *Groupwork for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Ages -5-11) - An Integrated Approach.* Owe, C., Eggett, A., Old, K. & Davidson, L.A. (2007). London: Routledge
- *Social Skills Training for Children and Adolescents with Asperger Syndrome and Social-Communication Problems.* Baker, J.E. (2003). Kansas: Shawnee Mission



- *Attention Autism*  
<https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/attention-autism/>
- *Middletown Centre for Autism Turn Taking Video*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eElyokdd0e4>

### Social narratives

- *The New Social Story Book* (15th ed.). Gray, C. (2015). Arlington, TX: Future Horizons
- *Comic Strip Conversations: Illustrated Interactions that Teach Conversation Skills to Students with Autism and in relation to Disorders*. Gray, C. (1994). Arlington, TX: Future Horizons
- *Social Stories™\**  
<https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/social-stories/>
- *Social Narratives*  
<https://life-skills.middletownautism.com/background/teaching-life-skills/social-narratives/>
- *Successful Social Stories for Young Children: Growing up with Social Stories*. Timmins, S. (2016). London: Jessica Kingsley

### Scripting

- *Teach Me with Pictures: 40 Fun Picture Scripts to Develop Play and Communication Skills in Children on the Autism Spectrum*. Griffin, S., Harris, R., & Hogdon, L. (2013). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

### Cognitive behavioural interventions

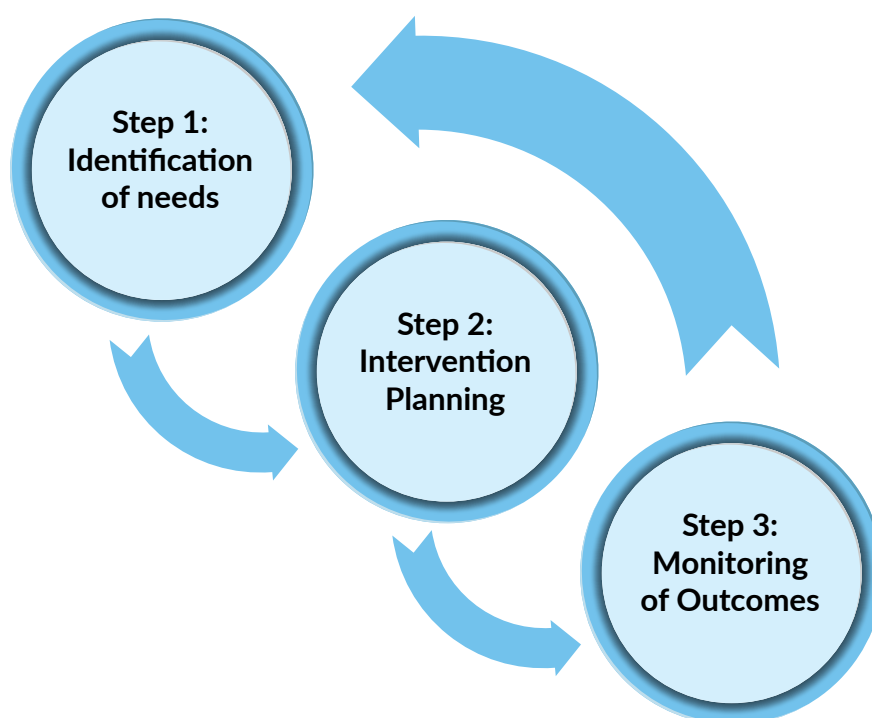
- *Socially Thinking*. Michelle Garcia Winner (2020)  
[www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com)
- *Teenage Resources: SOCCSS (Situation, Options, Consequences, Choices, Strategies and Simulations)*  
[https://teenage-resource.middletownautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/09/3-SOCCSS\\_Worksheet.pdf](https://teenage-resource.middletownautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/09/3-SOCCSS_Worksheet.pdf)
- *The Secret Agent Society Program: Solving the Mystery of Social Encounters*  
<https://www.sst-institute.net/>

\*See Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) section for more information.



### Step 3: How can we monitor and record outcomes?

Following the identification of strengths and needs in relation to social development and the implementation of evidence-informed interventions to address priority learning targets, it is important to establish if the interventions chosen in [Step 2](#) have been successful. Reviewing the effectiveness of the intervention(s) should involve a collaborative process, incorporating information from parents, the student and support staff. Ongoing teacher reflection and observation is an essential component of monitoring outcomes. If checklists or questionnaires were used to establish a baseline in respect of social skills before an intervention, they may be re-administered to assess progress. A review of progress with regard to social development must consider how well students can generalise skills to different contexts and the degree of support required for them to demonstrate the skill. Learning targets, intervention approaches and outcomes recorded in the Student Support Plan should be reviewed and revised accordingly as a new cycle of the problem-solving process begins.







## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Points to Remember

#### STEP 1 - IDENTIFY NEEDS

Establish the student's use of a range of social communication skills across settings, including their nonverbal interaction, participation, attention, social interaction, and leisure and play skills.

#### STEP 2 - MEET NEEDS

Social skills need to be explicitly taught to students with autism, using a variety of evidence-informed interventions including visual teaching approaches, video modelling, social narratives etc.

Provide opportunities to practice skills across school and home settings to ensure generalisation of learning.

Provide students with opportunities to engage in a variety of leisure and play activities to help develop social skills and friendships through shared interests.

Make social skills teaching meaningful for the student by relating learning targets to real situations and incorporate their interests and preferences to enhance engagement.

Promote understanding and acceptance of autism within the school community to help increase positive social experiences for autistic students and decrease negative social experiences.

Tailor social skills interventions to the priority learning needs of the student, in consultation with parents and students

Support the student to share their views of and to reflect upon social experiences in order to identify their needs and promote social skills development.

#### STEP 3 - RECORD AND MONITOR OUTCOMES

Carefully monitor and reinforce students' appropriate use of social skills across settings and update Student Support Plan accordingly. Provide opportunities to practice skills across school and home settings to ensure generalisation of learning.

Please see *Indicators of Effective Practice* to assist schools to reflect on their approach to promoting **Social Development** and to help identify areas for further development.





## Emotional Development

The promotion of emotional development should be located within a school’s broader whole-school plan to meet the wellbeing, learning and participation of all students. Students’ relationships and their feeling of belonging at school are central to their emotional development. For students with autism in particular the development of independent living skills supports their participation and engagement, and is an important protective factor in promoting emotional wellbeing. Conversely, a student’s experience of emotional dysregulation can have a profound impact on all aspects of their development. Therefore, emotional development should be a central consideration in the broader identification of, and response to, the educational needs of students with autism.

To me, the outside world is a totally incomprehensible mayhem which terrifies me.  
(Blackburn, 2019)



Behavioural Development

An understanding of autism and promoting responsive adult-student relationships, strong home-school communication, social-emotional development and meaningful engagement of students underpins an inclusive whole-school approach to wellbeing.



Whole-School Practices

Instead of concentrating on the lack of emotional wellbeing in people with autism, we should develop strategies to facilitate their feeling of happiness. Since happiness is a subjective and abstract concept and the source of a person’s happiness is often not known (not even to the person with autism himself, because of difficulties with self-awareness), it is pivotal to develop strategies and tools to assess happiness and emotional wellbeing that are autism friendly.  
(Vermeulen, 2014b, p.14)





The promotion of wellbeing and happiness for children with autism is all the more pertinent as they may have fewer opportunities to develop resilience and to enjoy positive emotional experiences. They may not automatically perceive others as a source of happiness or emotional support, and some may feel vulnerable, stressed and isolated.

Students with autism may experience difficulties understanding their thoughts and feelings, which may lead to emotional dysregulation. These feelings may be expressed as either externalised behaviours that challenge, or internalised emotions that may contribute to feelings of stress or anxiety. The skills a student needs to understand, express and manage their emotions develop sequentially, and are based on an understanding and awareness of their own emotional state. These skills play an important role in understanding the emotional states of others and in the formation of relationships. Emotional awareness is fundamental to the development of emotional regulation and the use of skills associated with successful social-emotional problem solving.

Emotional awareness and communication of needs	Emotional regulation and problem solving
Recognising and making connections between physiological arousal and emotion	Developing one's capacity to modify and cope with emotion
Accurately identifying and labelling emotions in others and in oneself	Using problem-solving strategies in social-emotional interactions <i>(See Emotional Arousal Cycle)</i>
Having a strategy to communicate emotion and level of physiological arousal	

Students with autism experience specific difficulties that impact on their emotional awareness and emotional regulation. These difficulties may relate to:



Sensory Processing

- Social communication and social interaction (e.g. social-emotional reciprocity and developing relationships)
- Hyper/hypo reactivity to sensory input, including unusual interest in sensory aspects of environment
- Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour (e.g. distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns)
- Flexible thinking and perspective-taking.



Research continues to clarify how emotional development differs in people with autism (e.g. challenging the stereotype that people with autism lack empathy and cannot recognise feelings) and broaden our understanding of how sensory issues interact with emotional development.

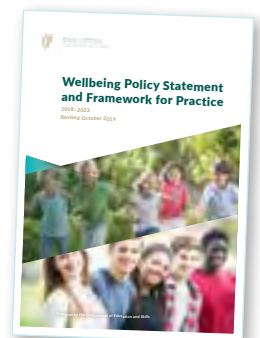
Interoception refers to the perception of the physiological condition of the body, including hunger, temperature, and heart rate...existing research indicates an association between low interoceptive sensitivity and alexithymia (a difficulty identifying one's own emotion), underscoring the link between bodily and emotional awareness.

(Murphy *et al.*, 2017, p.45)

## Step 1: How can we identify needs?

### How is this information gathered?

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* provides self-evaluation questionnaires and tools that can be used by teachers, parents and students to support a whole-school approach to the promotion of wellbeing. A student's perception of whole-school interventions can be gathered through verbal, written or visual approaches (e.g. *My Thoughts About School Questionnaire* and *How Do You Feel?* scales).



The use of autism friendly approaches to assess emotional wellbeing and happiness is advised. *The Autism Good Feeling Questionnaire* and Person-Centred Planning (PCP) approaches ([Appendix 1](#)) can be used to support student engagement in the identification of their own needs and the development of interventions. For students who are preverbal, observations and close communication between home and school contribute to building an understanding of a student's emotional presentation. In addition, sensitive and responsive interactions provide the opportunity for adults to develop an understanding of subtle changes in a student's mood.



Language and  
Communication  
Development

### Emotional awareness and communication of needs

In order to understand how a student displays their emotional state verbally and nonverbally (e.g. body language, facial expression, vocalisations or vocabulary used) observations of the student across contexts, with a range of peers and adults, can provide valuable baseline information. Adults will need to be observant of behaviours which communicate emotional dysregulation, especially with students who are unable to recognise, or express their own emotional needs.

Teachers can use visual supports such as feelings maps or talking mats to explore a student's ability to make connections between their physiological arousal and their emotional experience.



Areas of focus include establishing:

- How accurately a student can recognise emotion cues from facial expressions, body language and tone of voice
- The range of receptive and expressive vocabulary a student uses to label emotions in themselves and others
- The intensity of an emotion being experienced by others, and by themselves using rating scales or emotion thermometers
- Which emotions a child can accurately identify and label in others and in themselves

Data can also be gathered using emotion word banks, emotion fans or feelings wheels. The use of photos and video materials, games, story books or apps may also be helpful in building up a picture of students' emotional awareness.

### Emotional regulation

Observation of behaviours can provide important information in understanding an individual's capacity to cope with emotional arousal and their problem-solving strategies. Measures such as the *Comfort Zones Profile* can help teachers establish a student's sensory, cognitive and emotional needs. Standardised tools can be used to assess specific aspects of emotional development and coping skills, such as the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)*, *Assessment of Children's Emotional Skills (ACES)* or the *Spence Anxiety Scale*. Results of self-report measures used with students with autism should be interpreted with caution and in conjunction with the views of others who know the student well.

Commercially available resources designed specifically for people with autism include the *Cognitive Affective Training (CAT-Kit)* and the *Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support (SCERTS®)* model assessment tools. Measures provided within these resources can be used to better understand students' emotional skills, and their ability to connect their physiological and emotional experience with their thoughts and actions.

Further information on assessment tools is available in [Appendix 4 – Assessment tools for language and communication, social and emotional development, and life skills.](#)



Example of  
emotion fan.  
Source: MCA



The following are examples of measures that can be used to identify needs related to emotional development:

## RESOURCE BOX 10

### SUPPORTING IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS - EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

#### Checklists

- *Resource Documents RD1: Basic Needs Checklist, My Thoughts About School Checklist, 'How Do You Feel?' Scale*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *Wellbeing Questionnaire for Pupils - Primary*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e0fb5-primary-pupil-questionnaire/>
- *Wellbeing Questionnaire for Pupils - Post Primary*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/328fc-post-primary-pupil-questionnaire/>

#### Interviews

- *The Autism Good Feeling Questionnaire*  
<https://petervermeulenblog.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/autism-good-feeling-questionnaire-peter-vermeulen-english.pdf>
- *Assessment Document AD4: My Thoughts about School and How Do I Feel? Rating Scale*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *Person Centred Planning (PCP): Thinking Tools*  
<http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-thinking-tools/>
- *Subjective Quality of Life Tool*  
<https://www.bild.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Subjective-Quality-of-Life-Tool-Indoors-March2020.pdf>

#### Observations

- *Comfort Zones Profile*  
<https://www.zonesofregulation.com/index.html>



### Standardised assessment tools

- *Measuring and Monitoring Children and Young People's Mental Wellbeing – A Toolkit for Schools and Colleges*  
<https://www.annafreud.org/media/4612/mwb-toolki-final-draft-4.pdf>
- *Assessment of Children's Emotional Skills (ACES)*  
<https://socialdevelopmentlab.umbc.edu/available-measures/the-assessment-of-childrens-emotional-skills-aces/>
- *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)*  
<https://www.sdqinfo.org/aO.html>
- *Spence Children's Anxiety Scales*  
<https://www.scaswebsite.com/>

### Autism-specific emotion assessment tools

- *Cognitive Affective Training (CAT-Kit)*  
<https://cat-kit.com/en-gb/about>
- *Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support. SCERTS® Model Assessment tools*  
[www.scerts.com](http://www.scerts.com)

## Step 2: How can we meet these needs?



Inclusive whole-school practices to promote emotional development, at each level of the Continuum of Support, may include:

#### Whole-School Practices

- Universal whole-school approaches for the promotion of emotional development (e.g. *Aistear*, *Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*, *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* and the *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme*) and evidence-based interventions (e.g. the *FRIENDS* programmes)
- Individualised approaches for students with specific needs may be delivered in small groups or through focused personalised supports. Interventions involve proactive and preventative teaching and learning strategies (including environmental adaptations and interpersonal supports) that promote effective emotional awareness and emotional regulation

Once needs relating to emotional development have been identified in [Step 1](#), the next step is to set out priority learning targets for intervention.



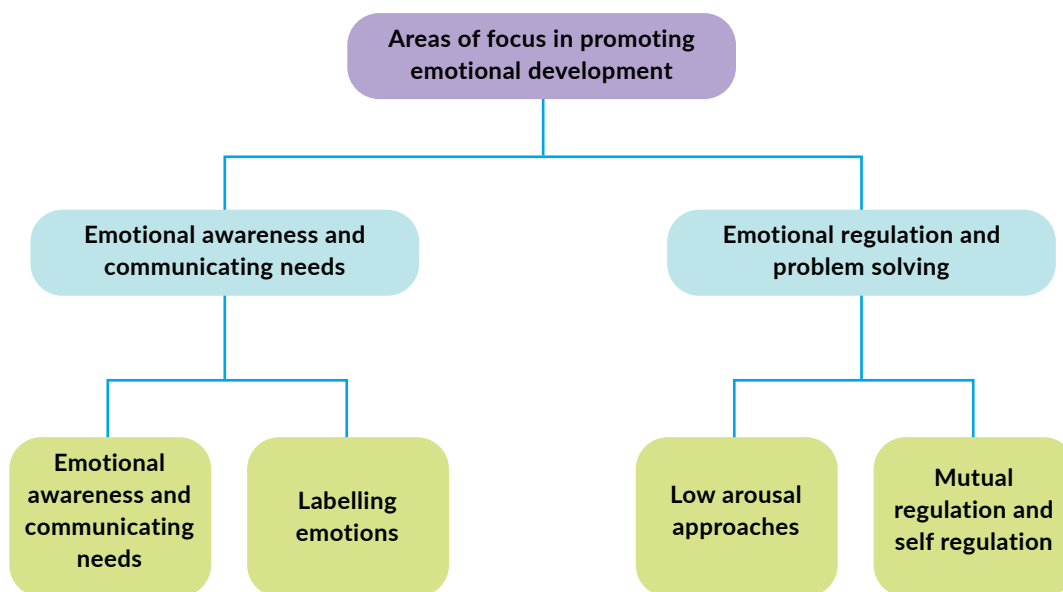


Figure 9: Approaches to promote emotional development

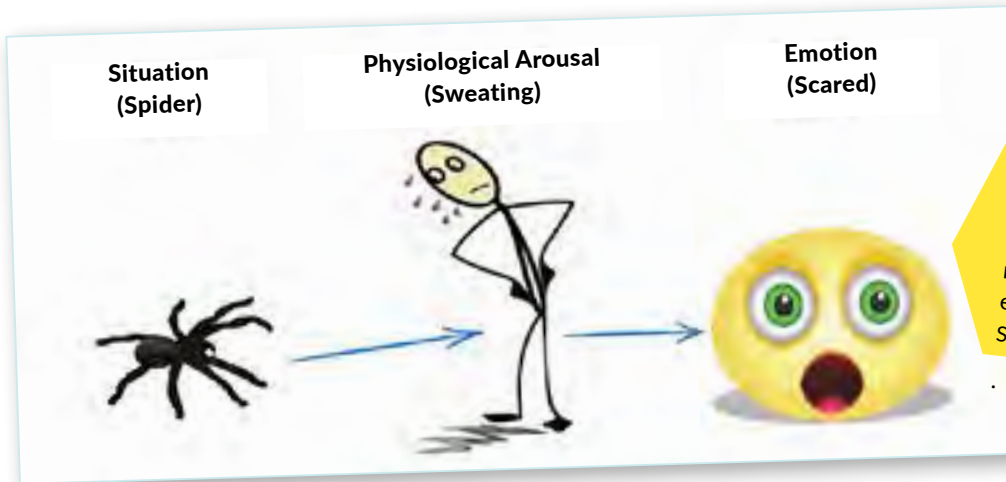
## Emotional awareness and communicating needs

The teaching of emotional awareness forms the basis for the development of emotional regulation skills. It is important to explicitly teach emotional understanding to students with autism at a level appropriate to their development and communication skills.

### Recognising emotions and body cues

Promoting emotional awareness begins with a focus on recognising body cues for emotion and then labelling these. For students with more complex learning needs, it is important that adults recognise emotional states and provide a concrete or visual strategy for the student to express need. The areas of focus relevant to supporting a student to make connections between their physiological and emotional experience are set out in [Step 1](#). The promotion of emotional awareness can in turn support the development of students' skills in communicating their emotional needs. Using resources such as an emotion fan and rating scales can help students to communicate their emotional experience and their emotional needs.





Relationship between event, physiological response and emotion.  
Source: MCA

**Labelling emotions**

Labelling emotions helps support the development of an emotional vocabulary. It is recommended that positive emotion vocabulary is taught first, before progressing to more complex and negative emotions. Teaching emotional literacy involves supporting students to recognise emotional states and associated physiological states, in themselves and others, in order to understand and use the language of emotion.



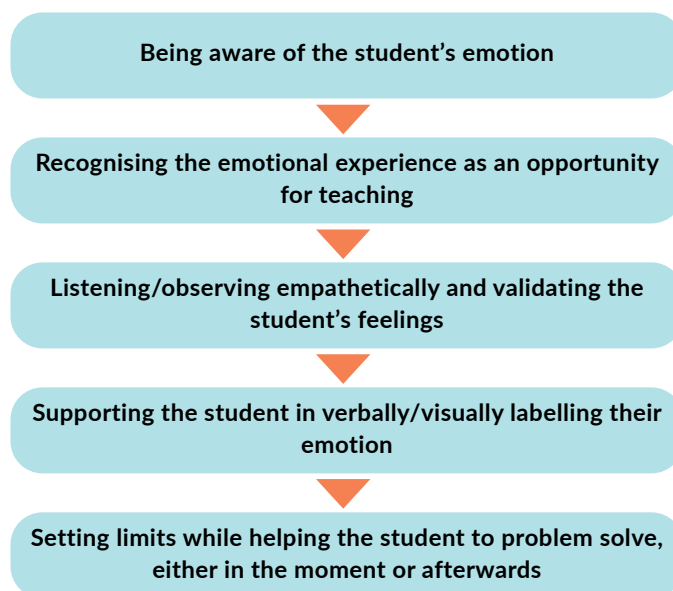
Emotion board.  
Source: MCA



Emotions thermometer.  
Source: MCA

Emotional awareness can be developed by supporting students to observe body language, facial expression and tone of voice. The development of skills to accurately identify and label emotions in others and in real-life situations can be supported through the use of photographs, puppets, visual aids, emojis, role play, social scripts or stories that explore and model feelings. The use of visual tools, such as communication boards, emotion thermometers, scales and colour coding can help students to identify emotions, the intensity of the emotion and whether that emotion is helpful or unhelpful.





**Figure 10: Adult-led emotional support**

Adult-led descriptive commenting, such as labelling emotions and providing suggestions for coping strategies, can support students to more accurately link emotional experiences with emotional responses. Using comments such as *'Your face is telling me that you seem worried'*, *'Would you like some quiet time to relax your mind and body?'* provide the student with both language to express an emotion and a strategy to respond to it. The use of language and terminology should be differentiated to the developmental level of the individual. The use of visual cues and reminders can help support this process. Some students may respond to more complex descriptions which might include the use of neurophysiological concepts to support an understanding of emotional arousal, for example:

- The benefits of oxygen (calm breathing) to enhance the body's performance
- The concept of a fight/flight/freeze physiological response
- How the body responds to neurochemicals such as adrenalin or dopamine



## Emotional regulation and problem-solving

Difficulties in understanding and regulating emotion can impact on students' wellbeing, learning and participation in school. The promotion of emotional development is aided through the use of low arousal approaches and by providing opportunities for students to experience mutual regulation and develop self-regulation skills.

### Low arousal approaches

Students experiencing heightened emotions such as anxiety are often hypervigilant, which can lead to an increase in their perception of threat, or in their experience of sensory stimuli as overwhelming. This can result in increased levels of the stress hormone (cortisol) that prepare their bodies for a fight/flight/freeze response.

Fight	Flight	Freeze
Behaviours of concern (e.g. lashing out, emotional outbursts, 'out of control')	Escape or avoidance (e.g. running from classroom, refusing to go to school, refusing to engage in activity)	Shutdown or inability to engage with others, engage in an activity or process language

Behaviour is about us, not them.

(McDonnell, 2019, p.314)

It is essential that supporting adults understand the phases of the Emotional Arousal Cycle in order to support the process of mutual regulation. Low arousal approaches involve identifying triggers and employing strategies to reduce stress, frustration and behaviours of concern in the moment. They use the least intrusive intervention to support a student to calm down more quickly and effectively and improve their quality of life in school. This process involves:

- The adult appearing calm (even if that is not how they are feeling!)
- The adult reducing all demands and minimising verbal interaction
- The adult giving the student space, staying outside of the student's line of vision
- The adult avoiding any nonverbal cues that may further trigger the behaviour
- The adult monitoring safety needs (e.g. consider removing other students)



When supporting a student who is dysregulated, it is normal for the adults' own levels of anxiety to increase. However, it is essential that adults monitor their own arousal levels to avoid escalating the situation. The most effective low arousal intervention is achieved when the adult remains regulated, as adults may inadvertently trigger behaviours of concern.

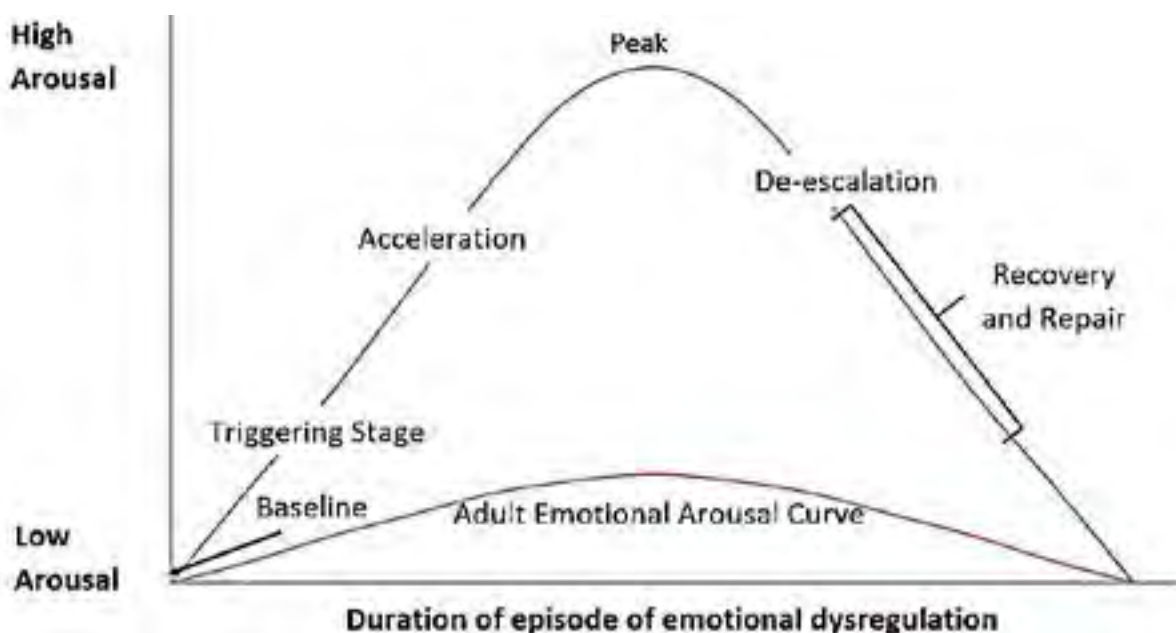


Figure 11: Emotional Arousal Cycle

It's not about giving in, 'in the moment' you're not trying to correct behaviour, rather ride out the storm.

(McDonnell, 2020, p.153)



Behavioural Development

This is illustrated in the emotional arousal cycle above where adult arousal remains low and facilitates an environment of de-escalation, recovery and repair. Low arousal approaches emphasise stress management techniques, thereby helping to create a calm environment where everyone's wellbeing is promoted. For further detail on the emotional arousal cycle see Reactive Strategies in the Behavioural Development Domain.



Social Development

**Mutual regulation and self-regulation**

In promoting emotional regulation it is important that students have opportunities to develop relationships and engage in meaningful social interactions. The use of interventions such as *intensive interaction* play an important role in promoting emotional regulation.



As is the case with all students, the more secure and safe a student with autism feels at school, the more likely they are to be emotionally available to participate, engage in and benefit from learning opportunities. Supporting adults should aim to foster a secure and responsive relationship with a student with autism and make efforts to ensure that they feel emotionally safe at school.



The SCERTS® model suggests two dimensions to support the emotional development of students with autism:

- **Mutual regulation:** Involves the student soliciting and securing assistance from others in regulating their arousal. This assistance may be sought and secured through verbal or nonverbal means. Mutual regulation involves adult scaffolding of students' emotional skills to help a student feel safe and secure in school and participate as independently as possible in daily school life
- **Self-regulation:** Involves developing a student's ability to independently relax and achieve an optimal level of emotional arousal

The notion of transactional support in the SCERTS® model emphasizes that supports must be flexible and responsive to different social contexts and learning environments, and to the changing needs of children and families...Transactional support is addressed in three major domains in the SCERTS® model: interpersonal support, educational support, and family support. (Prizant et al., 2003, p.308)

### Emotional regulation strategies

Explicitly teaching a student to use a range of relaxation strategies is important. Hand-over-hand guidance, prompts and incentives may encourage a student's practice and initial use of new relaxation activities. This process is supported by identifying what a student is doing when particularly calm or relaxed and clearly labelling this experience, so that the student recognises this link between the activity and the internal state. Once a student has been taught emotional regulation strategies, they should be encouraged to identify and use personalised calming tools. The more varied these tools are, the more options the student will have to regulate their emotions across settings. These tools can be gathered to form a calm kit of coping strategies.





Examples of calm kits.  
Source: MCA

These strategies or tools include approaches in the following areas:

- Physical** coping strategies e.g. stress ball, exercise such as walking or using a trampoline, sensory strategies. Activities that incorporate proprioceptive input, such as weight-bearing and resistance are generally understood to be calming e.g. wall pushes, moving furniture, carrying heavy items
- Relaxation** coping strategies e.g. using breathing exercises, sitting in a quiet space, listening to music, guided muscle relaxation or visualisation scripts
- Social** coping strategies e.g. asking for help or for the opportunity to take a break, talking to a teacher, spending time with friends
- Thinking** coping strategies e.g. identifying their emotional experience using a rating scale, emotion thermometer, reviewing a happiness scrapbook, practising changing unhelpful thoughts to more helpful thoughts

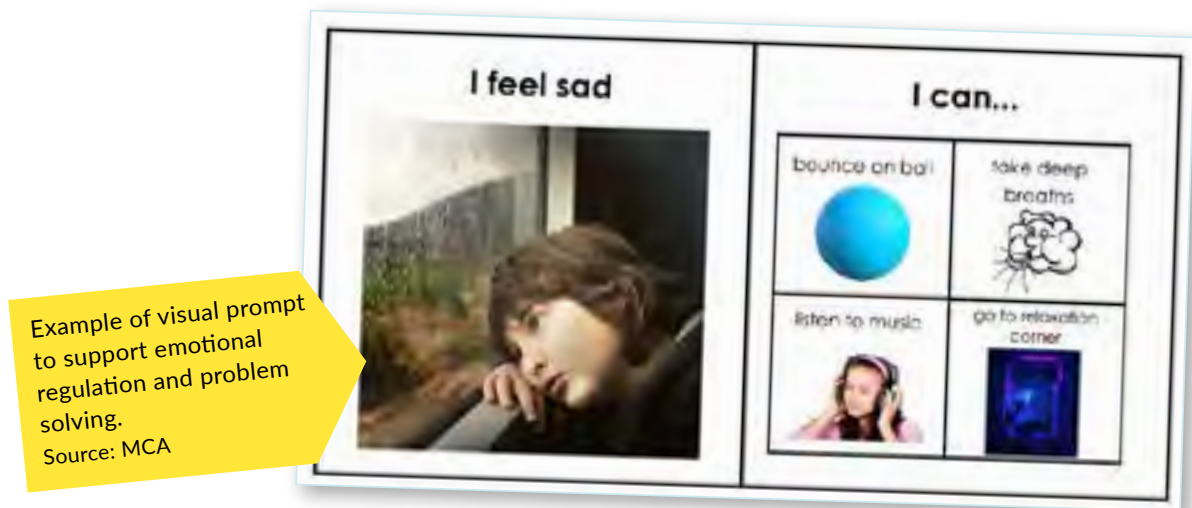


When students are confident in using their relaxation tools, these activities can be scheduled in a proactive way, and also used reactively when a student experiences emotional dysregulation.

Anxiety:  
A Closer  
Look



The use of coping strategies in managing difficult emotions must be explicitly taught in order to support students' self-calming and self-regulation development. In this regard, the use of scales, coping cards, talking mats and emotion key rings, or targeted programmes are helpful (e.g. *Zones of Regulation*<sup>®</sup> or *Alert Program: How Does Your Engine Run*).



### Linking thoughts, emotions and behaviour

It is also important to help students to understand the link between their thoughts, their emotional experiences and their actions. For students who have established fluency in their emotional awareness, understanding the connection between thoughts and emotion can be expanded by learning how to recognise and change unhelpful thoughts to more helpful thoughts. For these students the use of cognitive-behavioural techniques and strategies, including developing students' ability to use a step-by-step approach to problem solving around emotional experiences, can be useful (e.g. the *FRIENDS* programmes, Tony Attwood's *Exploring Feelings* series, *Secret Agent Society* programme). Students who have developed emotional awareness can be supported to identify situations when they are likely to experience certain emotions. Social scripts and *Social Stories*<sup>™</sup>, and cognitive-behavioural techniques, can help students to understand and problem solve around an emotional experience in key social contexts.





Figure 12: The connection between thought, emotion and behaviour



Students may need support to make concepts associated with emotional problem solving more concrete. Teachers can provide opportunities to practise reflection and making connections between events and consequences e.g. *Think Sheet* (Department of Education and Skills, 2010, p.138).

The *Check and Connect* mentoring approach between a key supporting adult and a student with autism may be a valuable resource to students who have developed key skills in emotion regulation, yet require ongoing problem solving support and scaffolding. For example, Check and Connect can be arranged to address identified needs associated with specific times of the student's day (e.g. morning arrivals and evening departures, before and after break times, exam times).

A collaborative, team-based approach is essential to promoting emotional development in students with autism. Supporting adults are encouraged to reflect on their own wellbeing needs within this process. The following are examples of resources that can support interventions relating to emotional development:

## RESOURCE BOX 11

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

#### Whole-school approaches

- *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/24725/07cc07626f6a426eb6eab4c523fb2ee2.pdf>
- *Wellbeing Advice and Resources for Parents, Students and Schools, including Catalogues of Wellbeing Resources for Primary and Post-primary Schools*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/af24b-wellbeing-guidance-documents-for-parents-students-and-schools/>
- *Wellbeing - Programmes Initiatives and Interventions*  
<https://www.nbss.ie/interventions-and-projects/wellbeing>





### Emotion awareness

- *Five Point Scale - Emotion Thermometer*  
<http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/links-and-resources/videos>
- *Emotional Wellbeing*  
<http://teenage-resource.middletownautism.com/teenage-issues-and-strategies/emotional-wellbeing>
- *Publications and Resources - Social and Emotional Literacy Programmes and Resources Information*  
<https://www.nbss.ie/publications-categories/social-emotional-literacy-resources-publications>
- *Self Esteem and My Feelings Wheel (Appendix 3)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *Incredible Teachers: Nurturing Children's Social, Emotional and Academic Competence.* Webster-Stratton, C. (2012). Seattle, WA: Incredible Years Inc.

### Emotion regulation and problem-solving

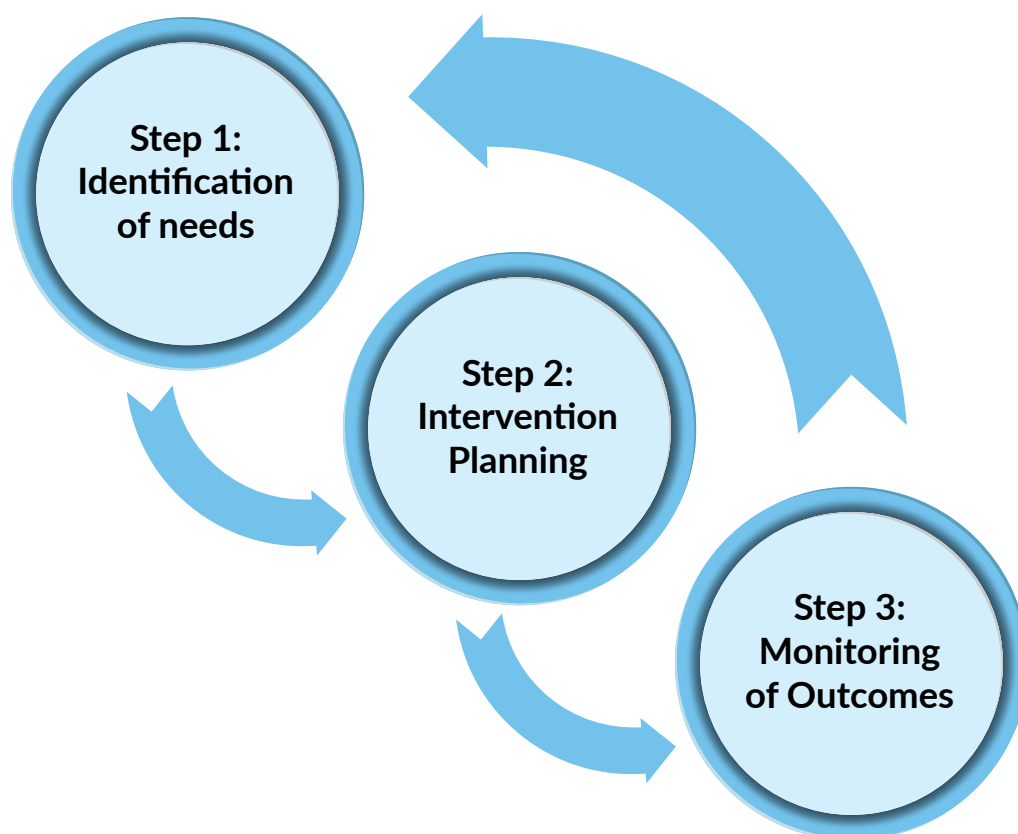
- *Stress Kit, Breathing and Progressive Muscle Relaxation*  
<http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/links-and-resources/videos>
- *Teenage Resources: SOCCSS (Situation, Options, Consequences, Choices, Strategies and Simulations)*  
[https://teenage-resource.middletownautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/09/3-SOCCSS\\_Worksheet.pdf](https://teenage-resource.middletownautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/09/3-SOCCSS_Worksheet.pdf)
- *The Alert Program*  
[www.alertprogram.com](http://www.alertprogram.com)
- *Check and Connect: A Structured Adult Mentoring Intervention for Students*  
<https://www.nbss.ie/interventions-and-projects/wellbeing/check-and-connect>
- *The Turtle Technique, Passcard and Think Sheet (Appendix 3)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *The SCERTS® Model: A Comprehensive Educational Approach for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.* Prizant, B.M., Wetherby, A.M., Rubin, E., Laurent, A.M., & Rydell, P.J. (2007). Baltimore, MA: Paul Brookes Publishing Co.  
<http://scerts.com>
- *The Secret Agent Society: Solving the Mystery of Social Encounters*  
<https://www.sst-institute.net>
- *Zones of Regulation®: A Curriculum designed to foster Self-Regulation and Emotional Control.* Kuypers, L. (2011). Santa Clara, CA: Think Social Publishing
- *Anxiety Management for Kids on the Autism Spectrum: Your Guide to Preventing Meltdowns and Unlocking Potential.* Lynch, C. (2019). Arlington, TX: Future Horizons



### Step 3: How can we monitor and record outcomes?

As part of the problem-solving approach to promoting wellbeing and emotional development, a student's response to intervention should be monitored. By repeating the original observations, checklists and/or standardised measurement tools used prior to intervention, schools gather evidence reflecting how students' emotional development has progressed in the areas of:

- Wellbeing
- Emotional awareness and communication
- Emotional regulation and problem solving



Schools should include the student's views on their own emotional development, where possible, and new data should be cross-referenced with the perspectives of parents and relevant teachers.

The development of emotional awareness and emotional regulation skills is supported when students have opportunities to practise and consolidate key emotion skills. In addition to existing curricular approaches, schools should consider:

- Targeted interventions to reinforce learning through increased student opportunities to observe, listen to and interact with their peers
- Collaboration with parents and other adults who support the student outside school, to practise and generalise social-emotional skills across multiple contexts
- Mentoring and coaching of peers to promote empathy and support students' use of social/emotional skills



Emotional awareness and emotional regulation and problem-solving needs change over time. It is particularly important to be aware of students' emotional developmental needs at key life stages (e.g. during transitions, puberty, challenging life events such as bereavement or loss). At these times, a collaborative approach may be required. This should include the school, the student and their family, and may be supported by services and agencies outside of school.





## EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Points to Remember

#### STEP 1 - IDENTIFY NEEDS

Identify the student's level of emotional development, including their ability to recognise emotions, label them, communicate effectively and regulate their emotions.

#### STEP 2 - MEET NEEDS

Implement a whole-school plan to promote the emotional wellbeing of all students and staff.

Use individualised proactive and reactive strategies to support emotional needs.

Consider your own language and behaviour and its impact on the student's emotional state.

Teach emotions explicitly by linking body signals to emotions. Use visual supports, and differentiate the language used according to a student's communication level.

Match regulation strategies to individual needs, choosing from variety of physical, relaxation, social and thinking coping strategies.

Consider use of physical exercise, breathing techniques, a calm kit, quiet space and strategies that enable the student to ask for help.

Emotional regulation can be taught through mutual regulation. Explicitly teach self-regulation strategies if a student can link emotions to behaviour.

Use a low arousal approach proactively and if the student becomes dysregulated. Reduce verbal interaction and demands, and provide access to a calming space to de-escalate.

#### STEP 3 - RECORD AND MONITOR OUTCOMES

Monitor the impact of interventions in promoting the student's wellbeing, emotional awareness, emotional regulation and problem solving. Review emotional development at key moments of change, such as puberty and major transition points and support the consolidation and generalisation of emotional skills across situations.

Please see *Indicators of Effective Practice* to assist schools to reflect on their approach to promoting **Emotional Development** and to help identify areas for further development.





## Sensory Processing

Sensory processing refers to how the brain receives, registers, integrates and responds to sensory input.

Sensory information is received through receptors in these eight systems:

- Visual
- Auditory
- Tactile
- Olfactory (smell)
- Gustatory (taste)
- Vestibular (movement and gravity)
- Interoception (internal sensations such as pain, hunger, sexual arousal)
- Proprioception (body awareness)

Most people with autism present with differences in perception of sensory inputs (Lane et al., 2010). These differences can result in feelings of discomfort or feelings which are calming and pleasurable. Differences in sensory processing may act as a barrier to participation and engagement in learning.

The sensory issues are a serious problem in many, many cases of autism, and they make it impossible to operate in the environment where you're supposed to be social.

Q & A: *Temple Grandin on the Autistic Brain* (2013)

<https://healthland.time.com/2013/05/16/qa-temple-grandin-on-the-autistic-brain>



## Step 1: How can we identify needs?

### What information is gathered?

Assessment in this area should focus on building the student's sensory profile. This involves the examination of the sensory demands across different school contexts (such as the classroom, canteen, yard and corridors) and at different times of the day/week as sensory needs can vary across time and place.

Sensory processing difficulties are generally characterised by either an under-reactivity or an over-reactivity to sensory information. Students may present with a combination of over- or under-reactive sensory processing and these patterns may change over time and may also vary depending on context.

When a student has unmet sensory needs, and/or when they are experiencing discomfort due to sensory overload, they are unlikely to achieve the calm alert state which is optimal for engagement in learning, social interaction, leisure and personal care.

#### Over-reactivity

Students whose sensory systems are over-reactive may be highly sensitive to sensory stimuli, and experience input as painful or intolerable. A student may be over-reactive to specific stimuli (e.g. sound of school bell, tactile sensation of PE kit), or may become overloaded when there are multiple stimuli in an environment (e.g. in dining halls, corridors). Hyperawareness of sensory information may lead to emotional or behavioural responses, such as:

- Anxiety
- Avoidance
- Refusal to move to some settings or participate in some activities
- Behavioural challenges (e.g. pushing others, running from the school building)
- Distractibility
- Isolating self from others
- Heightened awareness of internal states and sometimes may 'overfeel' (e.g. may eat more to avoid feeling hunger pangs)

Anxiety can increase sensitivity to sensory input as it places the student in a hypervigilant state. Students are less able to cope with sensory stimulation at times of stress (e.g. major transitions, exam times). Factors such as lack of sleep and illness can also increase reactivity to stimuli.

#### Under-reactivity

Students who are under-reactive to sensory input are not registering adequate amounts of stimuli. This can lead to two types of responses:



- **Low registration:** Students who are not registering enough sensory input to stimulate the brain may appear to be disengaged, slow to respond to instructions and disinclined to initiate activities and interactions
- **Sensory seeking:** When sufficient levels of sensory information are not registered, students may seek out additional stimulation, and can present with behaviours such as vocalising, running around the classroom, swinging on seats, fidgeting, rocking and seeking to touch objects and people around them

### Sensory seeking and stimming

Sensory seeking may not always be due to under-reactivity. Some students will seek out increased input to regulate themselves when they feel overwhelmed. They may feel overloaded by the varied and unpredictable stimuli from the environment and their own bodies, or may feel anxious due to other factors, such as social demands, academic pressures, unpredictable changes, transitions. Some students may then engage in familiar and repetitive sensory behaviours. This is often referred to as 'stimming' and many autistic people describe how these behaviours feel regulating and pleasurable.

Examples of stimming include pacing, spinning objects close to eyes, flicking fingers and rocking. Stimming provides the student with predictable input which they enjoy, and this helps them to cope with the unpredictable and overwhelming demands around them. If the stimming behaviour is helping the student to remain calm and regulated, it should be allowed to continue, as it will then facilitate engagement in learning and interaction.

Some stimming activities can distract from on-task behaviours. If this occurs the student should be directed to scheduled times and places for the stimming activity. If the repetitive behaviour increases in intensity, or is causing harm (e.g. banging head) it may be an indicator that the student is distressed and requires intervention, such as a calm break or the removal of a trigger.

## How is this information gathered?

A comprehensive evaluation of sensory needs requires information from parents, teachers and the student themselves. This will ensure that sensory responses across a range of settings is examined. Information from all sources can be combined and, under the guidance of an occupational therapist (OT), used to inform the design of an appropriate intervention.



Teacher  
Professional  
Learning  
(TPL)

While formal standardised assessment of the student's sensory profile should be conducted by an OT (or other professional trained in Sensory Integration), teachers can also develop their expertise in this area by participating in courses relating to sensory processing.





The following measures may be helpful when gathering information in relation to a student's sensory needs:

## RESOURCE BOX 12

### SUPPORTING IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS - SENSORY PROCESSING

- *Occupational Therapy Resources and Publications*. National Council for Special Education (2020) [www.nbss.ie/publications-categories/occupational-therapy-resources-publications](http://www.nbss.ie/publications-categories/occupational-therapy-resources-publications)
- *Sensory Audit for School and Classrooms*. Middletown Centre for Autism (2020) <http://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/sensory-strategies/sensory-audit-for-school-and-classrooms>
- *Sensory Assessment Checklist*. Autism Education Trust (2020) [www.aetraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/37.2-Sensory-assessment-checklist.pdf](http://www.aetraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/37.2-Sensory-assessment-checklist.pdf)
- *Checklist for Autism Friendly Environments*. Simpson, S., NHS South West Yorkshire Partnership (2015) [www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Checklist-for-autism-friendly-environments.pdf](http://www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Checklist-for-autism-friendly-environments.pdf)
- *Building Bridges through Sensory Integration*. Yack, E., Sutton, S. & Aquilla, P. (2002). Las Vegas, NV: Sensory Resources

## Step 2: How can we meet these needs?

Following the identification of a student's sensory profile, the next step is to formulate intervention strategies to address the specific needs of the student.

### Strategies for over and under-reactive responses by sensory system

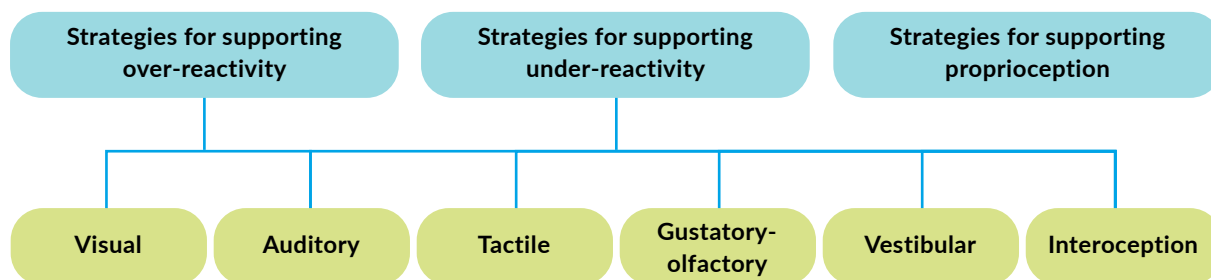


Figure 13: Strategies for over- and under-reactivity in each of the sensory systems.



The class teacher, supported by the special education teacher and SNA, implements sensory adaptations and interventions in the school context. For students with more complex needs, this may be informed by an individualised programme designed by an OT. It is important that strategies and interventions are individualised to meet each student's unique sensory needs.

The following strategies may be helpful to support students based on their identified sensory needs:

## Visual processing

Strategies for supporting over-reactivity	Strategies for supporting under-reactivity
Reduce number of posters and display boards in the classroom	Incorporate preferred type of visual stimulation during the day. Some students may enjoy watching bright, reflective objects or lights. This will then help the student to maintain an adequate level of alertness and attention throughout the day
Store resources out of sight (e.g. in cupboards, boxes or covered shelves)	Use visually stimulating resources to gain student's attention
Position student away from windows	
Provide a workstation to reduce visual distractions	
Some students may be permitted to wear sunglasses if light sensitive	



## Auditory processing

Strategies for supporting over-reactivity	Strategies for supporting under-reactivity
Provide soft furnishings in a classroom (e.g. carpet, cushions, or rubber stoppers on chair legs) which can assist in reducing noise levels	Use visual cues to gain attention and to support verbal instructions
Provide access to a quiet area when required and provide a quiet room for lunch	Provide scheduled times to listen to background music or nature sounds
Facilitate small group discussions in a quiet space away from the main noise of the classroom	Allow student to listen to music or nature sounds through headphones while engaged in quiet work time
If possible, give prior notice of loud noises such as scheduled fire alarms and school bells	Regular sensory breaks can increase general alertness and attention which may help some students to register verbal information
Use of ear defenders help to reduce noise input but should be employed as part of a desensitisation programme under the guidance of an OT. Their use should be limited to specific activities, settings and time periods	
Facilitate students to arrive at class earlier/ later in order to avoid moving through noisy corridors	
Reduce the time student is expected to play in the school yard, or provide a quiet area	
Teach coping strategies so students can regulate themselves when there is a loud or unexpected noise. Strategies may include covering ears, asking to leave room or accessing a calming tool/resource	



When I was little, loud noises were also a problem, often feeling like a dentist's drill, hitting a nerve. They actually caused me pain...When I was in college, my roommate's hairdryer sounded like a jet plane taking off. Some of the sounds that are most disturbing to autistic children are the high pitched, shrill noises made by electric drills, blenders, saws and vacuum cleaners.

(Grandin, 2006, p.63)



Adaptations to  
reduce noise level  
in the classroom.  
Source: NCSE



## Tactile processing

Strategies for supporting over-reactivity	Strategies for supporting under-reactivity
Provide alternative materials in line with students' preferences. For example, a student who dislikes touching paint could use pencils or markers instead	Schedule sensory experiences (e.g. messy play, using tactile art materials)
Enhance personal space by ensuring seats are not close together	Provide access to fidget toys
Take account of the location of the student's locker in post-primary school in order to reduce proximity to other students	Use tactile materials within curriculum topics such as tracing letters in foam
Use mats or cushions to indicate a designated space for students when seated on the floor, or position them at the end of a row	Use a visual boundary, such as coloured tape around the desk so the student is aware of their own and others' personal space
Use visual supports such as circles or footprints to indicate where each student should position themselves in the line to minimise physical contact. Alternatively, allow students to stand at the back of the line to ensure greater personal space	For post-primary students, subtle access to tactile input can be provided such as paper clips, textured pencil case, Blu Tack
If physical contact is necessary (e.g. helping a student to fasten coat), provide prior warning that there is going to be contact and seek student's agreement	
Establish an area in the yard where numbers are limited to a small group to reduce crowding	



## Gustatory-olfactory processing

Strategies for supporting over-reactivity	Strategies for supporting under-reactivity
Support choice during mealtimes (e.g. preferred food items for lunch, access to a quieter area)	Provide scented items (e.g. cotton balls containing essential oils or spices) for students who have a strong preference for certain smells
Make the environment as fragrance free as possible for students who are over-sensitive to certain smells. For example, using fragrance free cleaning products, allowing the student to use a toilet that is kept well-ventilated	Support choice during mealtimes e.g. preferred food items for lunch
Encourage the student to have a personal tissue, or item with a preferred scent, accessible which they can use to cover their nose if exposed to an overwhelming smell	

I was hypersensitive to the texture of food and I had to touch everything with my fingers to see how it felt before I could put it in my mouth. I really hated it when food had things mixed with it, like noodles with vegetables or bread with fillings to make sandwiches. I could never, never put any of it into my mouth. I knew if I did, I would get violently sick.  
(Barron & Barron, 2002, p.96)



## Vestibular processing

Strategies for supporting over-reactivity	Strategies for supporting under-reactivity
Provide activities that do not involve fast, unpredictable movement. Ideas may include ball games, crawling activities, obstacle courses	Introduce a sensory diet that involves scheduled movement breaks for set times throughout the day. Ideas may include taking a message to another teacher, bouncing on a therapy ball, chair push-ups
Encourage the student to participate in up and down movements, such as jumping, as these are easier to tolerate	Movement pathways can be provided through school corridors for students to engage in activities
Provide a break card that the student can use if the movement activity causes them to feel overwhelmed	If the student is aware of sensory needs, encourage him/her to request a movement break, using a visual request card
Avoid activities where feet are off the ground (e.g. balance beams, climbing wall bars)	Provide dynamic seating alternatives such as a balance cushion, 'Movin' sit cushion' or an exercise ball placed on a secure base
Consider height of seating and ensure student can place feet on ground	



Example of a sensory path.  
Source: NCSE



A “**sensory diet**” is a carefully designed, personalised activity **plan** that provides the **sensory** input a person needs to stay focused and organised throughout the day

## Interoception

Strategies for supporting over-reactivity	Strategies for supporting under-reactivity
Access to calm time scheduled throughout their day, including opportunities for a student to request a calm break	Use descriptive commenting to help the student to recognise and identify their physical needs. For example, ‘Your hand feels cold so you need to put on a coat’; ‘You’re drinking so I see you’re thirsty’
Visual supports to clearly communicate pain or discomfort and body part affected	Use a body parts poster to describe the way that specific body parts can feel and what the sensation may mean (e.g. a dry throat means thirst)
Regular routine for mealtimes, toileting, sleep	Teach students appropriate clothing to wear according to weather/temperature
Environmental modifications to address heating consistency	

## Proprioception

Proprioceptive input can be very calming for students who are over-reactive to sensory stimulation. These inputs can be alerting for those who are under-responsive to sensory stimulation. Many students will seek proprioceptive input in order to regulate responses to sensory stimulation. Intervention strategies include:

- Activities in which students are more actively engaged rather than passive input provided by an adult
- Opportunities for ‘heavy work’ activities that promote self-regulation and task-engagement (e.g. pushing/pulling doors, holding them open, carrying books)
- Experiences that provide calming input for students who seek deep pressure input. Examples include weighted lap pads and weighted blankets. Where possible, advice from an OT should be sought as it is essential to follow the guidelines on the product to ensure that the weight is correct for the individual student. Weighted blankets should only be used for short periods and under close supervision



- Supports for students who seek deep pressure input or resistance. For example, Therabands™ can be tied around the legs of a chair, allowing the student to use the band as a 'foot fidget' when seated
- Oral-motor supports and resources for students who seek oral proprioceptive input (e.g. chewy tubes, chewy pendants and chewy food items)

### General strategies for students with sensory processing differences

- Limit duration of tasks. Where a student has difficulty tolerating the sensory input from specific tasks (e.g. painting, handling food for cooking, noise levels at assembly), the duration of the activity could initially be reduced and then gradually increased as the student becomes more tolerant of the sensory experience
- Avoid, if possible, scheduling subjects or activities that involve high levels of sensory stimulation (e.g. PE, Music, Art and Home Economics) consecutively as this may be overwhelming for students with over-reactive sensory systems
- Schedule breaks at regular intervals on the student's visual timetable to prevent him/her from becoming overwhelmed by the sensory demands of the school day. Breaks should be consistently provided in a proactive way, even on days when the student may appear calm. Some students may also be given a visual card, which they can use to request a break if feeling overwhelmed by sensory input



A screened off corner of a classroom can be used as a sensory area.

Source: MCA



## RESOURCE BOX 13

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - SENSORY PROCESSING

- *Sensory Circuits: A Sensory Motor Skills Programme for Children*. Horwood, J. (2009). Cambridge: LDA
- *The Out of Sync Child: Recognising and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*. Kranowitz, C.S. (2005). Philadelphia: Penguin
- *The Out of Sync Child has Fun: Activities for Kids with Sensory Processing Disorder*. Kranowitz, C.S. (2006). New York: Penguin
- *Practical Programmes for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Larkey S (2006). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

#### Online resources to support intervention planning include:

- *Sensory Processing Resource: Strategies*. Middletown Centre for Autism <http://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/sensory-strategies>
- *Sensory Differences*. National Autistic Society <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/sensory-differences/sensory-differences/all-audiences>
- *Sensory Spaces and Movement Breaks* <https://ncse.ie/resources-for-teachers-on-occupational-therapy-support>
- *Movement Powers Change*. GoNoodle [www.gonoodle.com/](http://www.gonoodle.com/)

## Step 3: How can we monitor and record outcomes?

Following the implementation of evidence-informed approaches, it is important to establish if the intervention(s) in [Step 2](#) have been successful. Sensory interventions should be regularly reviewed through the consideration of the impact on the student's functioning, engagement and self-regulation.

Careful recording of targeted behaviours and responses prior to, and following, interventions should be conducted in order to assess the impact of the strategies/accommodations used. Improved levels of sensory regulation and engagement may be observed as evidence of progress.

The student's sensory profile should be kept under review, as needs and preferences may change over time. Where interventions have been found to be unsuccessful, it may be necessary to re-evaluate the student's sensory needs and the approaches to interventions. This is best done through a collaborative approach involving the student, teacher and parent as well as relevant professionals. The Student Support Plan should be used to maintain a record of interventions and supports, and to document progress and review outcomes.





# SENSORY PROCESSING

## Points to Remember

### STEP 1 - IDENTIFY NEEDS

Establish an individualised profile of sensory needs, taking account of responses to input across a range of contexts, and assess the sensory environment across all locations within school.

### STEP 2 - MEET NEEDS

Remove or reduce sources of sensory input which cause distraction or distress for the over-reactive student (e.g. reduce visual display boards).

Consult with an occupational therapist (OT) or other professional qualified in sensory integration for complex sensory concerns.

Integrate sensory activities into learning for those who require increased input to attend and engage.

Provide a personalised sensory diet for students who need sensory input to regulate themselves. Activities may incorporate movement, proprioceptive, tactile or other sensory input.

Adopt a flexible approach to meeting a student's sensory needs (e.g. provision of a quiet room for lunch; permitting a student to leave class a few minutes early).

Incorporate calm breaks in the daily schedules of students who are easily overwhelmed by sensory stimulation.

Proprioceptive input has a regulating impact on many students. Consider weightbearing, resistance and deep pressure activities.

Increase a student's tolerance of sensory stimuli by very gradually increasing exposure to the input which causes over-reactivity and avoidance.

### STEP 3 - RECORD AND MONITOR OUTCOMES

The student's sensory profile should be regularly reviewed to determine if the interventions are having a positive impact on daily functioning, engagement and self-regulation.

Please see *Indicators of Effective Practice* to assist schools to reflect on their approach to supporting students with **Sensory Processing** difficulties and to help identify areas for further development.





## Functional Skills for Daily Living

Functional skills refer to those personal care and daily living skills needed to live as independently as possible in the home, school and community environments. Most people achieve competence in the skills required for functional living without the need for explicit teaching. However, students with autism, irrespective of their cognitive ability, often require targeted interventions and support to enable them to develop the skills for independent living. Barriers to developing life skills for students with autism include difficulties in the areas of social communication, executive functioning, implicit learning and generalisation of skills. For example, the ability to problem solve is a useful life skill to enable students to access work experience placements, school/community outings and preparations for college but requires explicit teaching for students with autism. Sensory processing needs, anxiety or behaviours of concern may also impact the development of life skills.

Students with autism often require support in the following areas:

- Self-care
- Personal safety
- Functional academics
- Independent living
- Living in the community





## Step 1: How can we identify needs?

The priority needs of students should be assessed by observing their functional skills across school settings. Information should be sought from parents to determine the student’s engagement in life skills within the home environment. Direct engagement with students helps to identify their preferences, strengths and needs to inform targets in meeting their life skills goals. This helps to ensure that targets are meaningful and will contribute to improvements to the student’s quality of life.

The ability to problem solve is challenging for students with autism. Identifying students’ needs when planning extra-curricular activities, for example, school trips and work experience for older students, can foster opportunities to increase independence and problem-solving skills.

### What information is gathered?

Self-care e.g. toileting, personal hygiene, dressing
Personal safety e.g. using social media, emergency services, 'stranger danger'
Functional academics e.g. using money, telling time, using a timetable
Independent living e.g. household chores, laundry, meal preparation
Living in the community e.g. working independently, prioritising tasks, time management, accessing community services

#### Self-care

Adequate self-care skills allow individuals to perform personal care activities such as eating, dressing, grooming and toileting. Competence in these skills promotes health, community participation and access to experiences that enhance quality of life. The ability to perform self-care tasks fosters students’ self-esteem, dignity and independence by providing opportunities to make personal choices and decisions.

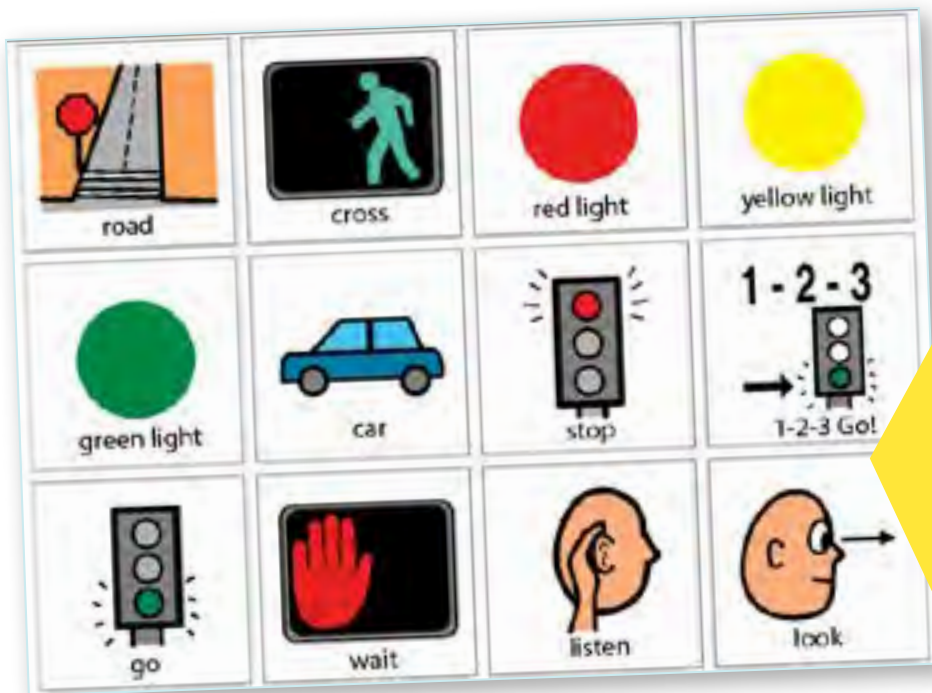


Labelling where materials are stored can support independence in dressing and in organising student’s belongings. Source: MCA



**Personal safety**

Basic safety behaviours associated with an awareness of danger, the ability to control impulses, to anticipate consequences, and to follow reasonable safety rules (e.g. using scissors, crossing the road, responding to fire alarm, contacting emergency services) are fundamental to independent living. More complex skills in achieving personal safety include the ability to use social media safely and to recognise when an individual may be exploited.



Symbols can help to reinforce meaning to the concept of road safety.  
 PCS and Boardmaker are trademarks of Tobii Dynavox LLC. All rights reserved. Used with permission

**Functional academics**

The ability to generalise literacy, numeracy and other academic skills in a functional way in real-life situations (e.g. shopping for basic items, managing money, telling the time) is fundamental in developing independent living skills.



Teaching a functional academic concept such as capacity can be supported by using an interest or preference.  
 Source: MCA





### Independent living

Skills for care and maintenance of the home and school environments are an essential component of independent living (e.g. cleaning, food preparation, carrying out minor DIY projects around the house, organising belongings such as managing a schoolbag and locker).



Identifying and selecting the correct items to complete tasks can be supported by using visual reminders. The visual can prompt the student, fostering independence and reducing reliance on others.  
Source: MCA



### Living in the community

Preparing students to participate in community life is a central goal of education. The aim is to increase the ability of the student to access community facilities and enjoy recreational activities (e.g. supermarket, library, gym, post-office, pharmacy, football matches, going to a cafe). Developing the skills required to participate in community activities, such as using public transport and accessing medical services, helps increase quality of life and level of participation.



## How is this information gathered?

Teachers gather information for target setting through informal methodologies (observation, interview) and/or through more structured approaches (criterion and standardised assessment tools). In assessing a student's independent living skills, it is important to establish whether skills are:

- Emerging
- Completed with assistance/prompting
- Completed independently
- Demonstrated across different settings

This can be achieved through consultation with the student, their parents, school staff, and external professionals, as appropriate. Priorities should be identified with reference to the unique needs of the student with the aim of developing as much independence as possible. It is also important to consider environmental factors as issues such as sensory overload, failure to understand the purpose of the task, learned dependency, and a lack of opportunity may present challenges to achieving optimum independence. Further information on assessment tools is available in [Appendix 4 - Assessment tools for language and communication, social and emotional development, and life skills](#).



The following are examples of measures that can be used to identify needs related to functional life skills:

## RESOURCE BOX 14

### SUPPORTING IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS - FUNCTIONAL SKILLS FOR DAILY LIVING

#### Checklists

- *The Access and Inclusion Model Profile (AIM)*  
<https://aim.gov.ie>

#### Interviews

- *Comfort Zones Profile*  
<https://www.zonesofregulation.com/>
- *Life Skills Program Planner*  
[http://www.bryteidea.com/Resources/Life\\_Skills\\_Program\\_Planner.pdf](http://www.bryteidea.com/Resources/Life_Skills_Program_Planner.pdf)
- *Care and Support Planning*  
<http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/care-support-planning/>

#### Criterion and Standardised assessment tools

- The Assessment of Functional Living Skills (AFLS), including *Community Participation Skills Assessment Protocol*, *School Skills Assessment Protocol*, *Independent Living Skills Assessment Protocol*

#### Autism-specific assessment tools

- *Psychoeducational Profile (PEP 3)\**
- *TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP)\**
- *Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills Revised (ABLLS-R)\**

\*See Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) section for more information.



## Step 2: How can we meet these needs?

Identified targets should be used to guide intervention planning to increase students' self-awareness, organisational and problem-solving skills and to foster independence across school, home, community and work experience environments, as appropriate. These functional skills can be targeted through a range of curricular areas including Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Home Economics and the SPHE Short Course, which contributes to the Junior Cycle wellbeing programme. Some approaches to supporting students' daily living skills are outlined in [Figure 14](#). In addition, many assessment measures include planning tools to support the development of targeted interventions see [Appendix 4 – Assessment tools for language and communication, social and emotional development, and life skills](#).

### Approaches to support students' functional skills for daily living

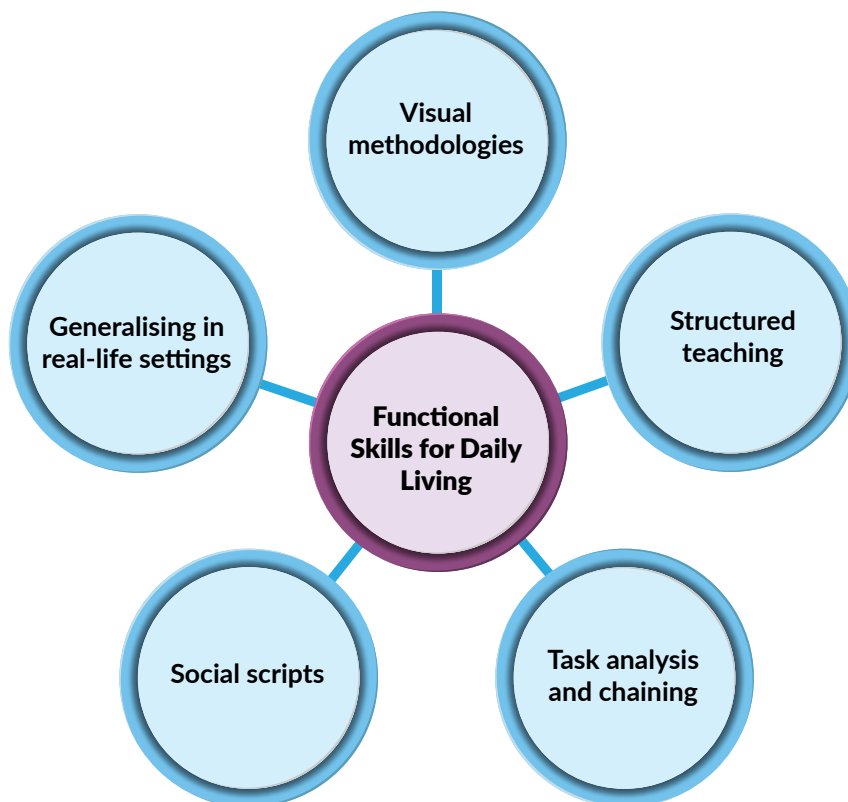


Figure 14: Approaches to support students' functional skills for daily living



## Visual methodologies

People with autism tend to learn better through visual methodologies than auditory input. Visual supports can be used to provide clarity and predictability in the student's environment. For example, use of pictorial or written schedules/ lists and colour-coded folders/organisers can enhance the student's organisational skills, thereby increasing opportunities for independence. Video modelling, using either peers as models or the student themselves, can also strengthen the acquisition and generalisation of life skills.

Complex skills, such as dressing or preparing a meal, can be subdivided into incremental steps, and presented in a way that supports the student to learn the sequence of actions required to demonstrate the skill.



Using timetables and checklists can assist students to pack their schoolbag independently. Colour-coded subject areas relate directly to the coloured folders to support organisational skills.  
Source: MCA

## Structured teaching

Structured teaching involves explicitly teaching and modelling to the student each component of the skill or task in order of increasing difficulty. The *TEACCH* approach incorporates structured teaching methodologies including visual supports such as schedules, activity systems, physical structure of the environment, and structuring of individual tasks, including task analysis.

## Task analysis and chaining

Task analysis involves breaking a skill into smaller, more manageable components or steps. For some tasks (e.g. hand washing or using the toilet) visual supports can be used to illustrate the sequence of steps.



Learning a routine in sequence can foster independence and highlight areas where students may require more support.  
Source: MCA



Chaining involves teaching each step separately to assist the student in achieving the desired skill. This is an effective visual teaching technique when a student is required to learn a routine task which is repetitive, for example, a personal care task or preparing a meal. Forward chaining involves teaching steps from beginning to end. Progression to the next step is made only when the previous one is mastered independently. In backward chaining, the task is taught in reverse, beginning with the final step. It uses a task analysis approach to ensure the student experiences success and links the independent components of the task with the completed task.

### Social scripts



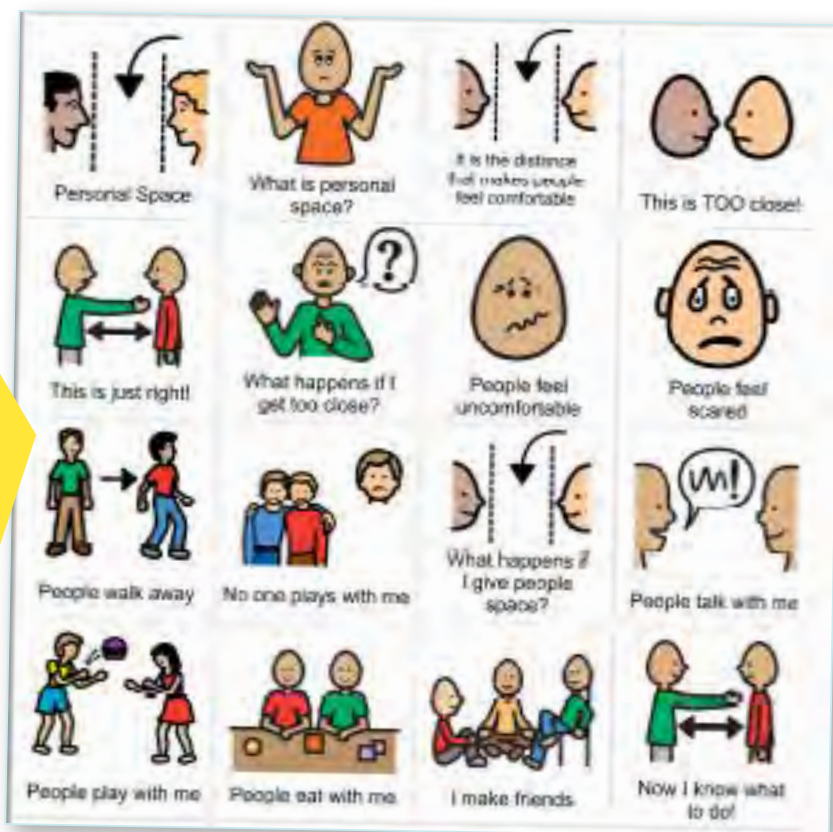
Social Development

Students with autism often have difficulty reading social cues and determining what behaviour is appropriate in different settings. Strategies and approaches therefore need to include targets that involve explicit teaching of the unwritten rules governing behaviour and social interactions, as part of functional life skills.

A social script is a short narrative used to explain social situations in a clear visual way. They clarify how people are expected to behave in specific situations and can also be used to help explain the behaviour of others. Social scripts can be used to explicitly teach 'how', 'why', 'where' and 'when' behaviours should be practised.

Symbols can help to reinforce meaning to teaching social concepts such as appropriate personal space when initiating dialogue with peers.

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## Generalising in real-life settings



Sensory Processing

Many students with autism find it challenging to generalise skills across settings. Parents and school staff should provide opportunities and supports for students to apply these skills across different environments.

For example, school trips and work experience placements provide important opportunities to teach and practice functional life skills such as problem-solving and self-advocacy. These are supported through the use of explicit teaching, visual supports and reminders. Peer support systems can also be used to assist students to practise and apply skills in different contexts. Students who demonstrate key skills in the home (e.g. self-care or organisational skills) should then be supported to apply these at school.

For some students, sensory stimuli (e.g. noise/light/smells in some environments) can cause discomfort that interferes with their learning. In these situations, an audit of the sensory environment should be carried out and appropriate adaptations put in place.



Life skills taught in a specific setting should be generalised to real-life environments to provide context and meaning.  
©TEACCH





The following are examples of resources that can support interventions related to functional skills for daily living:

## RESOURCE BOX 15

### SUPPORT INTERVENTION PLANNING - FUNCTIONAL SKILLS FOR DAILY LIVING

#### Task analysis

- *Task Analysis*  
<https://life-skills.middletownautism.com/background/assessment-life-skills/task-analysis>
- *Task Analysis and Chaining*  
<https://life-skills.middletownautism.com/background/teaching-life-skills/task-oriented-approach-vs-process-oriented-approach/>

#### Structured teaching

- *Structured Tasks*  
<https://life-skills.middletownautism.com/background/teaching-life-skills/structured-tasks/>
- *Structured Teaching Strategies for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder*  
<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/structured-teaching-strategies-students-autism-spectrum-disorder>

#### Social scripts

- *Social Stories™ and Comic Strip Conversations*  
<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/social-stories-comic-strips.aspx>

#### Community living

- *Travelling with Autism*  
<https://www.dublinairport.com/at-the-airport/passenger-information/special-assistance/autism-asd>

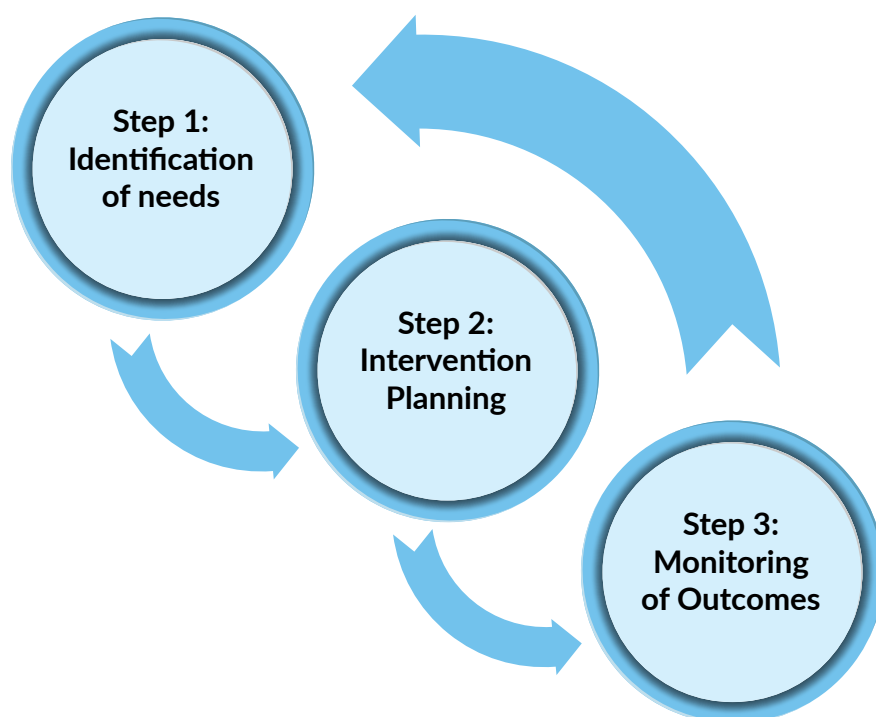
#### Generalising in real-life settings

- *Life Skills Resource*  
<https://life-skills.middletownautism.com/>
- *The Hidden Curriculum: Practical Solutions for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations.* Myles, B.S., Trautman, M.L. & Schelvan, R.L. (2004). Shawnee Missions, KS: APC Publishing Co.
- *Video Modelling*  
<https://life-skills.middletownautism.com/background/teaching-life-skills/video-modelling/>
- *Developing Leisure Time Skills for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Practical Strategies for Home, School and the Community.* Nyberg, C. & Klagge, M.L. (1996). Arlington TX: Future Horizons
- *Active Support: A Handbook for Supporting People with Learning Disabilities to Lead Full Lives*  
<https://arcuk.org.uk/publications/files/2017/12/AS-Handbook-updated-2017.pdf>



### Step 3: How can we monitor and record outcomes?

Assessing the degree of independence that the student demonstrates in performing key life skills (e.g. determining the level of support they require to complete a task) helps to evaluate progress and identify future targets to foster independence. Assessment tools initially used to obtain baseline information can be re-administered to assess the impact of interventions. This includes collaboration with parents and students to determine to what extent skills have been generalised across settings. It is recommended that the Student Support Plan is used to document this information.





# FUNCTIONAL SKILLS FOR DAILY LIVING

## Points to Remember

### STEP 1 - IDENTIFY NEEDS

In collaboration with parents and students gather information on functional life skills across settings and identify priority targets to promote independence.

### STEP 2 - MEET NEEDS

Explicit teaching of life skills enhances students' problem-solving skills, enabling them to pursue their interests and talents and increase their levels of independence.

Use task analysis to break life skills into incremental steps. Separately teach and reinforce each step using visual supports.

Remember acquiring essential life skills is a key factor in promoting a successful transition to adulthood for students with autism.

Provide opportunities to practice life skills across home and school to increase the generalisation of skills to real-life settings.

Use a structured teaching approach to modify learning activities and the environment to support students' understanding and independence.

Promote the development of life skills through the curriculum and through targeted intervention at group and/or individual level.

Drawing on students' preferences and strengths fosters their sense of autonomy and increases opportunities to learn new life skills.

Begin early, teach and reinforce functional skills:

- Self-care
- Personal safety
- Functional academics
- Independent living
- Living in the community

### STEP 3 - RECORD AND MONITOR OUTCOMES

Monitor the student's progress in developing functional life skills by assessing their independence in completing a task across home, school and community settings.

Please see *Indicators of Effective Practice* to assist schools to reflect on their approach to teaching Functional Skills for Daily Living, and to help identify areas for further development.





## Academic Development

All students, including those with autism, should have opportunities to engage with a broad and balanced curriculum. Academic development is enhanced by adopting a strengths-based approach. This involves identifying abilities and interests and incorporating these into academic work to promote engagement and learning. Academic development is also supported by the use of Person-Centred Planning (PCP) approaches which place students' own goals at the centre of educational planning.

When considering the discrete academic and learning needs of students with autism, the *psychological theories* discussed in Chapter 1 (e.g. *Theory of Mind*, *Central Coherence* and *Executive Functioning*) can be helpful. These theories offer a lens for teachers to consider how specific needs associated with autism may impact on the way a student approaches and engages with their learning. For instance, for many students, central coherence drives the urge to seek meaning when reading. Weak central coherence and other processing difficulties associated with autism may result in a student failing to focus on broad meaning (e.g. reading with a focus on single words), an emphasis on preferred areas of interest, and difficulties with perspective-taking. These discrete academic and learning needs can impact across all curricular areas as well as motivation and student engagement with learning.

### Step 1: How can we identify needs?

#### What information is gathered?

The teaching and learning environment of the school and classroom is crucial when planning for the academic needs of students. Factors such as teaching and learning methodologies, classroom management approaches, and sensory demands impact on students' engagement in learning and on their academic progress. Social aspects of the learning environment should also be considered as the quality of relationships, sense of belonging, security and connectedness to school which contribute to a positive school climate, are crucial for academic progress and participation.



Similar to all students, the academic strengths and needs of students with autism vary greatly. When establishing a student's learning profile it is important to consider information relating to their language and communication skills, motor skills and sensory needs. Other aspects of a student's learning profile may include differences related to:

- Attending
- Abstract thinking
- Organisational planning
- Speed of processing information, including speed of writing

It is also important to gather information on the student's progress across the curriculum, as some students may show marked differences in performance across subject areas. In particular, needs in the areas of literacy and numeracy should be targeted as they are key adaptive skills for maximising independence. Information should also be collated in relation to students' strengths, abilities, areas of interest and motivators, when planning teaching and learning activities.

## How is this information gathered?

### Learning environment

It is necessary to consider how the learning environment can be optimised to support academic development and engagement. This involves reviewing:

- Teaching and learning methodologies (e.g. visual structured teaching approaches, behavioural and communication-based programmes)
- Classroom management approaches (e.g. schedules, routines, reward systems)
- Physical environment (e.g. physical layout, organisation, workspace)
- Sensory demands (e.g. noise, lighting)

The use of checklists, observations and teacher reflection can provide important information which can be augmented through ongoing engagement and dialogue with parents and students.

### Learning profile

Information relating to a student's learning profile, along with knowledge of their language and communication skills, interests and motivators can be gathered from:

- Student
- Parents
- Teacher-based assessment
- Standardised assessment
- Professional reports (e.g. psychology, speech and language, occupational therapy)



Learning  
Environment



Assessment tools such as the *Psychoeducational Profile - Third Edition (PEP-3)*, the *Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills - Revised (ABLLS-R)*, *TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP)* and the *Verbal Behaviour - Milestones Assessment and Placement Programme (VB-MAPP)*, may also be useful in gathering important information about a student's learning style, developmental profile and pattern of strengths and needs.

### Monitoring progress across the curriculum

Consideration should be given to an individual's developmental level when considering how best to evaluate progress and monitor response to intervention. The learning differences of students with autism can impact on their ability to effectively participate in formal standardised assessments. Teachers are advised to consider factors such as students' motivation, speed of information processing and sensory needs when carrying out formal assessments and interpreting results. Guidance on adaptations to the assessment process for students with autism is outlined in [Appendix 2](#). Informal assessment approaches (e.g. curriculum-based assessment, observation, work portfolio, self-assessment), in addition to standardised assessment, should be used to identify needs and monitor progress across the curriculum.

The Primary Language Curriculum provides three progression continua to support the identification of needs in the areas of oral language, reading and writing. Teachers can use these continua to identify performance in each of these skill areas and to plan next steps for intervention. Particular attention should be paid to differences in word reading skills and reading comprehension. Some students may read accurately and fluently but focus less on meaning, which has a negative impact on comprehension of text. Comprehensive assessment of a student's literacy skills includes a consideration of performance in the following areas:

- Oral language and vocabulary
- Word reading and word attack skills
- Phonological awareness
- Reading fluency
- Reading comprehension
- Miscue analysis and running records
- Spelling
- Review samples of written work

The identification of needs in the area of numeracy is supported by data collection across multiple sources and involves the use of self and peer assessment approaches, diagnostic assessment, observation, interview, dialogue with students, numeracy portfolios and reflective journals.

The following are examples of assessment approaches and measures that can be used to identify needs relating to the academic development of students with autism:





## RESOURCE BOX 16

### SUPPORTING THE IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS - ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

#### Checklists

- *Learning Environment Checklist (Primary)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *Learning Environment Checklist (Post-Primary)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40658/f896b4d014464ad1b9241e91c5405370.pdf>

#### Interviews

- *My Thoughts about School Checklist; How Do You Feel? Rating Scale (Primary)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *My Thoughts About School Checklist (Post-Primary)*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40658/f896b4d014464ad1b9241e91c5405370.pdf>

#### Assessment tools and approaches

- *A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40640/dab7f9cd97a84c1db2990023c5de2445.pdf>
- *Effective Interventions for Struggling Readers*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40346/6a3b58f7e4d14c47906c0edecf95abca.pdf>
- *Maths Support - A Good Practice Guide for Teachers*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/430cc-maths-support-2020/>
- *Department of Education Circular on the Use of Instruments/Tests*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/e86f9-advice-on-the-use-of-assessment-instrumentstests-for-guidance-or-for-additional-and-special-educational-needs-sen-in-post-primary-schools/>
- *Primary Language Curriculum*  
<https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Primary-Language/>

#### Observations

- *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum Guidelines for Schools - Teacher Observation, - Target Child Observation, Event Samples, Time Samples, Anecdotal Observation, Shadow Study*  
<https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/2b3eaa53-cb4b-4053-9d71-2d28d9d6c734/Assessment-Guidelines.pdf>

#### Autism-specific assessment tools

- *Psychoeducational Profile (PEP-3)\**
- *Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills Revised (ABLLS-R)\**
- *Verbal Behaviour Milestones Assessment and Placement Programme (VB-MAPP)\**
- *TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP)\**

\*See [Teacher Professional Learning \(TPL\)](#) section for more information.





## Step 2: How can we meet these needs?

Following the identification of needs, the next step is to set out priority learning targets for intervention. Appropriate teaching strategies and interventions are selected based upon the student's learning profile, strengths and needs. Within this, there should be a particular emphasis on developing literacy and numeracy skills as tools to access the wider curriculum. Factors such as modifying the learning environment, considering student motivation, and using effective teaching approaches, facilitate teachers in meeting students' academic needs across the curriculum.

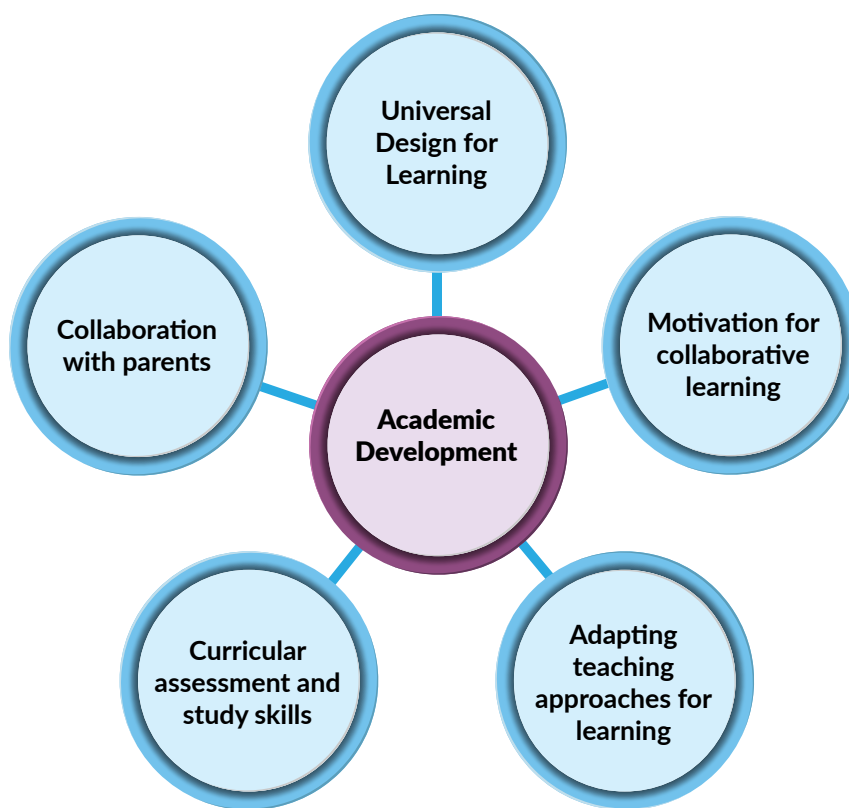


Figure 15: Approaches to support students' academic development

### Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning provides a framework which maximises learning for all students by using a variety of teaching methods to enhance participation and to remove barriers to learning (Meyer *et al.*, 2014). The approach emphasises the need to provide information in more than one format to ensure accessibility and to offer flexibility in how students interact with learning material and demonstrate their learning. It also advocates for different ways to motivate students by responding to their interests, giving them choices, and making learning tasks relevant and meaningful.



## Motivation for collaborative learning

Students with autism may find collaborative learning and group work challenging and are likely to require explicit instruction to support this (e.g. turn-taking, listening and asking and answering questions). They may not be as socially motivated as other students to gain the approval of teachers and peers. Making it clear how the learning task is relevant to them and incorporating their strengths and interests can increase participation. Involving the student in formulating their own personal goals and targets also helps to increase motivation.



## Adapting teaching approaches for learning

Systematically planned and carefully structured teaching can assist teachers in effectively differentiating for students with autism. The following teaching approaches support the academic development of students with autism:

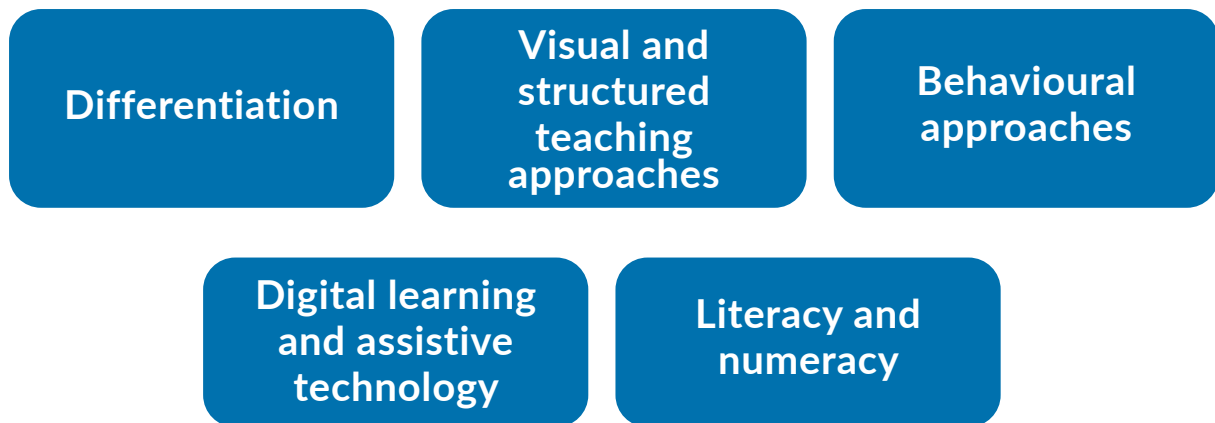


Figure 16: Teaching approaches to support students' academic development



## Differentiation

Differentiation considers the distinctive characteristics and learning styles of students with autism, and involves teachers adapting their teaching activities and building on individual strengths in response to need. Factors to consider when differentiating the curriculum include: differentiation by content; differentiation by process; differentiation by product and differentiation by environment. These are briefly outlined below:

Differentiation by content
Adapting the content by breaking the learning goal into manageable 'chunks'
Providing options of small groups or independent study to allow students to either work alone at their own learning pace or to learn through collaboration.
Presenting material in different formats e.g. use of text, visuals, audio, video, concrete materials
Maximising student motivation and engagement e.g. providing practical learning opportunities, utilising ICT, drawing on interests

Differentiation by process
Pacing a lesson to support information processing
Differentiating the activities or the time allocated to the task
Identifying, teaching and reinforcing key concepts and vocabulary in a lesson
Providing clear and easy to follow instructions and teaching materials e.g. visual supports, visual cues, schedules, written summaries and checklists of abstract concepts and main points of lessons
Providing sufficient practice and opportunities for generalisation
Monitoring progress and providing feedback



Money: Add up the totals then work out the change

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Coins	Total	Change from €1
		
		
		
		

A visual cue can be used to support the teaching of numeracy by differentiating the process for the student.

### Differentiation by product

Encouraging frequent responses to demonstrate knowledge

Offering a range of ways to respond to academic tasks e.g. choice boards, written responses, recorded responses, oral responses, use of ICT, video presentations

Modifying the scope of a task

Offering extended time to complete a task

Scaffolding student learning based on their needs

Monitoring progress and providing feedback



Differentiation by environment
Using visual supports and schedules in the classroom environment to reinforce learning
Incorporating breaks into scheduled prolonged work sessions
Organising the classroom to support independent working and group work activities e.g. labelling, colour coding, personal work spaces, work systems
Using alternative forms of communication, such as Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) or other Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) systems and strategies, as appropriate

## Visual and structured teaching approaches

Many students with autism tend to have a visual learning style and respond positively to structured teaching approaches. *TEACCH* provides a framework for planning individualised educational programmes to promote engagement in academic, leisure and self-care tasks. This approach helps clarify expectations, increase independence and reduce anxiety. Structured teaching approaches, incorporating students’ interests and linking task participation to relevant rewards can support engagement. Students with autism are more likely to engage when they have choice and a sense of control. It may be helpful to allow them to take the lead and to gradually build new learning into the task or activity. Students are more likely to respond to written or visual direction than verbal guidance alone. If a student has particular difficulties in following instructions, it helps to establish if they understand what they are being asked to do, the quantity of work to be done, and how they will know when the task will end. A fear of making mistakes is frequently a barrier to students attempting a task. In addressing this, it can be helpful to acknowledge small steps towards task completion and to reinforce progress (see *Skills development* within Behavioural Development Domain).



Behavioural Development



## Behavioural approaches

Behavioural approaches can also be used to teach academic and other skills through modelling and frequent repetition of a task, with feedback and positive consequences for displaying the target behaviour or skill. The following behavioural approaches are drawn from Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), and may be helpful in complementing other effective teaching practices:

**Environmental interventions** are used to adapt the setting to enable the student to attend and engage in learning. Components may include seating arrangements, proximity to the teacher, use of direct instruction, managing triggers and using visual cues to gain attention

**Task analysis** involves breaking down a target skill, activity or behaviour into small, manageable steps to assess the student's baseline ability. Teaching the component steps sequentially is called 'chaining'. Reinforcement, prompting, video modelling or time delay are also used to facilitate the acquisition of the smaller steps

**Prompting** focuses on assisting students to acquire or successfully engage in a targeted behaviour or skill by providing them with verbal, gestural or physical support

**Modelling** involves the demonstration of a desired target behaviour, resulting in the student imitating the target behaviour and leading to the acquisition of this behaviour. This may include live modelling (the target behaviour demonstrated by teacher or peers) and video modelling (watching a video of the target behaviour being completed). Modelling is often combined with prompting and reinforcement

**Self-management instruction** focuses on developing skills to discriminate between appropriate/inappropriate behaviours e.g. self-monitoring and recording behaviours, rewarding oneself for appropriate behaviours

**Pivotal response training** focuses on increasing a student's demonstration of 'pivotal' skills for learning, communication and social interaction through naturalistic reinforcement. Pivotal skill areas include motivation, self-management, and initiation of social interactions. For instance, if a student attempts to appropriately gain your attention, you reward them by giving your attention

**Discrete trial teaching** focuses on teaching academic behaviour and skills in the form of continuous trials, consisting of teacher instruction/presentation; student response; planned consequence/reward, and a pause before presenting the next instruction





Digital  
Learning and  
Assistive  
Technology

## Digital learning and assistive technology

Digital learning and assistive technology approaches can enhance learning and academic achievement. Some students may have well-developed information technology skills and feel more comfortable completing their academic work using digital learning and assistive technology devices. This approach can help students overcome some of the handwriting/motor co-ordination difficulties that can be associated with autism. For example, speech recognition software, screen readers, or literacy support software with predictive text/writing frames options can be a crucial intervention in helping students to access information and to present their work.

## Literacy and numeracy

Literacy and numeracy skills should be targeted specifically as these skills impact on students' performance across the curriculum and their development of independence skills. Overall learning profiles in these areas are influenced by factors such as a student's developmental level, cognitive abilities, as well as their language and communication skills. Effective interventions for developing literacy skills involve planned, purposeful teaching incorporating:

- Development of oral language
- Instruction in phonics, decoding, sight vocabulary
- Comprehension strategies
- Relevant reading material, at an appropriate level of difficulty
- Meaningful writing opportunities
- Strategies to build fluency

Reading comprehension is an important academic skill as it influences student performance across the curriculum. Difficulties in this area can impact on students' ability to pick up and interpret a range of cues necessary for the comprehension of narrative texts. Advice on strategies to develop reading comprehension skills is provided in [Appendix 7](#).

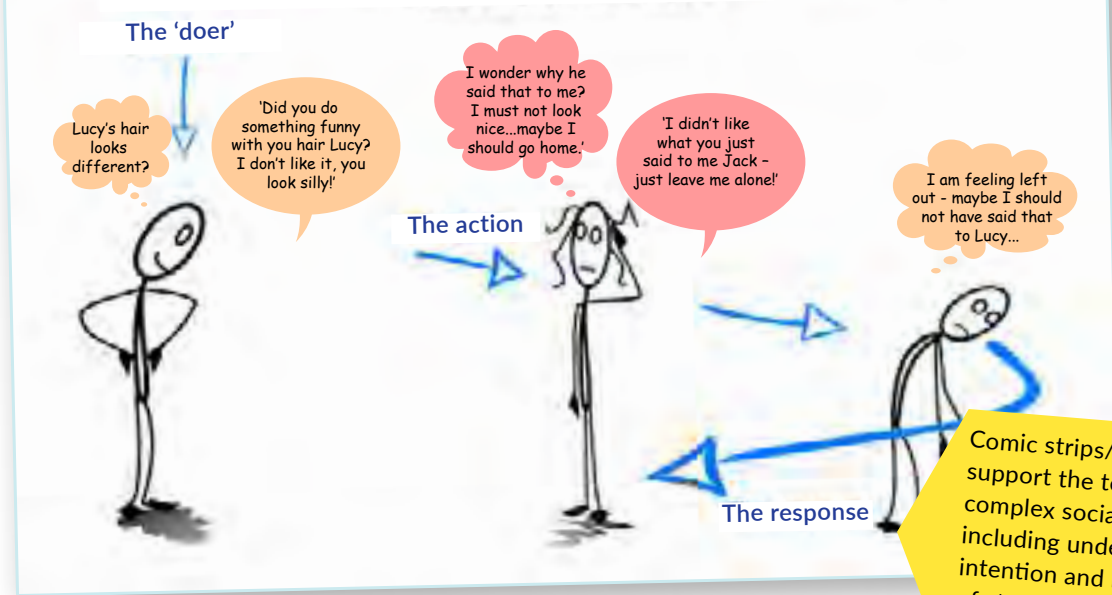
Comic strips can be used across a range of curricular subjects and can help students develop higher-order thinking skills like analysis, evaluation, prediction, and inference, which is of particular benefit to supporting post-primary students during preparation for study and examinations. Clear and sequenced icons and figures can help students to understand highly complicated matters in a condensed and succinct form. Comic strips are versatile and can help students to practise essential skills like reading, understanding visual concepts, understanding context clues, and understanding interactions. They can also be used to help students to develop empathy, particularly if the characters in the comic strips are someone they can relate to.





What someone does or says in the presence of others impacts how others feel and think (negatively or positively) which impacts how they react and respond to the 'doer' of the behaviours.

The 'doer' then has thoughts and feelings about how he or she is treated by others, which then impacts how they react and respond.



Comic strips/cartoons support the teaching of complex social behaviours, including understanding intention and motivations of story characters.  
Source: MCA



Materials used to support literacy development are informed by the special interests and the learning profile of the student.  
Source: MCA



Students' performance in numeracy and mathematics can vary significantly. It can be an area of significant strength for some students while others may experience difficulty. Accordingly, it is important to identify individual needs when considering how best to support the development of skills at all stages of learning, especially at post-primary level. Linking curricular topics to real-life situations, while also incorporating the student's interests into teaching approaches, enhances motivation and helps to make learning more meaningful for the student. A focus on functional mathematical skills involving real-life application of abstract concepts (e.g. money, time, measurement) can help to consolidate learning and support generalisation.



Example of a resource for incorporating students' interests to help motivate them during a mathematics activity.

Source: MCA

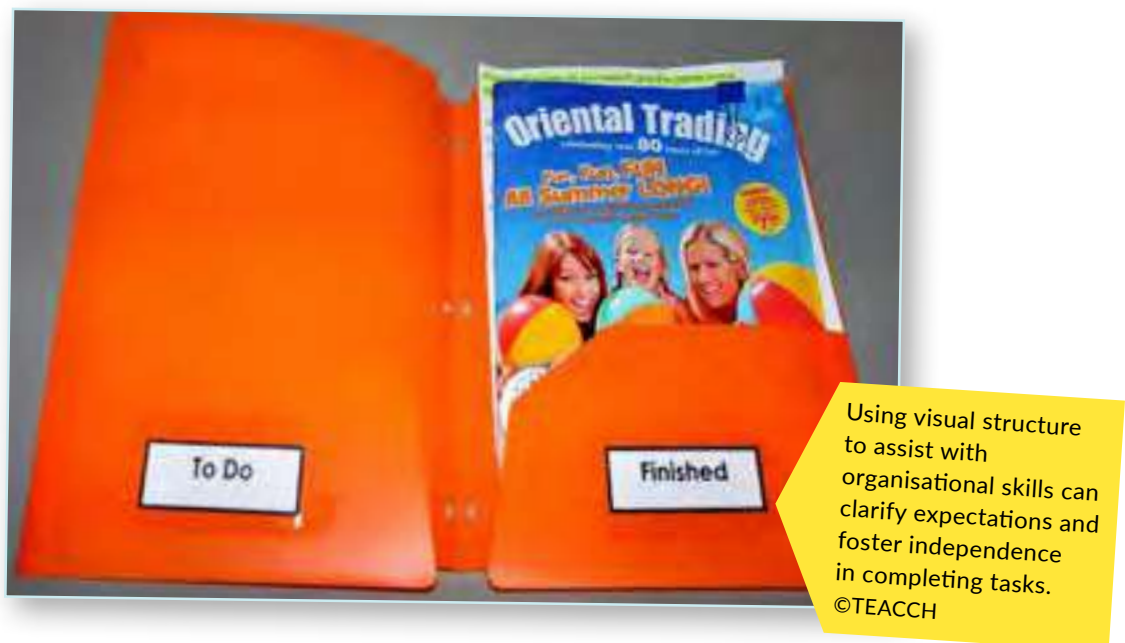
Explicit instruction paired with teacher prompts and positive reinforcement of student responses have been shown to be effective in teaching mathematics to students with autism. This includes modelling how to start and succeed with a task and providing sufficient practice opportunities. Visual structured teaching approaches can also support effective instruction in mathematics.



## Curriculum assessment and study skills

A range of assessment and certification options should be made available to students with autism. [Appendix 6](#) summarises the curriculum frameworks in Ireland ranging from early childhood education to post-primary education. These curriculum frameworks support teachers in developing curricular experiences that are broad, balanced and differentiated to address individual needs.

Students may need additional support to plan what steps are required to complete tasks. They may have difficulties with forward planning and organisational skills, such as planning written assignments, working towards a deadline for homework or bringing materials to class. Personalised strategies such as using checklists, a diary/journal, schedules, assistive technology or colour-coded worksheets can assist students in prioritising tasks and working in a systematic way.



Examinations can be stressful for all students but this is especially the case for students with autism. Their examination performance may be impacted by:

- Sensory feedback in a large, busy exam hall during the examination
- Time pressure in relation to language-based subjects which require written responses
- Difficulty in concentrating or sitting still for long periods
- Organisational and planning demands
- Perfectionism that may affect a student's ability to divide time between questions



Examination and study skills often need to be explicitly taught, especially at post-primary level. Students should be encouraged to try different learning approaches (e.g. listening to study/revision notes, preparing flash cards, mind maps) to help them identify what strategies work best for them. Students may experience difficulty in forward planning and time management, therefore they should be taught the skills of developing a personal study timetable which incorporates periods for breaks and leisure activities. Details about Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations (RACE) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), including eligibility criteria, are available from the State Examinations Commission (SEC) <https://www.examinations.ie>.

## Collaboration with parents

Working in partnership with parents and drawing on their unique insights and knowledge of their child is crucial in supporting students' academic development. For example, a home-school communication journal can be used as a collaborative resource to promote a positive parent-teacher relationship and is a means to share progress and achievement as well as to problem-solve any concerns. The school should ask parents their preferred means of communication and endeavour to apply this in their approach to collaborative practice. It is important for both school staff and parents to be clear about objectives of assigned homework. Teacher-parent discussions about strategies to increase motivation and engagement, and a consistent time-bound homework routine may be helpful. Teachers and parents should monitor how the student is progressing with homework and collaborate regarding adjustments, as needed.



The following are examples of resources that can support interventions to enhance the academic development of students with autism:

## RESOURCE BOX 17

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

#### Good practice guides and tips

- *NEPS Guidelines, Handouts and Tips for Teachers and Parents*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/84e52e-national-educational-psychological-service-neps-guidelines-tips-and-/#cognitive-skills>
- *NEPS Resources and Publications*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/97aa18-national-educational-psychological-service-neps-resources-and-public/>
- *Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/86911/e2ab0e65-f360-45a4-8075-37a4123838c3.pdf>
- *Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/86912/18cab177-e903-44da-8648-fdfe1cf59f02.pdf>
- *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities*  
[https://ncca.ie/en/resources/sen\\_introduction](https://ncca.ie/en/resources/sen_introduction)

#### Differentiating the curriculum

- *Intervention Options*  
<http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention>
- *How to Adapt Lessons*  
[http://www.amazeclassroom.org.au/how\\_to\\_adapt\\_lessons.html](http://www.amazeclassroom.org.au/how_to_adapt_lessons.html)
- *NCSE Resources on General Support for Learning (Early Years)*  
<https://ncse.ie/teacher-early-years-general-support-for-learning>
- *NCSE Resources on Curriculum Support (Early Years)*  
<https://ncse.ie/teacher-early-years-curriculum-support>
- *NCSE Resources on General Support for Learning (Primary)*  
<https://ncse.ie/teacher-primary-general-support-for-learning>
- *NCSE Resources on Curriculum Support (Primary)*  
<https://ncse.ie/teacher-primary-curriculum-support>
- *NCSE Resources on General Support for Learning (Post-Primary)*  
<https://ncse.ie/teacher-post-primary-general-support-for-learning>
- *NCSE Resources on Curriculum Support (Post-Primary)*  
<https://ncse.ie/teacher-post-primary-curriculum-support>



- *NCSE Resources on General Support for Learning (Special Class/School)*  
<https://ncse.ie/teacher-special-class-or-school-general-support-for-learning>
- *NCSE Resources on Curriculum Support (Special Class/School)*  
<https://ncse.ie/teacher-special-class-or-special-school-curriculum-support>

### Teaching literacy

- *A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in Early Years*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cf27b-a-balanced-approach-to-literacy-development-in-the-early-years/>
- *Effective Interventions for Struggling Readers*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40346/6a3b58f7e4d14c47906c0edecf95abca.pdf>
- *A Land We Can Share – Teaching Literacy to Students with Autism*. Brookes Publishing
- *Teaching Reading and Spelling to Children with Autism*. Kluth & Chandler Allcott (2008)  
<https://blog.allaboutlearningpress.com/teach-reading-autistic-child>
- *Using EDMARK Reading Program*  
<https://theautismhelper.com/using-edmark-reading-program/>
- *Strategies for Improving Literacy for Students with ASD*  
[https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/64CB422A-ED08-43F0-F795CA9DE364B6BE/asd\\_literacy\\_strategies\\_with\\_color.pdf](https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/64CB422A-ED08-43F0-F795CA9DE364B6BE/asd_literacy_strategies_with_color.pdf)
- *NCSE Seminars on Literacy and Students with Autism\**  
<https://ncse.ie/for-schools/connect-teacher-professional-learning-events-catalogue>

### Teaching mathematical concepts

- *NEPS Maths Support: A Good Practice Guide for Teachers*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/430cc-maths-support-2020/>
- *Teaching Maths Concepts to Children with ASD*  
<https://suelarkey.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Teaching-Maths-Concepts-to-Children-with-ASD.pdf>
- *Maths Interventions for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Best Evidence Synthesis*. King, S.A., Lemons, C.J. & Davidson, K.A. (2016). *Exceptional Children*, Vol. 82 (4), 443-462
- *NCSE Seminars on Numeracy and Students with Autism\**  
<https://ncse.ie/for-schools/connect-teacher-professional-learning-events-catalogue>

\*See [Teacher Professional Learning \(TPL\)](#) section for more information.

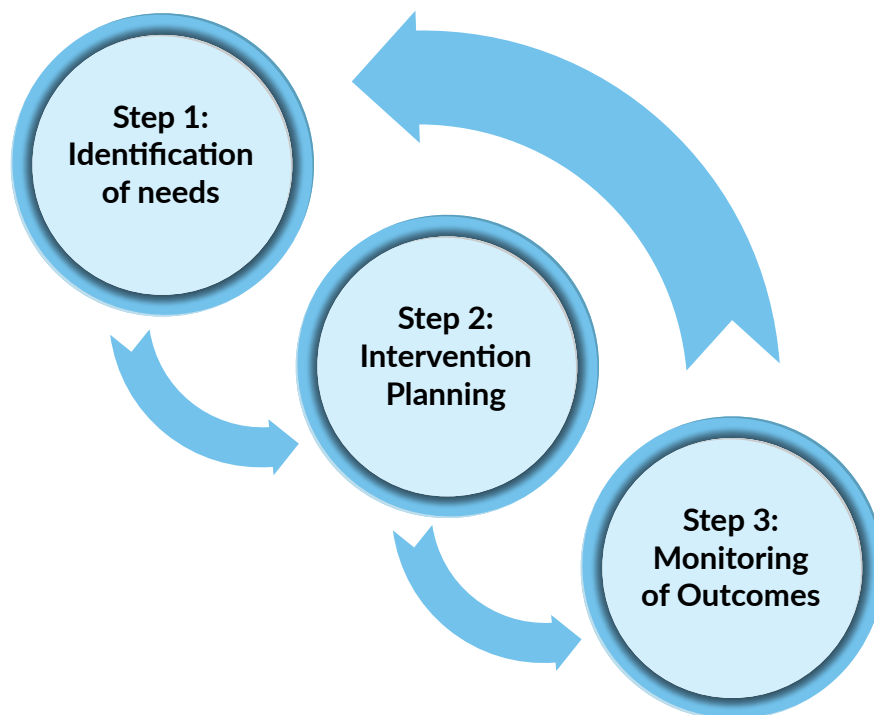




### Step 3: How can we monitor and record outcomes?

Following the identification of strengths and needs and the implementation of strategies to promote students' academic development, it is important to monitor, review and record outcomes. Regular monitoring of progress (e.g. termly) and updating of priority learning goals across the curriculum should be recorded in the Student Support Plan.

The monitoring and review process should consider the outcome of direct interventions in addition to adaptations to teaching and learning methodologies and to the learning environment. Ongoing teacher observation, consultations with parents, and students' own view of the interventions provide important information when reviewing outcomes and help to guide subsequent learning plans. Consideration of how students generalise or apply learning in real-life settings helps establish if the learning is making a qualitative difference to the student's life (e.g. applying numeracy skills when shopping). Assessments initially used to obtain baseline measures of academic attainment (e.g. literacy or numeracy) can be re-administered to evaluate progress and to review learning targets and intervention approaches.







## ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

### Points to Remember

#### STEP 1 - IDENTIFY NEEDS

Build a comprehensive learning profile of the student's strengths and needs, using adapted formal and informal assessment approaches, as necessary, across curricular areas, including a consideration of the teaching and learning environment.

#### STEP 2 - MEET NEEDS

Consider how students' literacy and numeracy needs impact on their performance across the curriculum and provide access to evidence-informed interventions.

Differentiate teaching approaches, materials, content and pace to ensure lessons are matched to individual strengths and needs.

Utilise digital learning and assistive technology approaches to support students' communication and learning.

Use evidence-informed classroom practice, including visual - structured teaching approaches, behavioural and communication approaches to teaching when planning interventions.

Provide students with access to a broad, balanced, differentiated curriculum and to certified learning options.

Put strategies in place to support and foster students' independence, including their organisational, study and examination skills.

In consultation with parents and students modify the learning environment in order to increase student motivation and engagement.

#### STEP 3 - RECORD AND MONITOR OUTCOMES

In collaboration with the student and parents, review priority learning targets, intervention strategies and outcomes across the curriculum; update the student's support plan and set a further review date.

Please see *Indicators of Effective Practice* to assist schools to reflect on their practice relating to **Academic Development** and to help identify areas for further development.





## Behavioural Development

Behaviour is influenced by a range of interconnected factors, including a student's social and emotional development, their communication skills, the quality of the learning environment, and interpersonal supports they receive. It can be helpful to view behaviour as a form of communication and recognise that difficulties may arise as a result of under-developed skills or unmet needs. Students with autism may display behaviours of concern due to factors such as:

**Limited social understanding, play and social interaction skills**

**Communication and sensory processing needs**

**Rigid or restricted ways of thinking that may interfere with the ability to transition, switch focus to engage in alternative tasks and plan ahead effectively**

**Heightened levels of anxiety including difficulty coping with change, uncertainty or when experiencing a lack of control over situations**

**The impact of unmet physiological needs e.g. needs related to diet, sleep and pain or developmental stage e.g. puberty**

These challenges may contribute to difficulties in maintaining a well-regulated emotional state. Behaviours of concern may range from minor incidents to high levels of dysregulated behaviour, possibly involving a student hurting themselves or others, damaging property and ultimately impacting upon a student's ability to reach their potential in areas including social, emotional and academic development.



Over time, a build-up of challenging behaviour can result in fun activities being stopped, relationships being strained and negative perceptions of the person, all leading to a poor quality of life for the person and their family.

What is Challenging Behaviour?

<https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/uploads/documents/Aspect%20Practice/PBS/Aspect-Practice-What-is-Challenging-Behaviour.pdf>

## Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)

PBS is a data-driven approach that draws on an understanding of behaviour from multiple perspectives to guide intervention planning. It emphasises early intervention to prevent and reduce the likelihood of behaviours of concern emerging, and close collaboration between teachers, parents and students when planning and reviewing supports. All students, including those with autism, benefit from a positive and proactive whole-school approach to behaviour that places relationships at the centre of behavioural development. This involves the creation of positive enabling environments and the promotion of social, emotional and behavioural development, situated within a wellbeing framework. In line with the Continuum of Support framework, PBS includes intervention at the whole-school level, targeted support for groups of students, and more intensive supports that are personalised to a student's unique strengths and needs. At an individual level, PBS endeavours to bridge the gap between skills not yet acquired and skills required, through teaching more appropriate behaviours and adapting the physical and social environment. It acknowledges that a reactive plan may also be needed at times when behaviours of concern arise, despite planned interventions. The guidance set out in this domain should be considered in conjunction with *Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools* (National Educational Welfare Board, 2008).

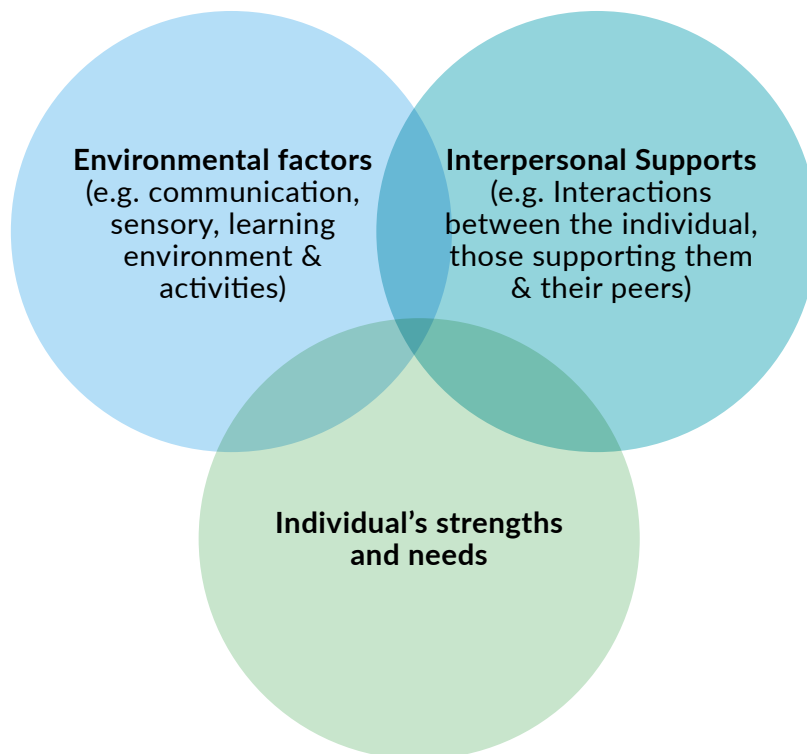
Behaviour change...occurs more readily when the focus is on support, building the skills needed for prosocial behaviour and increasing the student's wellbeing.

*Behaviour Support Plans*

<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/behaviour-students/guidance/6-behaviour-support-plans>



The PBS approach proposes that behaviours of concern occur as part of an interaction between: (1) the environments, communities and cultures in which an individual lives; (2) the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of other people in their lives; (3) an individual, their current and past experiences and what they have learned (Hastings et al., 2013). [Figure 17](#) shows the interaction between these components, when applied to autism.



**Figure 17: Interactive context within which behaviour occurs**

Behaviours of concern often occur when there is a mismatch between student needs and the environmental or interpersonal supports and/or the skills students may require to get their needs met in a more prosocial way.

Promoting behavioural change requires an understanding of the possible reasons why behaviour is occurring, making adjustments to the environment and interpersonal supports and interactions, and addressing a student's individual needs. This is best achieved in the context of whole-school approaches to creating environments that are responsive and sensitive to the needs of students with autism. Positive outcomes are more likely to arise when supporting adults show empathy and seek to understand the meaning or purpose of the behaviour. Some behaviours of concern can be inadvertently reinforced by the ways that others respond across settings, and these patterns of behaviour and responses may become established over time.



The views and experiences of the student should be central to decision-making, planning and reviewing behavioural interventions. The use of Person-Centred Planning (PCP) helps build an understanding of the student's individual strengths and needs and ensures that their specific concerns and wellbeing needs are addressed ([Appendix 1](#)).

Addressing behaviours of concern may be an emotive process as these behaviours can be a significant source of stress for both students themselves and for supporting adults. Increased emotional and physiological reactions can in turn make it more difficult to respond calmly and supportively. By reducing the stress levels of both school staff and students, it is hoped that behaviours of concern will be reduced. Accordingly, good quality support for students with autism requires additional knowledge and skills on the part of teachers and parents.

Without this additional knowledge and support (and despite everyone's best efforts) it is possible that there is a mismatch between a person's support needs and what is being provided to them. This mismatch can increase the likelihood of challenging behaviour.

What is Challenging Behaviour?

(<https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/uploads/documents/Aspect%20Practice/PBS/Aspect-Practice-What-is-Challenging-Behaviour.pdf>)

Behaviours of concern typically occur when the requirements placed on the student, in the context of the environment and interpersonal interactions, outweigh the skills they have to respond in an adaptive way. Consequently, within a PBS approach, an assessment may indicate the need to promote the development of skills, adapt the environment and/or provide interpersonal supports to enable the student to participate fully in the academic and social life of the school.

Kids do well if they can.

(Greene, 2014, p.9)



## Step 1: How can we identify needs?

Behavioural development is influenced by a range of interconnected factors and therefore identifying behavioural development needs requires a comprehensive, systematic and holistic approach. This involves considering social, communication, sensory and health needs while also reviewing the class and school contexts to reduce barriers to wellbeing, learning and participation and to ensure that the environment is sensitive and responsive to the needs of the individual student. Importantly, accessing the direct views of students is crucial in gaining insights into their lived experiences and achieving a better understanding of the behaviour from their individual perspective.

### What information is gathered?

Assessment should take account of individual strengths and needs across a range of areas of development and how behaviour presents in different settings. This section outlines two inter-related processes that can be used in promoting behavioural development and in understanding and responding to behaviour(s) of concern ([Figure 18](#)).

Behaviour(s) of concern may be identified and responded to using the following processes:

**A** Basic needs and strengths and needs across domain areas (as set out in [Chapter 4](#)).

If behaviour(s) of concern persist, despite intervention, proceed to the process outlined in B.

**B** Function-based assessment of behaviour

These steps are based on the understanding that behaviours occur in response to what is often a communicative, social, emotional or sensory need. If a student does not have the skills to get their needs met in an adaptive way, they may resort to using maladaptive behaviours that can be a cause of concern (e.g. disruptive or disengaged behaviour). Identifying underlying reasons for the behaviour can help tailor individualised interventions (adaptations to the environment/ interpersonal supports, and/or skills development) that aim to improve the student's quality of life and participation, in addition to decreasing behaviours of concern.

### How is this information gathered?

Interviews, checklists and observation tools can be used within a problem-solving framework to gather information on the student's strengths and needs, and to identify suggested supports. A series of tools and checklists are presented in this chapter to aid this process ([Resource Box 18](#)). A collaborative approach, which includes gathering the perspectives of all involved, including the student themselves ([Appendix 1](#)), ensures that behavioural development is understood within an interactive context.





## Understanding and responding to behaviour(s) of concern

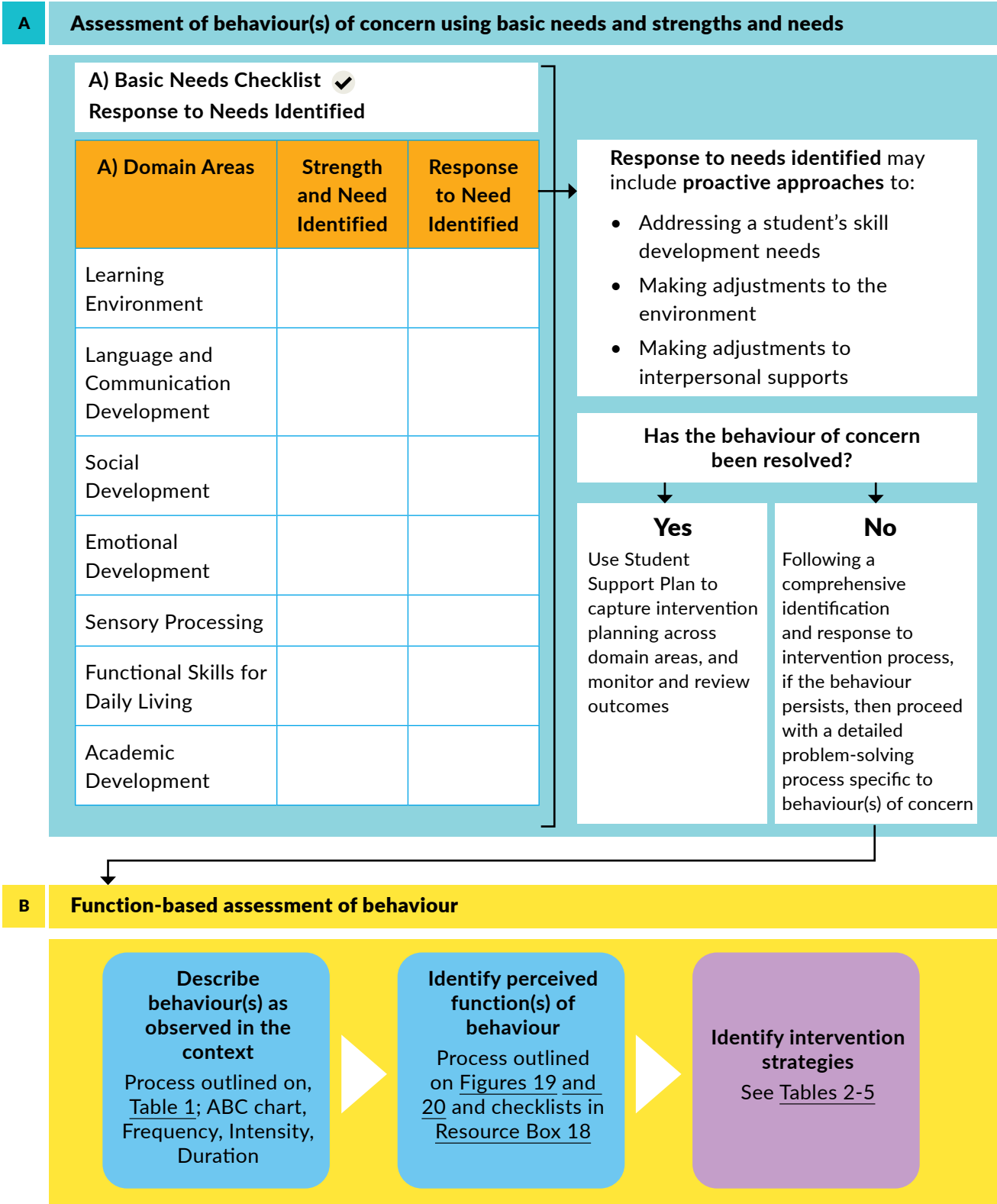


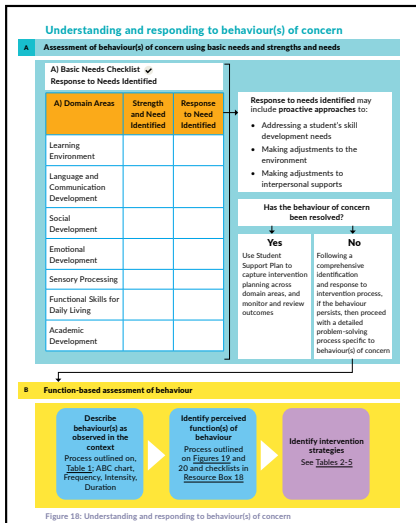
Figure 18: Understanding and responding to behaviour(s) of concern



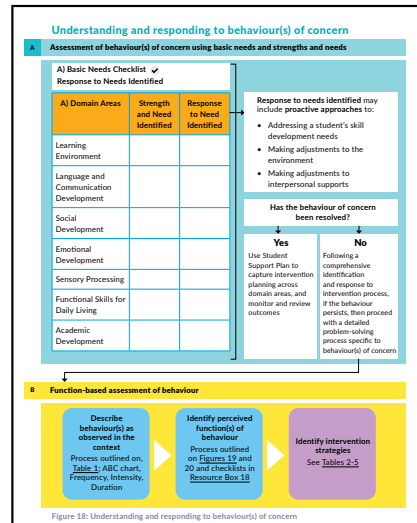


**A Assessment of behaviour(s) of concern using basic needs and strengths and needs**

**A) Basic needs**



**A) Strengths and needs across domains**



A systematic approach should be taken to understanding behaviour, beginning by establishing whether or not a student's basic needs are met. The basic needs checklist contained in Appendix 5.1 can be used to help understand how underlying needs may be contributing to the behavioural presentation of a student with autism, based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Having addressed basic needs, it may be necessary to identify strengths and needs across domain areas in order to understand and respond to behaviours of concern, using the strengths and needs across domains Checklist contained in Appendix 5.2 or with reference to individual domains.

**Appendix 5 Behavioural development checklists and templates**

**5.1 - Basic needs checklist**

A systematic approach should be taken to understanding behaviour, beginning by establishing whether or not a student's basic needs are met. The checklist below details how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be interpreted in understanding how underlying needs may be contributing to the behavioural presentation of a student with autism.

Basic needs: Have you considered?	Response to needs identified - Notes
<p><b>Physiological needs</b></p> <p>Could the student be...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>too cold, too hot, tired, hungry, need sleep or need to exercise?</li> <li>in pain, or have unmet medical needs, seizures, dental pain?</li> <li>having a growth spurt or experiencing hormonal changes?</li> <li>anxious, stressed or experiencing mental health difficulties?</li> </ul> <p>↳ reacting to sensory needs?</p> <p><b>Safety needs</b></p> <p>Does the student...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>feel emotionally and physically safe in class, the school yard and other shared spaces in school?</li> <li>feel emotionally and physically safe about any changes or events in his/her life (e.g. house move/ bereavement)?</li> <li>have structures in place to ensure predictability (e.g. personal schedules)?</li> <li>have key adults who model staying calm, problem-solving, and self-regulation?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Belonging and connectedness</b></p> <p>Does the student...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>feel connected to his/her teacher(s), class and peers?</li> <li>have a balance of time with peers and alone/down time?</li> <li>have opportunities to link with same age peers and peers who have similar interests inside or outside of school?</li> </ul>	

**5.2 - Strengths and needs across domains checklist**

Having addressed basic needs, it may be necessary to identify strengths and needs across domain areas in order to understand and respond to behaviours of concern.

Identification of strengths and needs across domains	Response to needs identified - Notes
<p><b>Learning Environment: Have you considered...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The student's needs in relation to transitions, rules, expectations and the use of visual approaches?</li> <li>If the learning environment is appropriately structured and organised?</li> <li>How low arousal approaches can be adopted to provide a calm, predictable, and structured environment?</li> </ul> <p><b>Language and Communication Development: Have you identified...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The student's attention, receptive, expressive and social/pragmatic language skill levels?</li> <li>Language/communication needs, targets and interventions?</li> <li>Adaptive strategies for the student to effectively communicate their needs?</li> </ul> <p><b>Social Development: Have you identified...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The student's social development skills, needs and priority targets and interventions?</li> <li>Whether the student has the pre-requisite skills to support social interaction (e.g. turn-taking skills, waiting etc)?</li> <li>Effective ways to support interactions with others and build friendships?</li> </ul> <p><b>Sensory Processing: Have you identified...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The student's sensory strengths, needs, priority targets and interventions?</li> <li>Any adaptations required to the school environment to meet sensory needs?</li> </ul> <p><b>Emotional Development: Have you considered...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The student's emotional development skills, needs and priority targets and interventions?</li> <li>The student's ability to identify and label emotion in others and in themselves?</li> <li>The strategies students use to regulate/cope with emotions and to problem solve?</li> </ul> <p><b>Functional Skills For Daily Living: Have you considered...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working collaboratively with home to identify strengths, needs and targets related to daily living skills?</li> <li>Working collaboratively with home to plan and implement interventions related to the student's daily living skills including self-care, leisure, functional academic and personal safety skills?</li> </ul> <p><b>Academic Development: Have you...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Used a range of assessment methods to gather information around academic strengths and needs?</li> <li>Adapted assessment methods to suit the needs of students with autism?</li> <li>Identified priority learning targets and adapted teaching approaches as part of the student's support plan?</li> </ul>	



Students can display a number of behaviours of concern during any one period. Targeting the behaviour that will make the most difference to their quality of life should be prioritised. Once that behaviour of concern has reduced or been eliminated, others can then be addressed.

**B Assessing the reason for/function(s) of a student’s behaviour**

Following a comprehensive identification of need and response to intervention process as outlined in Part A above, if the behaviour persists, then it may be necessary to proceed with a detailed function-based assessment specific to the behaviour(s) of concern (Appendix 5.3 and Appendix 5.4).

This aims to establish why the behaviour(s) may be occurring and suggest areas for intervention to help prevent or minimise occurrences (Figure 19).

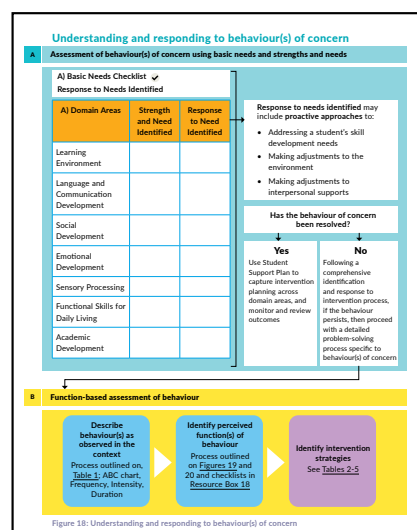


Figure 19: Understanding and responding to behaviour(s) of concern

The use of an ABC chart, such as Table 1, can be helpful in understanding behaviour:

- Consider/collect data on setting events (e.g. sleep pattern, medication change, illness)
- Identify triggers or ‘antecedents’ (i.e. what happens directly before/when the behaviour of concern occurs?)
- Identify what the behaviour looks like and where/when does it happen/not happen?
- Establish what happens as a result/as a consequence of the behaviour of concern?

**Common triggers for students with autism**

- Being told ‘no’ or asked to stop a preferred activity or move to a less preferred activity
- Not receiving positive attention, small improvements not acknowledged
- Being asked to do ‘one more thing’ when tired
- Lack of predictability, having a routine change
- Lack of choice

(Middletown Centre for Autism, 2014)



Table 1: Antecedent Behaviour Consequence (ABC) chart

Antecedent	Behaviour	Consequence
What happens before the behaviour? Setting events: ..... ..... (e.g. likely stressors that day) Trigger events: ..... ..... i.e. what happens just before behaviour occurs e.g. asked to stop preferred activity)	Describe the behaviour exactly as it is observed:  Where/when does it happen/ not happen? ..... ..... Detail aspects of the behaviour including: Intensity ..... Frequency ..... Duration .....	Direct response to the behaviour:  What is the immediate consequence or reaction? ..... How do others typically react? ..... How does the student respond to others' reactions? ..... .....



Drawing on information gathered from the ABC chart (Table 1), teachers can reflect on reasons for/function(s) of behaviour. A number of hypotheses (best guesses) may be generated about why the student is engaging in this behaviour, being mindful that a behaviour can have more than one function. It can also be helpful to consider whether behaviour is an attempt to get or avoid a sensory experience, attention, or a tangible object/activity.



In the absence of a more adaptive way to get needs met, is the behaviour an attempt to:

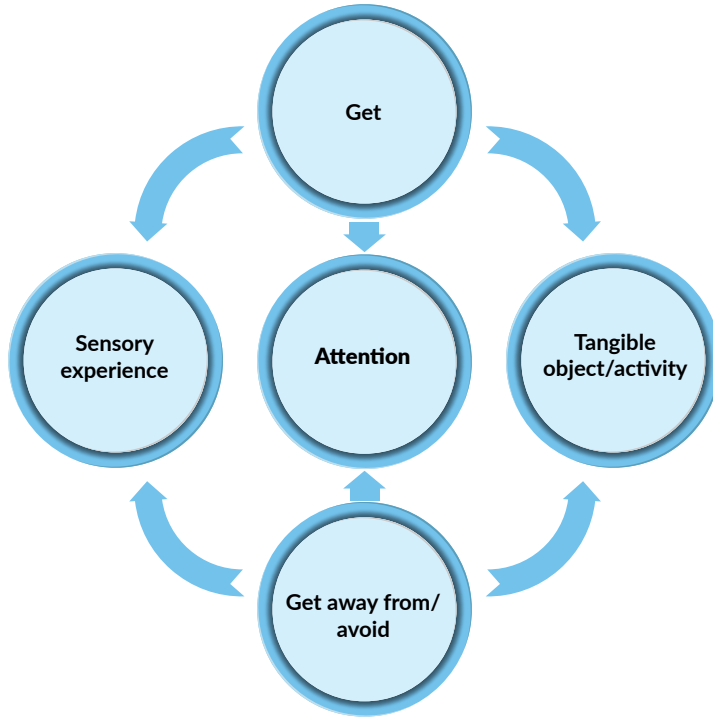


Figure 19: Possible functions of behaviour

Questions to consider in generating hypotheses about function(s):
What is the student trying to communicate through this behaviour?
How do you think the student is feeling before/during/after the behaviour?
How could the environment have impacted and/or what environmental changes might help minimise or prevent the behaviour?
What skill does the student need to learn or what unsolved problem might the student be experiencing in this situation?
What could adults do differently (environmental and/or interpersonal supports) in this situation to enable the student to use an alternative behaviour to fulfil this function?
In the absence of a more adaptive way to get needs met, is the behaviour an attempt to get/get away from: attention, a tangible object/activity, or a sensory experience?

How do you imagine this young person is feeling?

Possible function(s) of behaviour:  
\_\_\_\_\_

What do you think this young person is trying to tell us?

Figure 20: Questions to consider in generating hypotheses about function



The checklists and templates detailed in this section are available in [Appendix 5.3](#) and [Appendix 5.4](#). In addition, the following are examples of assessment tools that can be used to identify needs related to behaviour development:

## RESOURCE BOX 18

### SUPPORTING IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS - BEHAVIOURAL DEVELOPMENT

#### Checklists

- *Basic Needs Checklist; Learning Environment Checklist; Classroom Support Checklist, Behaviour Checklist*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *Functional Assessment Screening Tools (FAST)*  
<https://www.cmhcm.org/userfiles/filemanager/961> <https://depts.washington.edu/dbpedcs/Screening%20Tools/FAST.pdf>
- *Functional Assessment Form (including setting events)*  
<http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/03/Functional-Assessment-Form-Including-Setting-Event.pdf>

#### Interviews

- *Individual Interview Notes and Tools*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *Collaborative Proactive Solutions: Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP)*  
<https://livesinthebalance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ALSUP-2020-1.pdf>
- *Thinking Tools: Good Day/Bad Day*  
<http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-thinking-tools/>

#### Observations

- *Guidelines for Observations and Templates; Recording Behaviour within a context ABC*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>

#### Standardised assessment tools

- *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)*  
<https://www.sdqinfo.org/a0.html>





## Step 2: How can we meet these needs?

Whole-School  
Inclusive  
Practice

Effective interventions need to be responsive to identified needs, and should encompass:

- Policy and practice at a whole-school level that promotes Positive Behaviour Support (See Figure 21) and autism-friendly environments
- Proactive strategies:
  - Environmental adaptations (Table 2)
  - Interpersonal supports (Table 3)
  - Skill development needs (Table 4)
  - Positive reinforcement of behaviour (Table 5)
- Reactive strategies (to help calm and de-escalate)

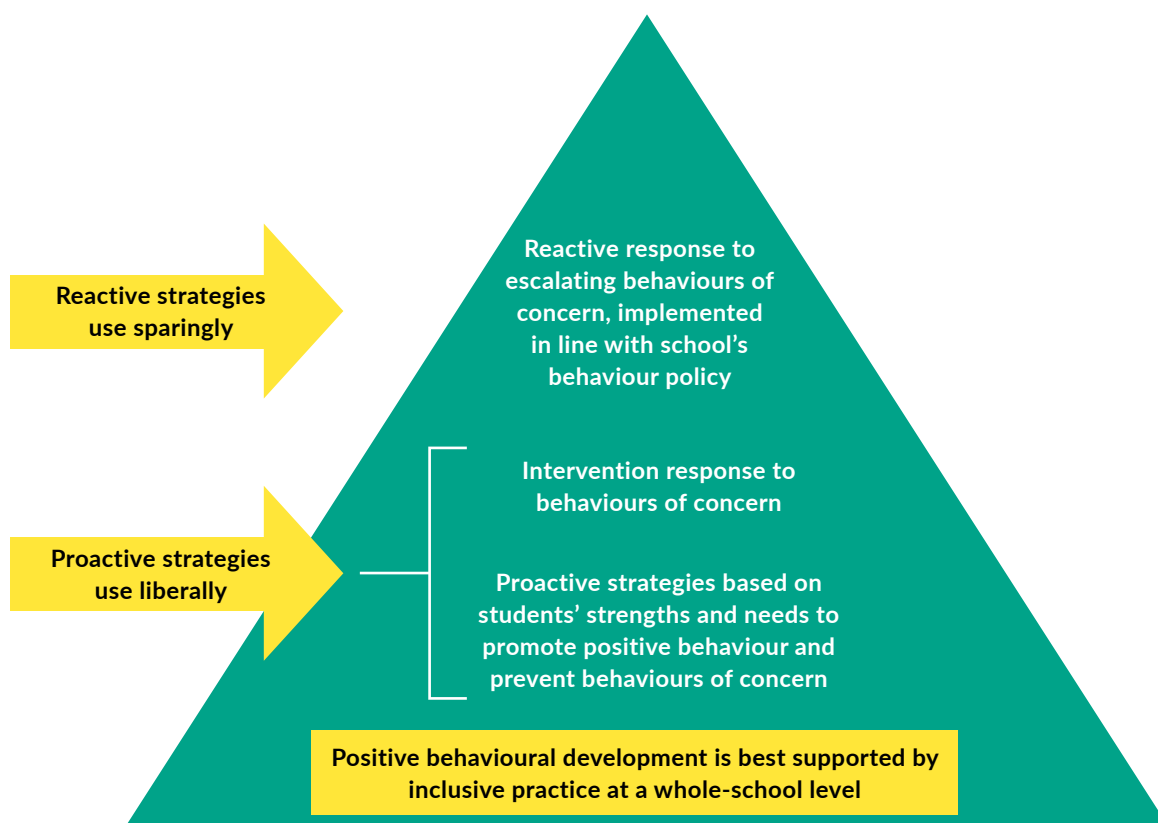


Figure 21: A whole-school approach to positive behavioural development

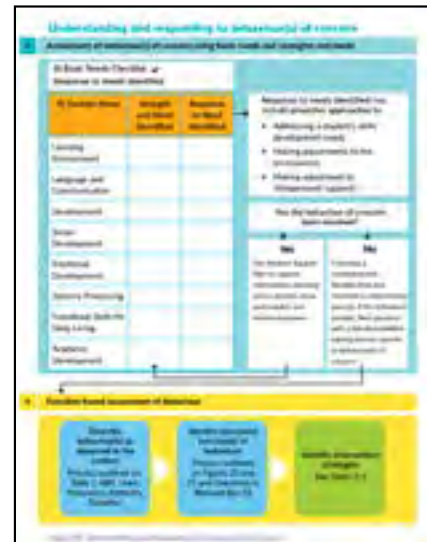
Intervention involving personalised proactive strategies can be undertaken following an identification of needs process (i.e. basic needs/strengths and needs across domains) and/or a function-based assessment. Guidance on proactive strategies relating to environmental adaptations, interpersonal supports, skills development and positive reinforcement are set out in [Tables 2-5](#).



## Responding to identified needs: Planning interventions

### A Responding to behaviour(s) of concerns related to basic needs and strengths and needs across domain areas.

Through the assessment process outlined in [Step 1](#) priority targets are identified based on A) Basic needs and Strengths and needs across domain areas. Following the assessment process, interventions are planned in a way that ensures that supports are matched to the student's individual strengths and needs in a motivating and meaningful way. [Figure 22](#) provides an example of matching an intervention response to identified basic needs ([Appendix 5.6](#)). [Figure 23](#) illustrates the matching of intervention responses to identified strengths and needs across domain areas ([Appendix 5.7](#)). Proactive strategies are set out to assist this intervention planning process, in the following areas: environmental adaptations ([Table 2](#)), interpersonal supports ([Table 3](#)), skill development needs ([Table 4](#)), positive reinforcement of behaviour ([Table 5](#)).



Basic need	Identification of needs	Response to identified need
Physiological	Following completion of basic needs checklist, sleep is identified as an area of need	Early morning timetable will be adjusted. Parents will link with multidisciplinary team around improving sleep. Home-school diary will be used to share information on sleeping patterns and to monitor behaviour

Figure 22: Example of basic needs identification and response





Domain	Identification of strengths and needs	Response to identified need
	What priority needs have we identified?	How can we respond to priority needs?
<b>Learning Environment</b>	Visual schedule is in place but student does not appear to be interested in it	Personalise visual schedule. Use student’s favourite Paw Patrol characters on schedule
<b>Language and Communication Development</b>	The speech and language therapist (SLT) has identified a moderate receptive language difficulty	Support instruction using visual teaching approaches, reducing amount of verbal instruction and allowing extra time to process information
<b>Social Development</b>	Observations indicate that student has difficulty with sharing toys and taking turns in games and activities	Turn-taking is prioritised. Use concrete object to indicate ‘Teacher’s turn, your turn’ until student can take turns independently. Practice same strategy with a peer using a turn-taking board
<b>Emotional Development</b>	Following a teacher designed assessment, student can accurately identify happy and sad from photos of a range of faces	Adults label their own and students’ emotions, identifying happy and sad feelings in context. Adults label happy and sad in others, stories and cartoons
<b>Sensory Processing</b>	The student tends to bite their own wrist. Structured observations suggest that this happens when student is upset	Use alternative object to meet sensory need. Monitor arousal level and prompt student to use chewable sensory aids. Teach replacement skills. Use visuals to request help or to request sensory support and increase access to calming proprioceptive sensory activity
<b>Functional Skills for Daily Living</b>	Parents have identified self-feeding with a spoon as a priority target	Task analysis completed for skills development. Collaborate with parents and occupational therapist  Use visual prompts, backward chaining and planned reinforcement strategies
<b>Academic Development</b>	This student is highly motivated to engage with learning when using the iPad	Use iPad to complete phonics assessment. Identify apps to support numeracy

Figure 23: Examples of strengths and needs across domains - identification and response



## Environmental adaptations to promote positive behaviour

Adapting the environment to achieve a better fit with individual needs can lead to a reduction in behaviours of concern and an increase in independent task completion (Blakeley-Smith *et al.*, 2009). Behaviours of concern are less likely to occur when support is consistent and transitions are well managed. Please see key messages in relation to environmental adaptations to promote positive behaviour in the following table:

**Table 2: Key messages when considering environmental adaptations to promote positive behaviour**

- Create environments that are predictable, safe and responsive to the social, communicative, emotional, physical, sensory and learning needs of students
- Enhance structure and predictability using visual timetables, schedules and routines
- Use visual structured teaching approaches to minimise the impact of information processing and communication difficulties
- Carefully manage transition and change to reduce stress and anxiety
- Identify specific settings and/or triggers in the social and physical environment that predict or maintain behaviours of concern and inform the development of targeted supports

Additional guidance on establishing an autism friendly learning environment is summarised below:

### Physical environment

- Ensure accessibility of materials through the use of labels, visuals and colour coding
- Create a calm, low arousal environment, including adaptations to the sensory environment and access to a calming space

### Visual supports

- Visual supports and timetables are displayed prominently and students have their own individual visual timetable if necessary

### Transitions

- Provide advance warnings and establish routines for transitions between activities, people, and environments

### Behavioural and task expectations

- Develop, display and explicitly teach behavioural expectations, class rules and routines
- Reinforce task expectations using visual supports, increasing processing time for instructions and providing explicit information on steps for completion
- Adapt daily schedules for optimal timing of activities
- Ensure tasks are engaging, developmentally meaningful and motivating



## Interpersonal supports

Over the years, the research evidence keeps piling up and it points strongly to the conclusion that a high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most potent and certainly one of the most potent factors in bringing about change and learning.

(Rogers, 1975, p.2)

Table 3: Key messages in promoting the use of interpersonal supports



### Build positive relationships

- Strengthen home-school relationships through sharing positive progress and collaborative problem solving
- Follow the student's lead, allow choices and incorporate the student's interests into interactions and learning
- Support the development of interpersonal skills and relationships with peers (e.g. reverse integration, buddy systems)
- Promote trust and safety through clear communication, limit setting, consistency and inclusive practice

### Engage student's attention and support interaction within a reciprocal relationship

- Engage the student's attention before initiating an interaction
- Meet the student at their eye-level without requesting eye-contact, and provide a commentary on what they are doing, before making a request
- Learn to recognise how a student initiates communication, either verbally or nonverbally, and support communication, through language and/or nonverbal means
- Support development of key communication skills (e.g. help-seeking, turn-taking)
- Adjust language to suit the needs of the student with autism (e.g. lowering the number of commands and tempering the use of humour or idioms)
- Model interpersonal behaviours (e.g. use vocabulary or sign to greet others, show gratitude and helpfulness)
- Support generalisation by describing behaviour in context (e.g. 'In a group we greet our friends. This is friendly behaviour. We turn our body and look towards them when we say hello')



### Promote regulation through mutual regulation

- Adjust your pace to the student's pace and wait before responding to them
- Learn to recognise individual signs of dysregulation. Be aware that refusal or rejection of an activity may be a sign of dysregulation. Allow space to regulate before attempting to re-engage and consider sensory needs within interpersonal interactions
- Acknowledge, label and validate emotions. Offer and scaffold the use of a coping strategy (e.g. 'I can see you're sad today. Everyone feels sad sometimes. Have some downtime in the cosy corner')
- Promote independence in regulating emotions by allowing choice and autonomy (e.g. allowing breaks as needed, extra time to complete activities)
- Be mindful that stress is transactional in nature; reducing stress levels of staff and students can help reduce behaviours of concern. In situations of stress for students, lower demands and expectations



## Skills development

Challenging behaviour occurs when the demands placed upon a child outstrip the skills he has to respond adaptively to those demands.

(Greene, 2014, p.10)

Table 4: Key messages for consideration when teaching new skills

- Identify priority skills and teach one skill at a time (see ALSUP, Identification of Needs [Resource Box 18](#))
- Based on strengths and needs identified, select evidence-informed interventions ([Appendix 5.5](#))
- Explicitly teach skills using supports (e.g. visual supports, interpersonal supports) and repetition. Students often need to be taught how to use the skill in a one-to-one setting with an adult before learning to generalise to other situations
- Incorporate students' interests and learning preference into skills teaching, whilst ensuring that tasks are developmentally appropriate and meaningful
- With certain targets, for example teaching a student how to cope with losing, practice with neutral activities before attempting to transfer and generalise the skill

### Consider whether the student has the skills to:

- Ask for something they need (e.g. help from an adult/peer; access to a break; calm down space; to use the bathroom; food/drink; the noise level to be reduced)
- Identify their emotional state (e.g. awareness of physiological cues when feeling anxious/overwhelmed/frustrated)
- Regulate emotions and know what they need to feel better (e.g. relaxation strategies)
- Accept guidance from a supporting adult to help them choose a coping strategy.
- Problem solve and adjust, with some flexibility, when things don't go to plan or during an unstructured time
- Initiate and sustain their completion of a task
- Understand the impact of their behaviour on others and consider others' perspectives
- Understand and follow clearly defined rules and instructions (e.g. 'no/stop')
- Participate with others in a social context (e.g. use of body orientation, an understanding of their/other use of eye contact, skills in taking turns, waiting)



## Positive reinforcement

Any attention given to a behaviour, either positive or negative behaviour, is likely to reinforce the student to use that behaviour again to meet a need. When promoting skills development, it is important that learning is reinforced in a planned way across contexts. This includes advanced planning of how teachers (and parents) respond to behaviours.

The use of attention, praise and encouragement are central to the development of positive behaviours and skills. *The Incredible Years* programme provides a framework to promote positive behaviour by increasing praise for desired behaviour, avoiding attention being given to negative behaviours, and by ignoring behaviours that are safe to ignore. Building positive relationships and working collaboratively with parents to identify preferred activities/reinforcers plays a crucial role in the success of a positive behaviour support plan. The learning and generalisation of skills is best promoted by using a ratio of positive reinforcement to correction that is at least 4:1. Please see key messages for consideration when using and choosing rewards and incentives:

Table 5: Key messages for consideration when using rewards and incentives

Rewards and incentives	Choosing rewards and incentives
Use incentives and rewards to teach new skills and reward prosocial behaviours with positive attention	Use of the most preferred reinforcers for the most difficult behaviour to provide the most powerful reinforcement for the student
Individual interests should be used to encourage skill development	Individualise rewards/incentives based on the teacher's knowledge and understanding of the student
Give rewards liberally for doing the skill without prompting	The size of the reward does not necessarily impact on the success of an intervention
Consistent reinforcement is provided immediately following the appropriate response	Reinforcers should be rotated and kept novel so that the student remains motivated by them and does not become bored
Reinforcers should be faded gradually over time as the student becomes more successful with the new behaviour	Review of preferred reinforcers is necessary to optimise motivation
Ensure that rewards/incentives earned for positive behaviour are never removed due to negative behaviour - <b>'If you've earned it you shouldn't lose it'</b>	



**B Responding to behaviour(s) of concerns using a function-based assessment**

If it has been necessary to use a detailed function-based assessment (Figures 22 and 23), this data is then used to identify and plan interventions that match the function of the behaviour (Figure 24 and Appendix 5.8). In addition to the guidance outlined in Tables 2-5, teaching approaches from the Learning Environment, Social Development, Emotional Development, Sensory Processing and Communication and Language sections may also need to be considered when developing a behaviour support plan.

**Guided by hypotheses based on the perceived function(s) of the behaviour, plan interventions to target Antecedent, Behaviours and Consequences as appropriate.**



Draw on proactive strategies to prevent occurrence of behaviours of concern and to promote prosocial behaviours and new skills:

- **Environmental adaptations** (Table 2)
- **Skills development needs** (Table 4)
- **Interpersonal supports** (Table 3)
- **Positive reinforcement** (Table 5)

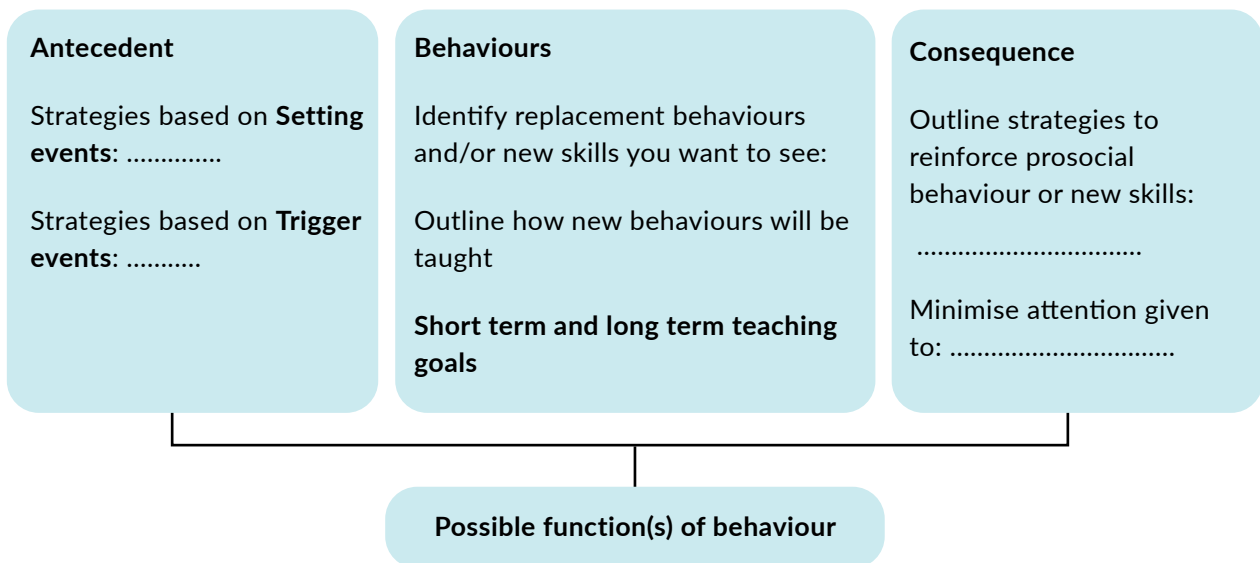


Figure 24: Planning interventions using function-based assessment data



See Table 6 for further examples

Assessing the function of behaviour helps explain why the behaviour may be happening and to identify strategies to support the student to respond in a more prosocial or adaptive way. Based on identified function(s), interventions may include adaptations to the environment, interpersonal supports and/or teaching more adaptive skills.





Table 6: Examples of proactive interventions matched to the function(s) of behaviour

Function of behaviour	What do we need to do? What intervention can support an adaptive/prosocial response?
To escape (e.g. tasks, people, situations, sensory experience)	<b>Student is supported to ask for and avail of a break when needed</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adult models 'I need a break'</li> <li>- Student is prompted with a break/help card</li> <li>- Designated break/relaxation space is set up in classroom</li> </ul>
To get attention/an expected response from a caregiver	<b>Student is supported to gain attention in a prosocial way</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adult provides attention as soon as the student demonstrates prosocial behaviour</li> <li>- Adult builds positive relationship</li> </ul>
To access a preferred activity	<b>Student learns the skills of asking for the preferred activity and to cope with waiting</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Timer and schedule used to indicate when activity will happen</li> <li>- Adult labels and validates emotions 'I can see you're excited to go to the sand. It's hard to wait'</li> <li>- Use first-then schedule</li> </ul>
Seeking a sensory experience	<b>Student learns how to gain sensory experience in a prosocial way</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide a choice board/visual prompt to support student to choose from an identified range of activities</li> </ul>
Not coping with transitions or changes in routine	<b>Student is supported in coping with change</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use schedules and transition object to support transitions</li> <li>- Positive surprises are included in the visual schedule to teach flexibility and tolerance of uncertainty</li> <li>- Introduce planned alternative activities</li> </ul>
Avoidance of task or delaying engagement in tasks	<b>Student learns the skill of persisting with a task</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Task is at appropriate instructional level, supported visually in a step-by-step manner and incorporates student's interests</li> <li>- Work system is in place</li> <li>- Adult coaches and acknowledges/praises each step achieved</li> </ul>
An effort to regulate their emotional experience	<b>Student learns to develop an awareness of their emotions and use coping strategies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adults scaffold by labelling their own and the student's emotions</li> <li>- Adults model and present choice of coping strategies</li> <li>- Support a student to reflect on whether their reaction matches the circumstances, using scaling to match behaviours, feelings and actions</li> </ul>



### Reactive strategies within the Emotional Arousal Cycle

Despite considered and thorough use of proactive intervention strategies, behaviours of concern may still arise and reactive approaches may be needed. These behaviours are often the student's way of trying to gain control over a situation that is overwhelming for them.

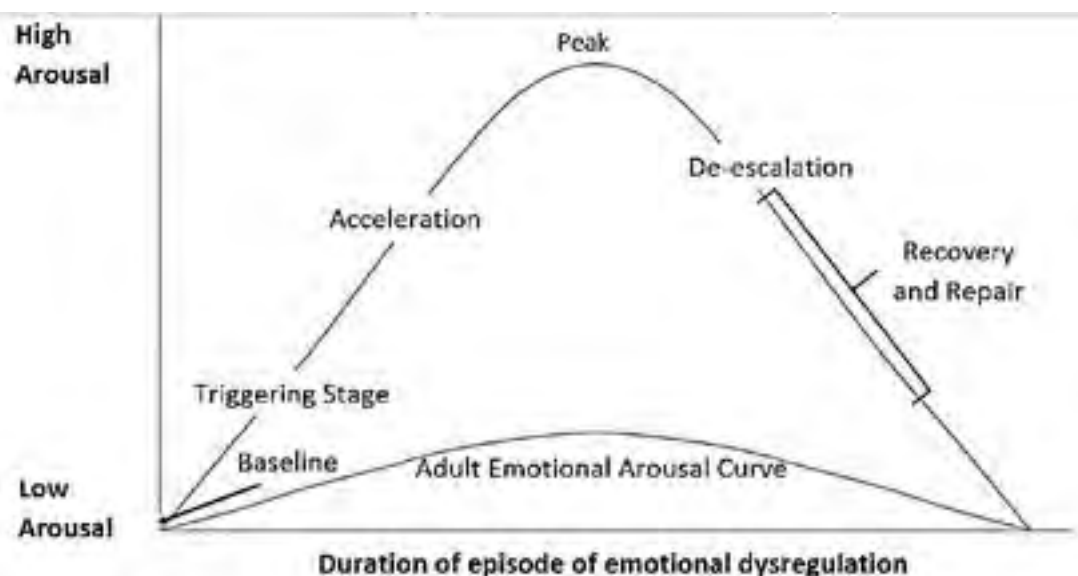


Figure 25: Emotional Arousal Cycle

Within a Student Support Plan, reactive strategies are implemented after a behaviour of concern has occurred to prevent the situation from escalating and/or causing harm, and to reduce the likelihood of the behaviour re-occurring. All reactive strategies should be non-aversive and avoid punishment. Reactive strategies adopt a low-arousal, step-wise approach to behaviour, where the supporting adult intervenes with the least intrusive approach first (e.g. praise, active listening, distracting, redirecting, reminder of coping strategies). Reactive strategies are effective in the context of a secure and positive relationship with a student and should always aim to maintain this relationship (see interpersonal supports [Table 3](#)). Low arousal approaches focus on altering staff behaviour in order to support students to better manage their behaviour and to self-regulate. Stress is transactional and therefore it is important for staff to manage their own arousal level and help to decrease the stress of the situation.

We as practitioners need to develop our skills after experiencing a high arousal situation by examining our own behaviour first, and then learning and reflecting on how we can improve next time.  
(McDonnell, 2019, p.1)



Given that stress is often triggered when the demands outweigh the coping response, it is important that the strategies chosen are based on an understanding of why the student may be becoming more dysregulated (trigger). Therefore a comprehensive assessment and identification of needs process (as outlined in [Step 1](#)) is essential in establishing the most appropriate reactive strategy for an individual. Low arousal strategies are now outlined to help de-escalate and manage behaviour at different stages of the Emotional Arousal Cycle.

As someone becomes more stressed, their world becomes more and more narrow until they feel as though they can only control themselves by controlling the world around them. Supporting someone in times of heightened stress to regain a sense of control is fundamental. (McDonnell, 2019, p.122)

#### Reactive strategies to de-escalate and manage behaviour(s) of concern

##### Baseline (maintenance strategies)

Continue to use proactive PBS strategies

(i.e. steps to ensure autism-friendly environment for all)

##### Response reminders for supporting adults

- Pay attention to the student's behaviours and consider what the behaviours are telling you about their feelings and emotions
- Continue low arousal strategies with a further reduction in demands, stimuli and interactions
- Provide access to sensory activities/resources which regulate the student
- Allow more space for the student
- Take deep breaths, think positively (e.g. 'The student is not doing it on purpose', 'I can help them through this').



### Triggering stage (regulatory strategies)

Describe exactly what the student is doing (e.g. biting their nails, rocking, pacing, change in facial expression, tone of voice)

#### Response reminders for supporting adults

Seek to understand what the student is trying to communicate and use regulating strategies e.g.

- Redirect to a special interest or to schedule
- Offer a break (e.g. calm space or movement activity), providing or modelling a visual support to request a break
- Provide a visual reminder of a rule
- Acknowledge and empathise
- Offer choices and incentives (if appropriate)
- Model calm breathing
- Use low arousal strategies: Reduce demands, minimise verbal interaction
- Be flexible

### Acceleration stage (strategies to de-escalate situation)

Describe what the student is doing. The student may become irritable, demanding, act impulsively. They are less able to cope with everyday demands

#### Response reminders for supporting adults

- Pay attention to the student's behaviours and consider what the behaviours are telling you about their feelings and emotions
- Continue low arousal strategies with a further reduction in demands, stimuli and interactions
- Provide access to sensory activities/resources which regulate the student
- Allow more space for the student
- Take deep breaths, think positively (e.g. 'The student is not doing it on purpose', 'I can help them through this').



When a person is drowning is not the time to teach him to swim.

(Ginott, 1969, p.85)

### Peak stage (safety strategies)

Describe what the student is doing at peak stage (e.g. hitting, kicking, head-banging)

Note that at this stage the student may have little control over their behaviour. Their body is in flight/fight/freeze

### Response reminders for supporting adults

- Support mutual regulation and model how to stay calm
- Respect their space, remove other people and remove any dangerous objects
- Provide cushions to reduce likelihood of injury
- Minimise interaction
- Be aware of your nonverbal cues which could be perceived as threatening e.g. you might wish to sit down
- Ensure you use strategies to remain calm yourself
- Wait calmly for the student to de-escalate
- Remember not to take this personally

### Recovery (de-escalation and repair strategies)

Describe what the person is doing now they are feeling calm. For example, lies down, falls asleep, apologises, or they may have no recollection of their behaviour

### Response reminders for supporting adults

- Allow student time and space to calm down
- Return to routine when student is ready
- Direct student to low demand and highly preferred task
- Take time to calm yourself
- Debrief with a colleague
- Schedule time to reflect on how to repair the relationship and prevent the cycle recurring
- This is **not** the time to talk through the events with the student

Figure 26: Reactive strategies to de-escalate and manage behaviour(s) of concern



## RESOURCE BOX 19

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - BEHAVIOURAL DEVELOPMENT

- *Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties: A Continuum of Support Guidelines for Teachers*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/40684/97bbea80d96b4057bf3f1f01107c7db4.pdf>
- *Positive Behavioural Strategies*  
<http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/positive-behavioural-strategies/>
- *Behaviour Management*  
<https://www.sess.ie/resources/behaviour-management>
- *NCSE Behaviour Resources*  
<https://ncse.ie/behaviour-resources>
- *Lives in the Balance. Collaborative Proactive Solutions*  
<https://www.livesinthebalance.org/>
- *The Reflective Journey: A Practitioner's Guide to the Low Arousal Approach.* McDonnell, A. (2019). Alcester: Studio III
- *Incredible Teachers: nurturing children's social, emotional and academic competence.* Webster Stratton, C. (2012). Seattle, WA: Incredible Years
- *What is Challenging Behaviour?*  
<https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/uploads/documents/Aspect%20Practice/PBS/Aspect-Practice-What-is-Challenging-Behaviour.pdf>
- *Positive Behaviour Strategies to Support Children and Young People with Autism.* Hanbury, M. (2007). London: SAGE Publications Ltd
- *Social Thinking*  
[www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com)
- *SCERTS® Model. Volume II Program Planning and Intervention*  
<http://scerts.com/>

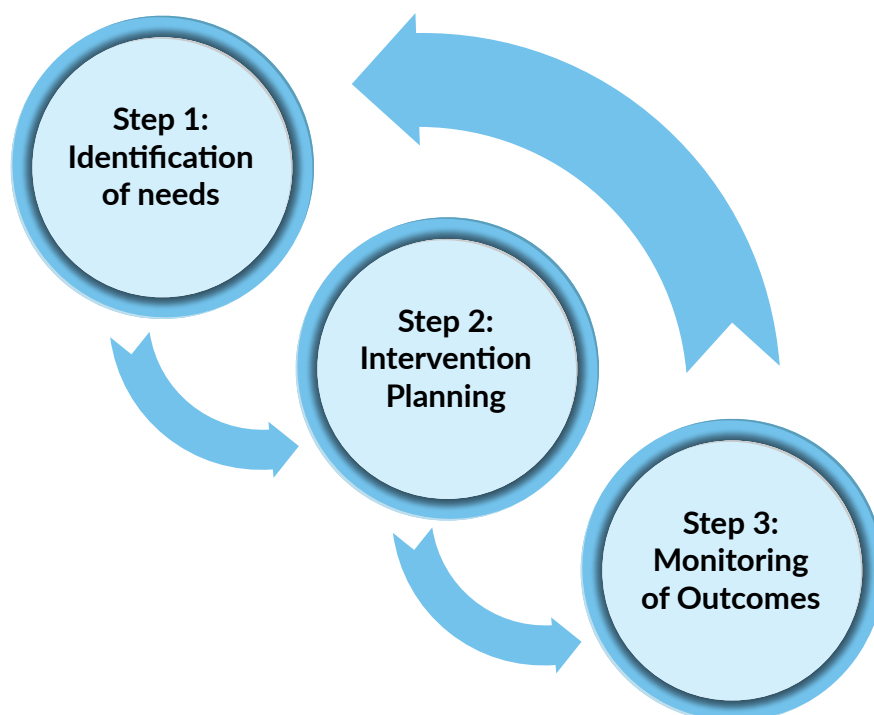


## Step 3: How can we monitor and record outcomes?

When adopting a holistic interactive approach to understanding and responding to behaviour, it is important that supporting adults reflect on their roles in intervening to improve behaviour (Table 3). Consistency in the promotion of behavioural development should be a focus of whole-school, class and individual intervention, in order to address difficulties students with autism can have in generalising new skills and coping with uncertainty.

Following the identification of needs process and an understanding of why the behaviour is occurring, appropriate targets and interventions are put in place within the Continuum of Support framework. These will focus on adaptations to the environment, interpersonal supports, and the development of prosocial behaviours/new skills. Hypotheses regarding why the behaviour is occurring should be kept under review, as these may change as understanding develops. This is particularly important for students with complex needs. The completion of the implementation and monitoring checklist (Appendix 5.9) can support the process of function-based assessment.

Progress in relation to behavioural targets within a pupil's Student Support Plan should be compared to baseline measures of the behaviour prior to the intervention and focus on recognising, reinforcing and celebrating success (every small step matters). A plan should be implemented for a number of weeks to enable incremental progress to be made. Progress can be observed through a reduction in the frequency, duration or intensity of the behaviour(s) of concern and an increase in the use of more appropriate skills/prosocial behaviour by the student. It is also important to consider the broader effect of improvements in behaviours of concern, which might include improved mood and coping skills, engagement in learning or improved social skills.







## BEHAVIOURAL DEVELOPMENT

### Points to Remember

#### STEP 1 - IDENTIFY NEEDS

Establish a shared understanding of what the behaviour of concern is, in observable terms, identifying when and where it occurs. Consider the interaction between a student's environment, interpersonal supports and their individual strengths/needs.

#### STEP 2 - MEET NEEDS

Focus on proactive strategies that will prevent behaviours of concern, or reduce their intensity and frequency.

Teach the student the skills required to communicate emotions and needs (e.g. asking for help) and scaffold and support their emotional responses.

Remove or reduce identified triggers/consequences for behaviours where appropriate (e.g. environmental modifications) and use students' strength and interests.

Ensure the student's needs are met (basic needs and needs across domain areas) and interventions are based on an understanding of the function of behaviour.

Ensure proactive and reactive strategies are part of a whole-school plan, communicated to all staff and implemented consistently across settings.

Adopt low arousal, reactive strategies and intervene with the least intrusive approach. Allow time and space for dysregulated behaviour to de-escalate and support recovery.

Use visual supports to clarify transitions, routines, expectations and rules.

Create a low arousal environment and consider reducing or removing demands, interactions and sensory stimulation as necessary.

Intervention may involve a combination of adaptations to the environment and interpersonal supports, a response to skills development needs and the use of positive reinforcement.

#### STEP 3 - RECORD AND MONITOR OUTCOMES

In collaboration with parents and students, carefully monitor the student's response to intervention by considering if behavioural goals have been met. Recognise and celebrate success and update the student's Support Plan as necessary.

Please see *Indicators of Effective Practice* to assist schools to reflect on their practice relating to Behavioural Development.





# A Closer Look

# Anxiety: A Closer Look

Van Steensel, Bögels and Perrin's meta-analysis reveals 'substantial comorbidity for anxiety in children and adolescents with an autistic spectrum disorder: nearly 40 percent were estimated to have clinically elevated levels of anxiety or at least one anxiety disorder.

(Van Steensel *et al.*, 2011, p.314)

When anxiety is experienced as overwhelming and persistent, it becomes a barrier to wellbeing, participation and learning. Students with autism may be more likely to experience anxiety as a result of:

- Difficulties in understanding and responding in social situations and communicating their needs
- Restricted patterns of thinking, insistence on 'sameness' or difficulty accepting change
- Feelings of lack of control over events and environments, particularly when these are unfamiliar
- Differences in sensory processing

The most prevalent types of anxiety relate to social anxiety, specific phobias and generalised anxiety problems. Students may display their anxiety in very different ways, for example, changes in their sleeping, toileting or eating patterns. Some may show increased rigidity or repetitive behaviours/language, while others may present with behaviours of concern such as increased social withdrawal, selective mutism, oppositional or self-injurious behaviour.

One of the most important things that a teacher can do to prevent anxiety is to get to know their pupils on the autism spectrum well so that they can 'read' their behaviour and anxiety level...another is to be aware of what contributes to any difficult situations for these pupils, including an awareness of the impact of how staff interacts with them.

(Middletown Centre for Autism, 2010, p.7)

If anxiety is not adequately managed it can adversely affect engagement, attendance and progress at school, the development of relationships, as well as the wellbeing and overall quality of life for both the student and their family. Therefore, it is important that school staff have an understanding of anxiety in general, its specific relevance to autism, and an awareness of strategies that can help in supporting students with autism to manage anxiety.



Anxiety is a common problem for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Recent research indicates that intolerance of uncertainty (IU) may be an important aspect of anxiety for this population. IU is the belief that uncertainty is upsetting, and not knowing what is going to happen is negative.

(Hodgson *et al.*, 2017, p.336)



Emotional  
Development

## Responding to anxiety across the Continuum of Support

Interventions to manage anxiety should in the first instance draw on and be informed by guidance set out in the Emotional Development section.

### Whole-school approach to promoting wellbeing

Prevention and intervention approaches to promoting emotional development and reducing anxiety are best supported within a broader whole-school approach to wellbeing and must be informed by an understanding of autism and anxiety. These include:

- Creating responsive, low arousal environments that are sensitive to the communication, social, emotional and sensory needs of students with autism and include routines, structure, predictability, as well as increased use of visuals and reduced verbal content, as appropriate to students' needs
- Providing curricular and other targeted approaches to enhance students' social, emotional and communication development through programmes such as *FRIENDS for Life*, the *Incredible Years* series and *Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support (SCERTS®)*



A whole-school approach to wellbeing is enhanced when supporting adults show a sensitivity and responsiveness to students' pattern of communication and interaction and are able to intervene early to support emotional regulation and prevent behaviours of concern. This is achieved in the context of positive, caring relationships that build a sense of belonging and connection and through collaborative engagement with parents and students.

## Understanding and responding to individual needs



It is important to understand the nature and level of the underlying difficulty when determining how best to respond. This is achieved through observation, collaboration with parents and other relevant professionals, as well as direct engagement with the student (e.g. facilitating situations where individuals can name/label their feelings and thoughts). The following problem-solving approach outlines a process to understand needs relating to anxiety, planning interventions and monitoring the student's response to the intervention.

### Understanding anxiety

Comprehensive information gathering helps to better understand the student's emotional needs and to identify factors that can trigger or exacerbate anxiety. Students may have strongly held, unique beliefs and perspectives that are very personal to them (sometimes referred to as core beliefs). This highlights the importance of listening to the views of students in order to better understand how they see and respond to situations. Relevant information may include:

A review of the environment to identify factors that may be impacting on the student's level of anxiety (e.g. the management of change and transitions, the impact of sensory stimuli)

Observations, interviews and ABC charts to consider the function of behaviours and to identify settings and triggers that are impacting on the student's anxiety. Checklists such as the *Anxiety Scale for Children - ASD* (ASC-ASD) can promote an understanding of specific situations/activities in which the student experiences anxiety

Approaches such as scaling to get the student's perspective on those factors that may be anxiety provoking (see [Emotional Development](#) domain)

Observation of any changes in individual presentation and mood which may indicate the onset of anxiety, including dysregulated or concerning behaviours (e.g. avoidant or oppositional behaviour), and physical signs (e.g. rapid breathing, sweating, outbursts or trembling, increased echolalia and increased levels of repetitive behaviours). For students who are preverbal it is important that supportive adults reflect on what may have caused anxiety (e.g. unexpected change, transitions, communication challenges, task frustration or sensory sensitivities). This process of reflection can be aided by consultation with parents and school staff

Identification of activities and interactions that are calming and help reduce levels of anxiety (see [Emotional Development](#) domain)

How anxiety presents is highly individual, for some students this may involve an increase in observable behaviours, whereas for others it may involve a reduction in, or the absence of behaviours, for example, anxiety-based selective mutism.



Many students with autism, particularly those who are preverbal, express themselves through their behaviour. There is a risk that interventions may focus more on reducing and modifying the behaviour that results from anxiety, rather than on understanding and responding to the triggers for the anxiety itself. To more fully understand and respond to their anxiety, consider the function of behaviour and what the student is attempting to communicate. In this context, it is helpful to consider what the behaviour achieves for the child, particularly if the behaviour results in the removal or avoidance of a situation or task that is anxiety provoking. Collaborating closely with parents and caregivers is particularly important as students with autism who are preverbal often have high support needs across other domains of functioning and across settings. Promoting students' emotional development is strengthened by understanding the support needs of those who care for them.



Behavioural  
Development

This anxiety may present as problematic behaviour and professionals and parents should be aware that certain types of behaviour can be caused by anxiety.

(Middletown Centre for Autism, 2010, p.10)

## Intervention planning

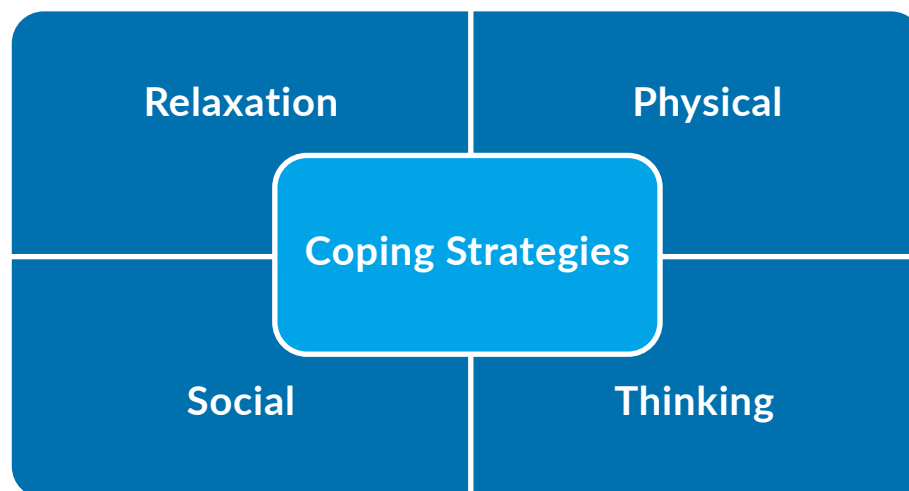
Good collaboration between teachers, students, parents and other professionals enhances intervention planning and provides opportunities to support generalisation of skills across contexts. Where possible, plans to address anxiety should be co-created with the student themselves using their own language and explanations, or through nonverbal means (e.g. talking boards). Teaching of practical strategies and coping skills is best achieved through individual instruction, repeated modelling and practice, paired with prompts (visual, written or audio) at a time when the student is calm. In addition to individual strategies, interventions to address anxiety are best supported within low arousal, well-structured learning environments where visual approaches are used to support learning and to enhance the structure and sequence of the day.

Visual teaching approaches that can strengthen supporting adults' efforts to address a student's anxiety, when using the *Physical, Relaxation, Social or Thinking* coping strategies, are detailed below:

- Illustrations of what the student or adult is describing help clarify the student's thought processes, make abstract thoughts more concrete, support the student to take next steps and serve as an aide-mémoire when reviewing how well the strategies worked for the student
- Scaling using visual rating scales, such as a thermometer (e.g. 0 – 'not worried at all' to 10 – 'extreme amount of worry') can be effective in helping students to identify and better understand their feelings
- Recordings (e.g. video or photographs showing next steps, audio recordings of helpful mantras or positive thoughts and affirmations) can provide supports for students to draw on in day-to-day situations. Positive coping statements can be recorded in the student's own words (e.g. coping cards), which describe a skill for managing worry (e.g. deep breathing/writing or decreasing negative self-talk)

- Resources such as *Facing your Fears (Fear Ladder)* or *When Anxiety Gets Overwhelming* can visually outline the steps a student is encouraged to take in coping with anxiety
- Clear lists for the student to refer to in overwhelming situations (e.g. Things I can control/cannot control) or the use of a *Worry Decision Tree* that outlines steps for distinguishing if this situation is an actual problem or a hypothetical event, and can help a student decide on an appropriate problem-solving strategy to use

Building upon the four coping strategies outlined in the Emotional Development domain, and based on an understanding of the student's individual needs, developmental level and nature of the anxiety, the following additional considerations may be helpful:



Where a child or adolescent presents with a moderate to severe mental disorder and autism, it is the role of CAMHS to provide appropriate multidisciplinary mental health assessment and treatment for the mental disorder. For a child or adolescent with an intellectual disability, their diagnostic and support needs are best met in HSE Social Care/HSE Disability Services. However, those children or adolescents with a mild intellectual disability with moderate to severe mental disorder are appropriate to be seen by CAMHS.

CAMHS Standard Operating Procedure (HSE, 2019, p.23)



**Physical coping strategies** - Offer varied opportunities for activities and physical exercise, bearing in mind that students with autism may be less likely to engage in regular exercise than their peers for a variety of reasons. Provide individually designed sensory and physical interventions to respond to arousal levels. These are often best delivered under the guidance of an occupational therapist (OT)

**Relaxation coping strategies** - Approaches that require the student to maintain a mindful focus on the here and now can reduce the influence of unhelpful thoughts. The use of guided muscle relaxation and visualisation approaches may be helpful. Teaching a student to slow their breathing can help regulate their physical experience of anxiety through slowing their heart rate, thus enabling them to more effectively implement *thinking* coping strategies. For students who are preverbal, include opportunities for students to exercise some independence, choice and control in the use of strategies (e.g. student using technology to dim lights themselves). In particular for students who are preverbal, the use of concrete activities is helpful to teach coping skills or use direct intervention to support the use of strategies when the student is anxious. Visual supports are of central importance in promoting students' understanding and use of relaxation coping strategies

**Social coping strategies** - Help-seeking on the part of the student can be supported by the use of communication aids (e.g. visuals/help cards), which not only assist preverbal students, but also assist more able students to communicate when dysregulated. Story-based interventions enable students to manage and cope with specific events and circumstances that are anxiety provoking. Identify specific ways for these students to express themselves when they are anxious, and importantly, introduce and practice these when they are happy/relaxed

**Thinking coping strategies** - Depending on the skills and level of understanding of the student, intervention to address anxiety can focus on their physiological and/or cognitive-behavioural experience. Cognitive-behavioural approaches can help students to explore the link between how they are thinking, feeling and behaving. These approaches can be used to carefully challenge unhelpful thoughts, which can alter their experience of anxiety and their ability to cope. In order to build upon their use of coping skills in subsequent situations, adults can support the review of situations where the student succeeded and/or struggled in coping, using practical resources such as comic strip conversations or role play using puppets. Cognitive-behavioural approaches can be strengthened by supporting students to understand the perspectives of others. To achieve this teachers can use practical resources e.g. Situation, Options, Consequences, Choices, Strategies, and Simulations (SOCCSS) to guide the student and/or their peers to modify their behaviour

Some individuals may respond well to more structured programmes. There are a number of manualised resources that teachers with specific training can use to address anxiety such as: the *FRIENDS* programmes, *Exploring Feelings*, and *Think Good Feel Good*. Some adaptations to these programmes may be required for use with students with autism (e.g. the use of more concrete and structured approaches including written and visual information, multiple choice worksheets and increased parental involvement) and are often best used in consultation with other professionals. The following are examples of resources that can be used to support interventions to address anxiety:



## RESOURCE BOX 20

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - ANXIETY

#### Identification and planning tools

- *Anxiety Scale for Children - ASD (ASC-ASD): Scoring Guide and Translations*  
<https://tinyurl.com/Anxiety-Scale-for-Children-ASD>
- *Therapy Leaflets*. Neurodevelopment and Disability Team (Newcastle University)  
<https://research.ncl.ac.uk/neurodisability/leafletsandmeasures/therapyleaflets>

#### Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) approaches

- *Exploring Feelings Series*  
<http://www.tonyattwood.com.au/books-by-tony/english-books>
- *The Secret Agent Society: Solving the Mystery of Social Encounters*  
<https://www.sst-institute.net>
- *The Homunculi Approach to Social Emotional Wellbeing: A flexible CBT Programme for Young People on the Autism Spectrum or with Emotional Behavioural Difficulties*. Greig, A. & MacKay, T. (2013). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- *The FRIENDS Programs*  
<https://www.friendsresilience.org>
- *Think Good Feel Good: A Cognitive Therapy Workbook for Children and Young People*. Stallard, P. (2002). England: John Wiley & Sons
- *Pesky gNats*  
[www.peskygnats.com](http://www.peskygnats.com)

#### Other strategies and resources

- *Energy Accounting System*. Toudal, M. (2017)  
<https://www.middletonautism.com/social-media/energy-accounting-6-2020>
- *When My Autism Gets Too Big! A Relaxation Book for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Dunn Buron, K. (2004). Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.
- *Worry Decision Tree*  
<https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/worry-decision-tree/>
- *Facing Your Fears (Fear Ladder)*  
<https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/facing-your-fears-cyp/>
- *When Anxiety Feels Overwhelming*  
<https://research.ncl.ac.uk/neurodisability/leafletsandmeasures/tipsformanaginganxiety/When%20anxiety%20feels%20overwhelming.pdf>
- *Developing and using Coping Cards*  
[http://anxietycanada.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/coping\\_cards\\_-\\_anxiety\\_canada.pdf](http://anxietycanada.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/coping_cards_-_anxiety_canada.pdf)
- *Overcoming My Fear: Exposure*  
[http://www.shared-care.ca/files/Anxiety\\_BC\\_Exposure.pdf](http://www.shared-care.ca/files/Anxiety_BC_Exposure.pdf)



- *Coping with Uncertainty in Uncertain Times*  
<https://research.ncl.ac.uk/neurodisability/leafletsandmeasures/copingwithuncertaintyinuncertaintimes/>
- *Manage Your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide*. Butler G. & Hope T. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press
- *The ASD Girls Wellbeing Toolkit: An Evidence-Based Intervention Promoting Mental, Physical and Emotional Health*. Rae, T. & Such, A. (2019). London: Hinton House
- *Anxiety Management for Kids on the Autism Spectrum: Your Guide to Preventing Meltdowns and Unlocking Potential*. Lynch, C. (2019). Arlington, TX: Future Horizons
- *Strategies: Major Life Changes Including Bereavement and Parental Separation*  
<https://managing-change.middletownautism.com/strategies/major-life-changes/>
- *Case Studies Covering Topics such as Bereavement, Transitioning Between Separated Parents*  
<https://managing-change.middletownautism.com/case-studies/>
- *Autism and Managing Anxiety: Practical strategies for working with children and young people*. Middletown Centre for Autism (2021). Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual: 2nd Edition*. Johnson, M., & Wintgens, A. (2016). Bicester: Speechmark.

## Monitoring outcomes and referral pathways

As part of a problem-solving approach, students' response to intervention should be carefully monitored and adaptations made to the Student Support Plan as necessary. Monitoring and review are best conducted in collaboration with students and their parents.

Most individuals will respond to environmental and individualised interventions to reduce their level of stress and anxiety, however, some students may continue to experience difficulties. Schools may consult with their assigned National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist to support the development of a more detailed understanding of students' needs.

Parents may also wish to discuss their son or daughter's experience of anxiety with their GP, who may consider onward referral to clinical supports through the local HSE Primary Care or Network Disability team. The GP may also recommend an onward referral to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for more specialised interventions. Psychological interventions provided under professional supervision through therapeutic services may include systematic desensitisation (or gradual exposure, in the context of using supportive relaxation strategies) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). In some instances interventions may be supported by prescribed medication.

# Transition Across Settings:

## A Closer Look



Transition may involve a move from one activity to another (known as horizontal transition), from one place to another and/or from one educational setting or stage of life to another (known as vertical transition). This section focuses on vertical transitions which may be intermediate (e.g. year to year within school), or more long term (e.g. preschool to primary, primary to post-primary).

Vertical transitions can be particularly challenging for autistic students because of their need for structure, familiarity and routine. Poorly managed transitions can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of students with autism and can lead to anxiety. Therefore, teachers, parents and students, should carefully prepare and plan in advance of transition, in order to promote wellbeing and maximise the likelihood of a successful start in the new educational environment.

Key transitions may include:

Starting school – moving from family or early years setting to formal education in a mainstream class, special class or special school

Moving from primary to post-primary school

Changing schools – moving between special and mainstream education settings

Planning for life after school - this can include moving to further, vocational or higher education settings, entering the workforce, or in the case of students with high support needs moving to settings such as those provided by the National Learning Network or HSE rehabilitative training programme/HSE adult day services

### Planning for transition

Transitioning is best viewed as a process over time, rather than a single event. Advance preparation and planning minimises stress and provides reassurance to all involved. Skill development is central to effective transition planning. It can take time and practice for many students with autism to become fluent in demonstrating independent and adaptive skills. Target setting can focus on promoting these skills throughout a student's time in school to support future transition. Relevant targets should be recorded in the Student Support Plan and used to document progress toward effective transition over time. Considerations for effective transition planning are set out below:



**Table 7: Considerations to support transition planning for students with autism**

- Has planning commenced in good time (i.e. ideally at least two years in advance)?
- Have the views of parents, teachers and the student with autism been considered in relation to placement options?
- Are parents, teachers and students clear about their roles and responsibilities in preparing for transition and the timeline in relation to transition-related actions?
- Have visits been made to prospective placements to gather information on the new school/setting?
- Have relevant external professionals been consulted for their views on the student's needs and the supports required to assist with the transfer to the new setting?
- What information and skills does the student require to enable them to make a successful transition? (E.g. a student with poor personal organisational skills would benefit from direct teaching in relation to using a locker or organising books and materials prior to transition to post-primary school)
- When a decision has been made on placement, have arrangements been made for the student to visit and familiarise themselves with the new educational setting?
- Has relevant information (e.g. key staff members, map of school, information on class organisation, locker system and personal organisational and logistical matters relating to books and materials) been gathered and shared? This information can be collated in a booklet or folder for the student
- Has the student had an opportunity to develop a student passport that provides information on their strengths, challenges and interests and which can be shared with the receiving school/setting?

## The perspectives of the student

The views, thoughts and expectations of the student should be a central part of the transition process. Completing a student passport is an effective way to record information from the child or young person's perspective. This allows the student to describe what they are good at, what they find difficult, and how others can help them. It can also be used to outline any sensory difficulties and task/activities that are challenging for the student. For many students, a Person-Centred Planning approach (PCP) is the most effective way to support a student and their family to establish personal goals and targets around their education and future goals (see [Appendix 1](#)).



## The views and expectations of parents/caregivers

Parents should be supported to explore the placement options available and how the needs of their child might be met in these settings. Teachers and other professionals (e.g. NCSE Special Educational Needs Organisers [SENOs], National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologists) should work collaboratively with parents in identifying suitable placements available within local areas. Parental hopes, expectations and concerns should be explored as part of transition planning. Parents' knowledge of their child/young person's abilities, strengths, areas of difficulty, added to their experience of how their child/young person learns best, provides very valuable information to support the transition process.

## The views of teachers and other professionals in the transition process

Liaison, preparation and planning, involving parents, teachers and other professionals where appropriate e.g. occupational therapist (OT), speech and language therapist (SLT), psychologist, helps to ensure that all necessary supports and structures are in place for a successful transition. Transition is best supported when school staff have a clear understanding of the needs of the individual student and what helps. All relevant information should be shared with key staff in the new setting to support the move.

Schools should draw up a post-school transition plan for students with autism as part of their individualised education planning. This should refer to the necessary links to post-school specialist services or further and higher education institutions as appropriate.  
(NCSE, 2015, p.92)

## Planning for life after school

*Planning for Life after School – Guidelines for Students with Special Educational Needs and their Parents/Guardians* (NCSE, 2016) emphasises the importance of post-school transition planning and provides comprehensive guidance on the full range of educational and support options available to suit students of different levels of ability and interests. This includes guidance for those students who may wish to go straight to work after school. Autistic students should be encouraged to develop their levels of independence during their time in post-primary school to help prepare for life beyond school. Targets to help develop skills required for work and further/higher education can be included in Student Support Plans. School guidance counsellors can support autistic students when considering different career options and making plans for the future. There are a range of post-school options for students with autism including further education and higher education options. Students can apply via the Central Applications Office ([www.cao.ie](http://www.cao.ie)) or may be eligible for the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme ([www.accesscollege.ie](http://www.accesscollege.ie)). Many colleges and universities have their own disability support services which can assist autistic students when they commence their studies.



While many autistic students will pursue further and higher education options, or may take up employment, some may need additional individualised support after school to enable them to achieve their potential and live as independently as possible. Post-school opportunities supported by HSE Rehabilitative Training Programmes or HSE Adult Day Services aim to develop life skills and basic work skills, and can be a stepping stone to further training or entry into the workplace. The HSE Occupational Guidance Service is available to help students with autism to find a post school training option appropriate to their strengths and needs by liaising with the student, their parents and their school.

## RESOURCE BOX 21

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - TRANSITION ACROSS SETTINGS

#### General transition supports

- *Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs to make Successful Transitions – Guidelines for Schools*  
<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/5-NCSE-2016-Supporting-Students-final-web-27.01.16.pdf>
- *TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP)\**
- *Transition – Research Bulletin Issue No.1.* Middletown Centre for Autism  
<https://www.middletownautism.com/research/research-bulletin/download/1>
- *Transitions Volume 2 - Research Bulletin Issue No.14.* Middletown Centre for Autism  
<https://www.middletownautism.com/research/research-bulletins?page=2>
- *Framework for Collaborative Working between Education and Health Professionals*  
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/progressing-disability/education-and-health-framework-for-collaborative-working.pdf>
- *Supporting Learners with Autism During Transition: Practical Strategies, Resources and Case Studies to Support Transition from Early Years to Primary School and from Primary School to Secondary School*  
<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-11/Supporting-learners-with-autism-during-transition.pdf>

#### Transition from pre-school to primary school

- *Starting School – Guidelines for Parents/Guardians of Children with Special Educational Needs*  
<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/02155-NCSE-Starting-School-Guidelines-final-08.02.16.pdf>
- *Mo Scéal: Moving from Preschool to Primary Templates*  
<https://ncca.ie/en/early-childhood/mo-sc%C3%A9al/mo-sc%C3%A9al-reporting-templates>



### Transition from primary to post-primary school

- *Supporting Children with ASD/Social Communication Difficulties – Transition from Primary to Post-Primary School – An Information and Support Pack for Parents and Teachers*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/41310/df9861ca41154cb08e45749440a330af.pdf>
- *Post-Primary Transfer Review*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/41308/02c61fbd32ad4e189f8657d15a1d8c40.pdf>
- *Transition to Post-Primary School Sample Transition Programmes*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/41309/13720c1f01774ab9b5a167b6942ee4f7.pdf>
- *Education Passport*  
<https://www.ncca.ie/en/primary/reporting-and-transfer/education-passport>
- *Changing Schools: Moving from Primary to Post-Primary School – Guidelines for Parents/Guardians of Students with Special Educational Needs*  
<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/02156-NCSE-2016-Changing-Schools-PrimarytoPost-final-08.02.16.pdf>
- *Mentoring a Young Person in Post-Primary School*  
<https://assets.gov.ie/41321/acc32df494e94d4ea8765faf909abc48.pdf>

### Transition to further/higher education and/or adult services

- HSE occupational guidance service is accessible through local HSE disability services  
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/>
- *Planning for Life after School – Guidelines for Students with Special Educational Needs and their Parents/Guardians*  
<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/4-NCSE-2016-Life-After-School-final-web-27.01.16.pdf>
- *Careers Advice and Employment Support*. AsIAM  
[www.asiam.ie/i-am-a-person-with-autism/employment-bodies-and-opportunities](http://www.asiam.ie/i-am-a-person-with-autism/employment-bodies-and-opportunities)
- *All About Me*. AsIAM  
[https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ASIAM\\_AllAboutMe-1.pdf](https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ASIAM_AllAboutMe-1.pdf)
- *Autism and Post Primary Education – Preparing for Adulthood – Research Bulletin Issue No.19*. Middletown Centre for Autism  
<https://www.middletownautism.com/research/research-bulletins?page=2>
- *Post School Education and Training – Information on Options for Adults and School Leavers with a Disability*  
<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/NCSE-Post-School-Education-Training.pdf>
- *Top Tips for Teachers to Support Post 16 Transition*  
<https://www.middletownautism.com/social-media/supporting-post-16-transition-2-2022>

\*See Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) section for more information.



# Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) for Students with Autism: A Closer Look

Building and maintaining personal and intimate relationships is a key developmental goal for young people. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), as part of the curriculum, provides opportunities for students to learn personal and social skills and supports their personal development, health and wellbeing. It helps them create and maintain supportive relationships, while nurturing sensitivity to the feelings and rights of others. RSE is an integral part of SPHE, where students are taught the skills needed to navigate the transition through puberty and adolescence, and to develop their understanding of interpersonal relationships. All schools are required to have an RSE policy to detail how it is taught in the school. This policy is an approved approach to the teaching of RSE and should include the rationale for using materials of a sensitive nature, in the context of the SPHE curriculum. The *Stay Safe* programme, which was introduced in primary schools in the 1990s and updated in 2016, forms a key part of RSE. The Professional Development Service for teachers has a list and links of all the *Stay Safe* resources <https://pdst.ie/primary/healthwellbeing/RSE>.

Due to differences in social communication and sensory processing, students with autism face a number of additional challenges in personal development, including adjustment to physical changes associated with puberty, and in building and maintaining relationships.

Young adults with ASD may have limited opportunities to develop appropriate behaviour and access appropriate information in relation to sexuality and developing close personal friendships and relationships. As a result of this some young people may present with inappropriate behaviour in close relationships or have a poorly formed concept of what constitutes a personal relationship. Having a poor concept of what constitutes appropriate intimate behaviour can also leave the young person open and vulnerable to being involved in exploitative and potentially damaging relationships.

(Middletown Centre for Autism, 2011, p.5)

Young people typically glean much of their knowledge about relationships and sexuality through incidental learning, for example, through the way people around them interact and relate, and by watching TV and online content. Incidental learning can be a challenge for many people with autism and it is essential that they receive explicit teaching in topics such as relationships, puberty and sexuality. Parents and teachers can support young people with autism in the challenge of adjusting to the many physical and emotional changes that occur during puberty. This involves helping

young people to be aware of and understand body changes, hygiene, privacy rules, personal space and distance, relationships and consent. Boundaries related to body (private parts), space (private places), and topic (private subjects), as well as physical forms of affection and closeness, need to be explained and reinforced (Middletown Centre for Autism [MCA], 2011).

When teaching RSE to students with autism, it is important to consider and understand the impact of autism on their learning and to use evidence-informed teaching approaches. This includes the use of visual approaches, *Social Stories™* and RSE materials that have been developed for young people with autism. Students with autism and co-occurring learning difficulties are likely to require more concrete learning materials to aid their understanding of the topics. *Sexuality and Relationship Education for Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Hartman, 2013) is a specific resource that teachers and parents can use with this cohort of students. Teachers and parents need to ensure that the resources match the learning profile, developmental level and changing needs of students and then adapt the content and teaching approaches to suit individual needs. Good communication with parents is important in helping students to develop their understanding and transfer skills to new contexts. Positive behaviour supports may be needed to prevent or respond to behaviours of concern (e.g. touching private parts of their body, using sexualised language).

RSE programmes typically include the following topics:

**Puberty:** Outlining how hormonal changes lead to physical changes in one's body; understanding the reproductive process

**Public versus private:** Recognising how to identify public and private spaces; understanding the expected behaviours in different environments

**Relationships, including different types of relationships:** Understanding the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour; recognising healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships

**Sexual activity:** Understanding why and when people have sex, safe sex, and how people talk about sex

**Consent:** Understanding different types of boundaries and what consent means, including when and how to ask for consent; saying no when asked for consent and how to respond when someone says no to you

**Online relationships and safety:** Appreciating what information to share online and how to manage online activity, including online dating; dealing with negative interactions

**Sexual orientation and gender identity:** Outlining terms used to explain gender identity and sexual orientation; signposting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex + (LGBTI+) community resources; developing an understanding of 'coming out', social acceptance and dealing with discrimination



The following are examples of resources that can support the teaching of RSE to students with autism:

## RESOURCE BOX 22

### SUPPORTING INTERVENTION PLANNING - RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION:

- *Sexuality and Relationship Education for Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders; A Professional's Guide to Understanding, Preventing Issues, Supporting Sexuality and Responding to Inappropriate Behaviours.* Hartman, D. (2013). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Practical teaching advice geared towards the needs of young people on the autism spectrum



- *The Growing Up Book for Boys: What Boys on the Autism Spectrum Need to Know!* Hartman, D. (2015). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

This book explains the facts behind the growth spurts, body changes and mood swings of adolescence for boys aged 9-14 on the autism spectrum



- *The Growing Up Guide for Girls: What Girls on the Autism Spectrum Need to Know!* Hartman, D. (2015). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

This is a guide for young girls on the autism spectrum explaining all they need to know about puberty and adolescence



- *A PHSE Programme for Learners with Autistic Spectrum Disorders.* Speirs, F. (2015)

A programme of Social Personal and Health Education. This is specifically designed for children with autism and can supplement an existing programme



- *Sex and Relationship Education. A visual programme for learners with Autistic Spectrum Disorders or Learning Disabilities).* Speirs, F. (2015)

This resource covers the following areas: The physical self, emotions, relationships, sexual expression, life choices, staying safe



- *Books Beyond Words Series: Relationships Mini Set*

These books are aimed at people who find pictures easier to understand than words (suitable for those with learning or communication difficulties)

<https://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/book-sets/relationships-mini-set>



- Information from the BeLonG To Youth Services supports LGBTI+ young people <https://www.belongto.org/>.

- *Autism Spectrum Disorder: Relationships and Sexuality - Research Bulletin Issue No. 5.* Middletown Centre for Autism  
<https://www.middletownautism.com/files/uploads/d025395b6bc81ccff53f90757e3f9235.pdf>

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- *Autism Spectrum Disorder: Relationships and Sexuality Vol 2 - Research Bulletin Issue No. 22.* Middletown Centre for Autism  
<https://www.middletownautism.com/files/uploads/8f551e36c9c14931e240c215388cf7dd.pdf>



Teacher  
Professional  
Learning  
(TPL)

It is recommended that teachers access appropriate training and guidance in the area of RSE and autism. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and MCA provide Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) on RSE.

# Digital Learning and Assistive Technology for Students with Autism: A Closer Look

Digital learning refers to 'embedding of digital technologies within learning, teaching and assessment practices in a school' (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p.3). School supports and interventions in this area are guided by the *Digital Learning Framework* (2018-2019) which has been developed to assist primary and post-primary schools in effectively embedding digital technologies into teaching and learning. Assistive technology refers to any piece of equipment, software, or system that is used to maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of students with additional needs, including autism and can assist with learning and interaction. This can include devices such as alternate keyboards and mice, voice recognition software, monitor magnification software and text to speech options.

Digital learning and assistive technology support effective teaching, learning and the participation of all students. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2011) highlighted that these approaches support high-quality education for learners with disabilities by providing alternative means of communication, increasing motivation for learning, and providing convenient access to educational resources. These technologies can also be used effectively to support interventions that address social, communication, behaviour, joint attention, cognitive, academic, motor, adaptive and vocational skills for students with autism (Odom, 2013).

## Factors to consider when using digital learning and assistive technology

Wynne *et al.* (2016) highlighted a number of factors to support the effective use of digital learning and assistive technology (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], Research Report No. 22). Assessment and ongoing monitoring are important to help identify a suitable match between the student, the digital learning approach/assistive technology device and the school environment. The views and preferences of the student should be a central consideration of this process, for example, autistic students tend to have a preference for assistive technology. Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) and support for teachers, parents and the student are also important to maximise benefits and to ensure continued use of the technology. Students' access to relevant technology should be maintained throughout their schooling. Guidance from the Department of Education for schools on the eligibility criteria and purchase of assistive technology is contained in the *Circular No 0010/2013*:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/cf55735bb8004e2d8a3b195c717c7259/>

Schools can apply for assistive technology from the NCSE by accessing this link:

<https://ncse.ie/for-schools>.



**Universal and targeted interventions**

Digital learning and assistive technology should be viewed within a Universal Design for Learning Framework, to ensure that all learners can participate effectively in classrooms and schools and access curriculum and learning resources.

**Universal interventions**

Digital learning and assistive technologies can assist students to:

Support learning e.g. using a laptop to take notes, using spellcheck, text reading or speech recognition software, provide practice and consolidation opportunities
Stay organised (e.g. calendars, schedules, alarms, organisational apps)
Communicate in a variety of ways e.g. messaging apps
Support social engagement e.g. social media apps
Manage stress e.g. music players, calming apps
Develop learning skills e.g. using the internet to research
Pursue interests e.g. internet communities

**Targeted interventions**

In addition to the universal interventions above, digital learning and assistive technologies can also be used as part of targeted interventions for some students to:

Promote independent learning and the development of students' interests
Be a source of shared enjoyment and create opportunities for social interaction
Support focused interventions, such as the use of smartwatches to manage emotional regulation through biofeedback
Support the increase of on-task behaviour through self-modelling and self-monitoring e.g. the Choiceworks app)
Facilitate Augmentative and Alternative Communication interventions (AAC) e.g. Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Proloquo2Go and Grace app
Support the teaching of more adaptive social skills through behaviour imitation and video modelling and feedback
Pursue interests e.g. internet communities





Teacher  
Professional  
Learning  
(TPL)

Information, guidance and TPL to support the use of digital learning and technology for students with autism is outlined in the following resource box:

## RESOURCE BOX 23

### SUPPORTING THE USE OF DIGITAL LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY

#### Organisations

- **Professional Development Service for Teachers**

*The Digital Learning Framework*

<https://www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/en/Planning/Digital-Learning-Framework/>.

For courses on promoting and supporting the integration of ICT in education see:

<https://www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie>

- **Middletown Centre for Autism**

*Assistive Technology, Apps and Autism - Research Bulletin No. 27*

<https://www.middletownautism.com/files/uploads/4bdd684c343385b250fa009cfce1c278.pdf>

- **National Disability Authority**

Research into the provision of assistive technology in Ireland

<http://nda.ie/Policy-and-research/Research/Research-Publications/Research-on-the-provision-of-Assistive-Technology-in-Ireland.html>

- **National Council for Special Education**

*Assistive Technology/Equipment in Supporting the Education of Children with Special Educational Needs - What Works Best? Research Report No. 22. Wynne et al. (2016)*

<http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NCSE-Assistive-Technology-Research-Report-No22.pdf>

For details on a range of seminars, and supports, list of Irish software providers and assistive technology, and information on grants for assistive technology

<https://ncse.ie>

- **Enable Ireland**

Assistive Technology Training and Workshops

<http://www.enableirelandat.com>

- **University College Cork (UCC)**

*Introduction to Assistive Technologies Course*

<https://www.ucc.ie/en/modules/ace/ad5834.html>

- **National Council for the Blind of Ireland**

Ireland's national sight loss agency provides support and training in relation to assistive technology

<http://www.ncbi.ie/technology>



- **Central Remedial Clinic**

Advises on assistive technology and specialized equipment for students with autism who may have a co-occurring physical disability

<https://www.crc.ie/>

- **Call Scotland**

Provide information and guidance on assistive technology resources to promote communication, access, literacy and learning

<https://www.callscotland.org.uk>

- **AHEAD**

Provides information on different types of technology for students with disabilities in higher education

<https://www.ahead.ie/assistivetech-students>

### Apps

- For information on apps for students with autism, a training seminar can be accessed through the NCSE: <https://ncse.ie>; also see:
- <https://www.callscotland.org.uk/common-assets/cm-files/posters/ipad-apps-for-complex-communication-support-needs.pdf>
- <http://touchautism.com/app/autism-apps/>

# Teacher Professional Learning (TPL): A Closer Look

The quality of teaching is the most critical factor in enhancing learning and educational experiences for all students, including those with autism (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and

Continuing professional development (CPD) or teacher professional learning refers to lifelong teacher learning and comprises the full range of educational experiences designed to enrich teachers' professional knowledge, understanding and capabilities throughout their careers. (The Teaching Council, 2011, p.19)

Development, 2005; National Council for Special Education, 2015). Support for students with autism is enhanced when all staff members engage in relevant professional learning to develop the capacity of schools to meet the diverse needs of students.

Professional learning is most effective when:

It is tailored to the needs of teachers and reflects their professional learning priorities

It includes access to rich and varied learning opportunities, involving both formal professional learning programmes and informal learning activities e.g. mentoring, shadowing, learning collegially, video professional learning or personal study in an area of interest

It provides opportunities for collaborative and individual reflection on aspects of professional practice

It facilitates teachers to apply and critically evaluate their learning from both formal and informal professional learning activities

It supports sharing of knowledge and competency with colleagues

Engagement in communities of practice provides opportunities for teachers to collaborate with others and share good practice in their own school and beyond. Schools and individual teachers should maintain a record of professional learning activities and review their progress in achieving stated goals within their professional learning plan and in meeting the needs of their students. The NCSE has developed a [tool](https://www.sess.ie/resources/cpd-audit-tools) for reflection on professional learning (<https://www.sess.ie/resources/cpd-audit-tools>) which aims to assist teachers by:

- Raising awareness of what professional learning courses are available from the NCSE
- Aiding reflection on individual teachers' knowledge and skills base
- Helping principals to review the existing skills and knowledge base among staff and facilitate planning to build further capacity



## Planning professional learning to meet the needs of students with autism

It is the role of school leaders to develop an inclusive whole-school approach to special educational needs (SEN) provision and to strategically plan for the professional learning needs of all staff. Schools should consider a broad range of programmes which are responsive to the professional learning needs of teachers and which reflect the different roles and responsibilities of personnel within the school:

**School leaders** – to promote a positive inclusive ethos, a culture of reflection and review in developing a whole-school approach to the education of students with autism

**All teachers** – to develop a good understanding of autism and adapt their teaching and classroom management approaches

**Teachers in specialist roles and settings** - to draw on an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the current evidence-based practices in the education of students with autism and adapt their teaching and classroom management approaches; to support, guide and mentor their colleagues as part of an inclusive whole-school approach to the education of students with autism

**SNAs** – to support the additional care needs of students

Schools can use different processes to review their professional learning needs and to plan suitable professional learning activities. For example:

- The school self-evaluation process which is used by schools to identify their professional learning goals over a two or three-year cycle, can be included in the school's learning plan (See [Appendix 8: School self-evaluation and identification of teacher professional learning requirements in relation to the education of students with autism \(NCSE\)](#))
- The use of the *Indicators of Effective Practice* enables schools to reflect on their provision for students with autism and to identify priorities for professional learning

## National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

The NCSE was set up to improve the delivery of education services to persons with SEN arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children. The Council was first established as an independent statutory body by order of the Minister for Education and Science in December 2003. The NCSE provides support to schools by providing resources, direct support to teachers, TPL seminars and communities of practice. The NCSE provides a comprehensive professional learning programme to support the education of students with autism including:

- Professional learning for school leaders to support their pivotal role as leaders of learning in their schools, including seminars for principals of newly established and existing autism classes
- Comprehensive programmes for mainstream class teachers and those in specialist roles and



settings to enable them to support students with autism in their classes using a thematic approach

- Staff learning with a focus on a whole-school approach
- In-school support and school visits that offer advice and supports relating to teaching and learning
- Seminar delivery in external venues
- Development of school-based learning communities that promote professional communication and sharing of best practice around the education of students with autism
- Publications of support materials
- A book-borrowing facility – see <https://www.sess.ie/ncse-support-service-book-borrowing>

## National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

Psychologists from NEPS provide individual casework and support and development initiatives to support schools to meet the needs of all children and young people, with particular recognition for those with SEN and those at risk of marginalisation. The latter involves work of a more preventative nature where the psychologist engages in consultation on good practice and/or programmes and policies to support effective provision for children with SEN, including those with autism. Psychologists may provide professional learning and support in areas such as transition planning, promoting wellbeing, use of positive behavioural approaches and managing anxiety. Psychologists may also participate in communities of practice with teachers of children with autism in order to problem-solve concerns and to discuss effective intervention strategies.

## Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA)

MCA is a specialist second-tier service funded by the Departments of Education in Northern Ireland and Ireland. It was established to support the promotion of excellence throughout the island of Ireland in the education of children and young people with autism. MCA's role is to complement and build on existing first level services. MCA offers a wide range of specialist research, information and resources on evidence-informed approaches and practice-based professional learning. The NCSE and MCA operate cooperatively around the provision of programmes of professional learning in the area of autism. MCA provides a comprehensive professional learning programme to support the education of students with autism including:

- Parent professional learning courses
- Specialist input into the NCSE programme of professional learning
- An annual applied programme of research-based professional learning and specialist seminars designed to meet the needs of experienced professionals and open to all teachers and related educational professionals

- In partnership with the NCSE, professional learning and support for individual schools in Ireland that request specific second-tier professional learning
- In partnership with the NCSE, a 'wraparound' programme, designed to complement and extend the NCSE introductory programme on autism specific topics and tailored for parents and teachers
- A two-day international conference, for teachers, parents and autistic people, organised on a cross-border basis, every two years
- Online learning resources and a virtual learning environment, covering topics such as Life Skills, Sensory Processing and Teenage resource. Please use this link to open the virtual learning portal <https://vle.middletownautism.com/>

For information on professional learning opportunities in the area of autism see:

## RESOURCE BOX 24

### FURTHER INFORMATION ON PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

#### MCA

- <https://vle.middletownautism.com/>
- <https://www.middletownautism.com/package>

#### NCSE

- <https://ncse.ie/teacher-professional-learning>
- <https://ncse.ie/middletown-centre-for-autism>
- <https://ncse.ie/school-support>
- <https://ncse.ie/teacher-resources>



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## Appendix 1

### Resources related to Person-Centred Planning (PCP)

#### Guides to using PCP:

- *Tools and resources to support implementation of the national framework for Person-Centred Planning services for persons with a disability.* Health Service Executive (2020)  
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/newdirections/person-centred-planning-framework-tools-resources.pdf>
- *Person Centred Planning.* Autism Education Trust (2012)  
<https://www.aetraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/PCP-toolkit.pdf>

#### Using PCP at times of transition

- *Starting School Resource Pack - A Guide for Teachers and Parents.* Beyond Autism: Outreach and Training  
<https://www.beyondautism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Starting-school-resource.pdf>
- *Leaving School - Transition Planning for Autistic Pupils*  
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/transition-adulthood>

#### Using PCP with students who do not use words to communicate:

- Developing 'Communication Passports' can support student's participation in school and beyond. For example: *Personal Communication Passports: Creating Passports.* Call Scotland (2012)  
<https://www.communicationpassports.org.uk/creating-passports/>
- Video footage demonstrating the use of communication tools. For example: *Communication Chart*, Helen Sanderson Associates (2020)  
<http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-thinking-tools/communication-chart/>
- PCP can be supported through the use of assistive technology



Digital  
Learning  
Closer Look

#### Adaptations to PCP approaches may include:

- Use approaches such as TEACCH, PECS and AAC to allow students who communicate in alternative ways to share their views
- Adapt terminology and visuals commonly used in PCP to enhance accessibility and understanding e.g. *Autism Minibook*, Helen Sanderson Associates and The National Autistic Society, (2009),  
<https://www.scie.org.uk/personalisation/specific-groups/autistic-spectrum-conditions>
- Use one-to-one opportunities to access the views of students with autism which can be fed back to meetings involving key staff
- Access the views of others who know the student well, when using PCP approaches

#### Example of PCP tools to monitor and review student outcomes:

- *Person-Centred Reviews Toolkit: A Guide for Early Years, Schools and Colleges in Wales.* Welsh Government (2015)  
<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-12/person-centred-reviews-toolkit.pdf>



## Appendix 2

### Adaptations to assessment process

The following considerations may be helpful in engaging students with autism in the assessment process, both formal and informal:

- Teachers should be trained in the administration of assessment tools and incorporate their understanding of the needs of students with autism in the testing process
- Students with autism often perform better on assessments that incorporate their interests
- In addition to standardised testing, draw on informal assessment approaches to capture rich information on the student's learning needs and strengths (e.g. observation, student work samples, student and parent interview, portfolio)
- Consider conducting assessments:
  - Across multiple sessions, as appropriate, in order to obtain a sample of the student's behaviour and skills
  - In a familiar setting with familiar people, as students with autism often have difficulty dealing with change across settings
  - In the most relevant setting, given difficulties students may experience in generalising skills (e.g. play and friendship skills are best evaluated in social situations)
- Provide students with information about what they can expect of the assessment situation using the means most appropriate to them (e.g. visual timetable, Social Stories™ or clear verbal/written instructions). A practice assessment may be helpful
- Students should be supported to make use of appropriate strategies to regulate their emotions in order to manage test anxiety. Students benefit from practice in the use of these strategies in advance
- Explain and teach key terms and expectations associated with assessment questions (e.g. discuss, evaluate, what is your opinion on?)
- Based on the student's level of engagement, attention, and cooperation, flexibility in the timing of assessment and the use of rest periods/additional time to complete tasks may be required, as appropriate
- Modify the environment in line with the student's sensory needs (e.g. appropriate lighting, sound levels, use of ear defenders/headphones)
- Rewards and reinforcement for engagement in assessment may increase a student's level of cooperation
- The use of timers, visual aids (e.g. colour coding the order of tasks to be completed in multi-step questions), and verbal/nonverbal redirection may be appropriate



Emotional  
Development

- Gather information about the student's skills or performance from multiple sources (e.g. support staff, parents, students themselves). Parents and support staff can provide important information about students' ability to generalise material learned to new settings and situations. Students with autism may share a perspective on their approach to a task or assignment which may give an insight into their problem-solving skills or level of understanding
- Use a dynamic approach to assessment to ascertain what a student can do independently, can do with assistance, or is unable to do at present
- Assess progress in aspects of learning and engagement that can be particularly challenging for students with autism (e.g. initiating tasks, sustaining effort, working independently without prompting, the process of drafting and redrafting work and learning from mistakes)
- Be mindful that the use of assistive technology and modifications during formative assessments may need to be reviewed for certificate examinations to ensure that it is aligned with State Examinations Commission (SEC) criteria

**Note:** Adopting a non-standardised approach when administering a test can invalidate the obtained scores. This can be avoided by first administering the test under standardised conditions.

*The above guidance was informed by Ryan (2018) and Virginia Department of Education (2011)*

## Appendix 3

### Template to support identification of needs and target settings within the Student Support Plan

#### Involvement of external agencies/professionals

Name of professionals/agency:	Nature and date(s) of involvement: Assessment/Intervention	Summary and recommendations (including details of strengths/ needs/diagnoses/co-occurring difficulties)
Psychology		
Speech and language therapy		
Occupational therapy		

\*Please list other professionals/agencies involved as required

#### Summary of school-based assessment

Date	Observations/data collected/tests administered and results

## Profile of skills, strengths and needs across domains

Domain	Strengths and needs identified in consultation with key members of staff and parents, and reflecting the views and experiences of the student
Learning Environment	
Language and Communication Development	
Social Development	
Emotional Development	
Sensory Development	
Functional Skills for Daily Living	
Academic Development	
Behavioural Development	

This information is then used to develop specific targets and interventions across the Continuum of Support within the Student Support Plan.

## Appendix 4

### Assessment tools for language and communication, social and emotional development, and life skills

Name of assessment tool	Language	Social Communication	Social skills	Emotion	Life skills	Age range	Free online	Link/further information	Specific training required
Social Communication Emotion Regulation Transactional Support (SCERTS®)	✓	✓	✓	✓		Developmental ages 8 months-10 years		<a href="http://scerts.com">http://scerts.com</a>	✓
CAT-GLD Basic Skills Checklist	✓		✓			Early development	✓	<a href="https://www.sess.ie/about-cat-gld-and-guidelines-use">https://www.sess.ie/about-cat-gld-and-guidelines-use</a>	
SESS functional language & communication resources	✓	✓				Early development	✓	<a href="https://www.sess.ie/resources/sess-functional-language-and-communication-resource">https://www.sess.ie/resources/sess-functional-language-and-communication-resource</a>	
My Child's Stage of Communication Development (Hanan)	✓	✓					✓	<a href="http://www.hanen.org/Site-Assets/_10_Special-Pages/soc-checklist.aspx">http://www.hanen.org/Site-Assets/_10_Special-Pages/soc-checklist.aspx</a>	
Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Early development	✓	<a href="https://agesandstages.com/">https://agesandstages.com/</a>	
Autism Social Skills Profile (Bellini,2006)		✓	✓			6-17years	✓	<a href="https://education.missouristate.edu/assets/access/BelliniAutism-SocialSkillsProfile.pdf">https://education.missouristate.edu/assets/access/BelliniAutism-SocialSkillsProfile.pdf</a>	
Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment & Placement Program (VB-MAPP)	✓		✓			Early development		<a href="https://marksundberg.com/vb-mapp/">https://marksundberg.com/vb-mapp/</a>	✓
The Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skill (ABLLS-R)	✓				✓	Birth to 12 years		<a href="https://www.appliedbehavioranalysisprograms.com/faq/what-is-an-ablls-assessment/">https://www.appliedbehavioranalysisprograms.com/faq/what-is-an-ablls-assessment/</a>	✓
Psychoeducational Profile (PEP-3)	✓		✓	✓	✓	6 months to 7 years		<a href="https://teacch.com/resources/assessment-tools/">https://teacch.com/resources/assessment-tools/</a>	✓
TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (T-TAP)			✓		✓	Adolescence early adulthood		<a href="https://teacch.com/resources/assessment-tools/">https://teacch.com/resources/assessment-tools/</a>	✓

Name of assessment tool	Language	Social Communication	Social skills	Emotion	Life skills	Age range	Free online	Link/further information	Specific training required
Social Options Consequences Choices Strategies and Simulations (SOCCSS)			✓	✓		Adolescents - early adulthood		<a href="https://teenage-resource.middle-townautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/09/3-SOC-CSS_Worksheet.pdf">https://teenage-resource.middle-townautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/09/3-SOC-CSS_Worksheet.pdf</a>	
Assessment of Functional Living Skills (AFLS)			✓		✓	Adolescents - early adulthood		<a href="https://functionallivingskills.com">https://functionallivingskills.com</a>	✓
Person Centred Planning tools			✓	✓	✓	Primary and post-primary	✓	<a href="http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/">http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/</a>	
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire			✓	✓		2 years-18+	✓	<a href="https://sdqinfo.org/">https://sdqinfo.org/</a>	
Cognitive Affective Training CAT Kit		✓	✓	✓		Primary and post-primary		<a href="https://cat-kit.com/en-gb/about">https://cat-kit.com/en-gb/about</a>	
Comfort Zones Profile			✓	✓	✓	Primary and post-primary	✓	<a href="https://www.zonesofregulation.com/">https://www.zonesofregulation.com/</a>	
Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) Profile	✓	✓	✓		✓	Early development/ preschool	✓	<a href="https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/AIM-Level-4-Access-and-Inclusion-Profile.pdf">https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/AIM-Level-4-Access-and-Inclusion-Profile.pdf</a>	



## Appendix 5

### Behavioural development checklists and templates

#### 5.1 - Basic needs checklist

A systematic approach should be taken to understanding behaviour, beginning by establishing whether or not a student's basic needs are met. The checklist below details how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be interpreted in understanding how underlying needs may be contributing to the behavioural presentation of a student with autism.

Basic needs: Have you considered?	Response to needs identified – Notes
<p><b>Physiological needs</b></p> <p>Could the student be...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• too cold, too hot, tired, hungry, need sleep or need to exercise?</li> <li>• in pain, or have unmet medical needs e.g. seizures, dental pain?</li> <li>• having a growth spurt or experiencing hormonal changes?</li> <li>• anxious, stressed or experiencing mental health difficulties?</li> <li>• reacting to sensory needs?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Safety needs</b></p> <p>Does the student...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feel emotionally and physically safe in class, the school yard and other shared spaces in school?</li> <li>• feel emotionally and physically safe about any changes or events in his/her life (e.g. house move/bereavement)?</li> <li>• have structures in place to ensure predictability (e.g. personal schedules)?</li> <li>• have key adults who model staying calm, problem-solving, and self-regulation?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Belonging and connectedness</b></p> <p>Does the student...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feel connected to his/her teacher(s), class and peers?</li> <li>• have a balance of time with peers and alone/down time?</li> <li>• have opportunities to link with same age peers and peers who have similar interests inside or outside of school?</li> </ul>	

<p><b>Self-esteem</b></p> <p><b>Does the student...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have a positive relationship with teacher(s), school staff and peers?</li> <li>• have schedules and reward charts that relate to their interests?</li> <li>• have a choice of tasks and activities that they can successfully complete and that build on their strengths?</li> <li>• have learning tasks differentiated to their needs that are developmentally appropriate and meaningful?</li> </ul>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Self-actualisation</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>When basic needs have been addressed a student will be more available to engage in and benefit from learning opportunities.</b></p>	

## 5.2 - Strengths and needs across domains checklist

Having addressed *basic needs*, it may be necessary to identify strengths and needs across domain areas, in order to understand and respond to behaviours of concern.

Identification of strengths and needs across domains	Response to needs identified – Notes
<p><b>Learning Environment: Have you considered...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student's needs in relation to transitions, rules, expectations and the use of visual approaches?</li> <li>• If the learning environment is appropriately structured and organised?</li> <li>• How low arousal approaches can be adopted to provide a calm, predictable, and structured environment?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Language and Communication Development: Have you identified...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student's attention, receptive, expressive and social/pragmatic language skill levels?</li> <li>• Language/communication needs, targets and interventions?</li> <li>• Adaptive strategies for the student to effectively communicate their needs?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Social Development: Have you identified...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student's social development skills, needs and priority targets and interventions?</li> <li>• Whether the student has the pre-requisite skills to support social interaction (e.g. turn-taking skills, waiting etc.)?</li> <li>• Effective ways to support interactions with others and build friendships?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Sensory Processing: Have you identified...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student's sensory strengths, needs, priority targets and interventions?</li> <li>• Any adaptations required to the school environment to meet sensory needs?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Emotional Development: Have you considered...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student's emotional development skills, needs and priority targets and interventions?</li> <li>• The student's ability to identify and label emotion in others and in themselves?</li> <li>• The strategies students use to regulate/cope with emotions and to problem solve?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Functional Skills for Daily Living: Have you considered...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working collaboratively with home to identify strengths, needs and targets related to daily living skills?</li> <li>• Working collaboratively with home to plan and implement interventions related to the student's daily living skills including self-care, leisure, functional academic and personal safety skills?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Academic Development: Have you...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used a range of assessment methods to gather information around academic strengths and needs?</li> <li>• Adapted assessment methods to suit the needs of students with autism?</li> <li>• Identified priority learning targets and adapted teaching approaches as part of the student's support plan?</li> </ul>	





## 5.4 - Function-based assessment template

Using the ABC chart (Appendix 5.3), consider the possible functions or communicative intent of the behaviour(s):

*What is the student trying to communicate through this behaviour?*

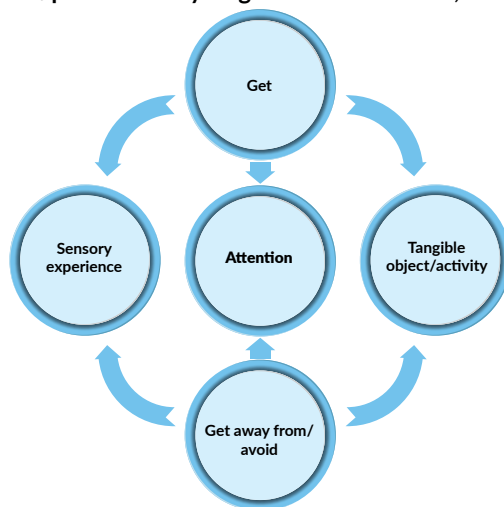
*How do you think the student is feeling before/during/after the behaviour?*

*How could the environment have impacted/what environmental changes might help minimise or prevent the behaviour?*

*What skills does the student need to learn or what unsolved problems might the student be experiencing in this situation?*

*What could adults do differently (e.g. interpersonal supports, skills development) to prevent the student using specific behaviours to fulfil the function(s) identified?*

**In absence of a more adaptive/prosocial way to get their needs met, is the student's behaviour an attempt to...?**



*Hypotheses: Possible function(s) of behaviour:*

## 5.5 - Evidence-informed interventions for skills development



**Stimulus control/environmental modification** involves adapting the environment or activity so that the environmental conditions no longer elicit the behaviour of concern. This might involve a range of strategies such as using the student's interests, changing schedules/routines, implementing pre-activity interventions, incorporating choice, adapting teaching strategies and/or the environment

**Functional communication training** involves teaching students communication skills to replace a behaviour of concern, arising from frustration due to the young person's difficulty with communicating their needs/wants. It might involve modelling certain phrases such as 'Help'/'I need a break' and providing students with visual support

**Self-management** focuses on students discriminating between appropriate and inappropriate behaviours, accurately monitoring and recording their own behaviours, and rewarding themselves for behaving appropriately

**Social narratives** (e.g. *Social Stories™*) are simple stories, written to help students with autism to develop a greater understanding of a social situation that they may have difficulties understanding or interpreting (e.g. how to cope with losing). They also seek to provide information related to particular situations, skills or concepts, and to improve perspective taking. Social narratives are individualised according to student needs

**Social skills training groups** involve group or individual instruction designed to teach students with autism the skills to interact appropriately with peers and adults. Most groups include direct instruction, role play and feedback to help students acquire and practice communication, play, or social skills

**Structured work systems** set out tasks in a sequential order and are visually organised for the student. One such system is the TEACCH programme and it is frequently used in special settings to reinforce on-task behaviour and the learning of new skills. Components of this programme may also be adapted for use in mainstream settings. This helps the student to know what they have to do, how much work this involves, and what to do next

**Video modelling** provides a model of the targeted skill and allows opportunity for the student to observe, imitate and practice the behaviour in real-life contexts

**Visual approaches** include communication symbols (e.g. wait, help); schedules (e.g. first, then); aids to support students' concept of time (e.g. visual timer, countdown strips) and reinforcement systems (e.g. choice boards). Visual approaches support students to process instructions and help to establish a safe and predictable school environment

**Differential reinforcement** involves the provision of positive/desirable consequences for behaviours or their absence that reduces the occurrence of an undesirable behaviour

**Examples of approaches taken to teach core skills are outlined at the following links:**

<https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/positive-behavioural-strategies/teaching-core-skills/>

[http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/1\\_NCSE-Supporting-Students-ASD-Schools.pdf](http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/1_NCSE-Supporting-Students-ASD-Schools.pdf)



## 5.6 - Basic needs template: Identification and response

Basic need	Identification of needs	Response to identified need
Physiological		
Safety		
Belonging and connectedness		
Self-esteem		

*Example:*

Basic need	Identification of needs	Response to identified need
Physiological	Following completion of basic needs checklist, sleep is identified as an area of need	Early morning timetable will be adjusted. Parents will link with multidisciplinary team around improving sleep. Home-school diary will be used to share information on sleeping patterns and to monitor behaviour.



### 5.7 - Strengths and needs across domains template: Identification and response

Domain	Identification of strengths and needs	Response to identified need
	What priority needs have we identified?	How can we respond to priority needs?
Learning Environment		
Language and Communication Development		
Social Development		
Emotional Development		
Sensory Processing		
Functional Skills for Daily Living		
Academic Development		

Example:

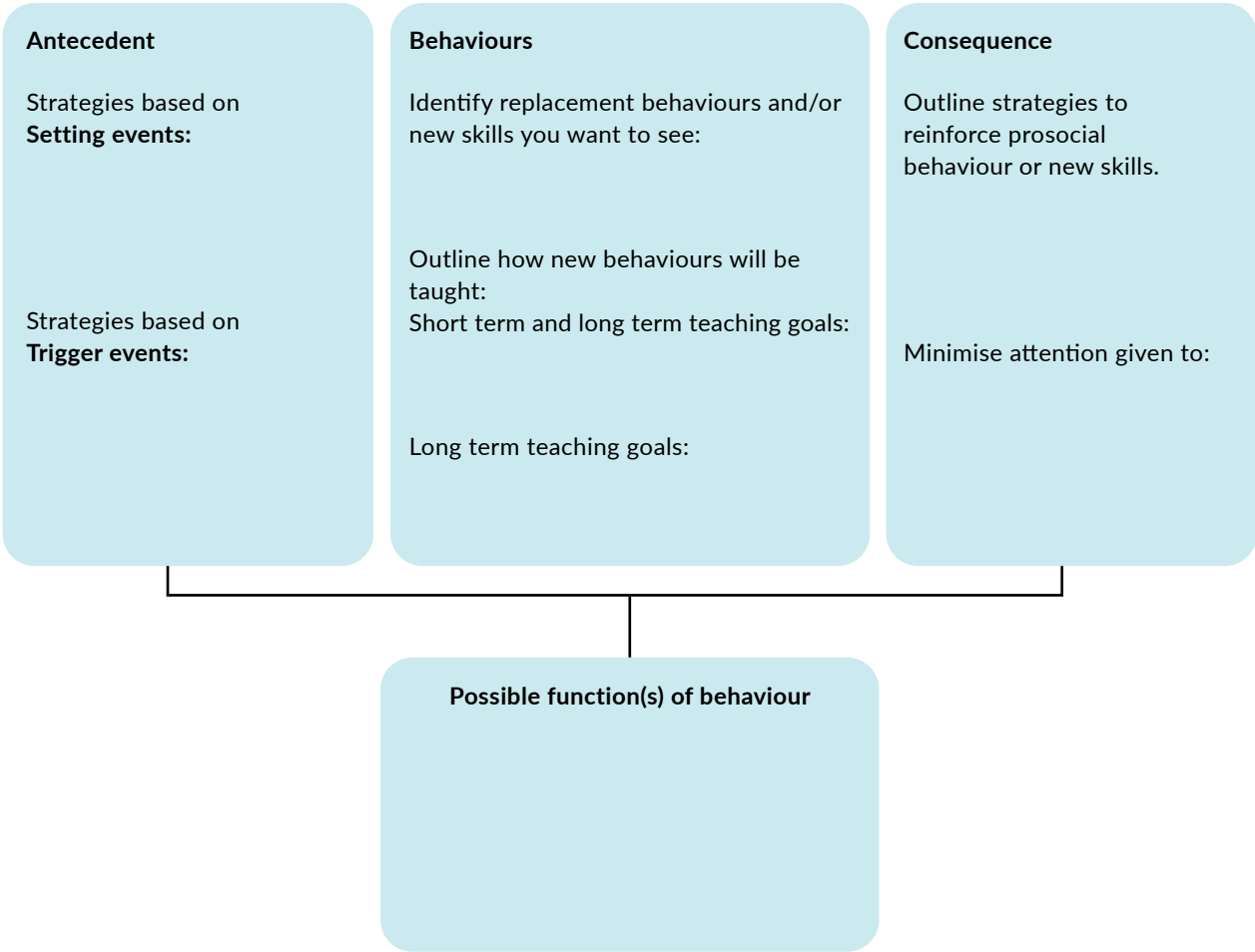
Domain	Identification of strengths and needs	Response to identified need
	What priority needs have we identified?	How can we respond to priority needs?
Learning Environment	Visual schedule is in place but student does not appear to be interested in it	Personalise visual schedule. Use student's favourite Paw Patrol characters on schedule

## 5.8 - Planning intervention based on data gathered and function-based assessment

**Guided by hypotheses based on the function(s) of the behaviour, plan interventions to target Antecedent, Behaviours and Consequences as appropriate.**

Draw on proactive strategies to prevent occurrence of behaviours of concern and to promote prosocial behaviours and new skills:

- Environmental adaptations (Table 2)
- Interpersonal supports (Table 3)
- Skills development needs (Table 4)
- Positive reinforcement (Table 5)



### 5.9 - Implementation and monitoring checklists for function-based assessment\*

Monitoring checklist for function-based assessment	
1. Have you collaborated with others, including the student, to identify and respond to behaviour(s) of concern?	
2. Have you defined the behaviour of concern in specific, measurable, observable terms?	
3. Do you have a baseline measure of the frequency, duration and intensity of behaviour?	
4. Have you prioritised specific behaviours of concern for intervention?	
5. Have you identified setting events and triggers that happen before the behaviour?	
6. Have you identified the potential function(s) of the behaviour?	
7. Have you matched functions to proactive intervention approaches? (I.e. environmental adaptations, skills development, interpersonal supports, positive reinforcement)	
8. Have you listed 1-3 specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timed and agreed (SMARTA) targets?	
9. Have you identified the steps involved in implementing proactive strategies (e.g. environmental adaptations, interpersonal supports, strategies that teach the student a replacement behaviour or new skill)?	
10. Have you planned for how the desired behaviour will be reinforced?	
11. Have you considered reactive strategies, if required?	
12. Have you set a date to review the intervention plan, allowing time for implementation?	

Task checklist	Who is going to organise this?
What needs to be organised before the intervention begins? (E.g. contact made with others who will be involved, Velcro bought for visual schedule, pictures printed)	



Implementation check: Weekly reminder for strategies	M	T	W	T	F
Decide what strategies from my plan need to be implemented on all/some days of the week: (E.g. present visual schedule each morning, give sticker for walking into school, use first-then schedule)					

Measuring behavioural change		
Behaviours of concern (describe as observed)	Changes in frequency, duration and/or intensity of behaviour	Broader improvements such as improved mood, coping skills, engagement in learning and/or social interaction

\*Resource is adapted from *What is Challenging Behaviour?* (Autism Spectrum Australia) <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/uploads/documents/Aspect%20Practice/PBS/Aspect-Practice-What-is-Challenging-Behaviour.pdf>

## Appendix 6

### Curricular frameworks in Ireland across early childhood, primary and post-primary education

Curricular framework	Description and link for further information
<b>Early childhood education</b>  Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009)	Aistear guidelines for good practice include building partnerships between parents and practitioners, children learning and developing through interactions and play, and supporting children's learning and development through assessment.  <a href="https://ncca.ie/en/early-childhood/aistear">https://ncca.ie/en/early-childhood/aistear</a>
<b>Early childhood education</b>  Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)	AIM is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with additional needs can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. <a href="http://aim.gov.ie/">http://aim.gov.ie/</a>
<b>Primary education</b>  Primary School Curriculum  (NCCA, 1999)	The Primary School Curriculum aims to develop each child's potential to the full, to encourage a love of learning and to help children develop skills they will use all their lives.  <a href="https://ncca.ie/en/primary">https://ncca.ie/en/primary</a>
<b>Primary and post-primary education</b>  Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities  (NCCA, 2007)	To assist teachers in meeting the needs of students with general learning disabilities, the NCCA developed guidelines for use in primary schools, special schools, post-primary schools and other educational settings. The guidelines seek to support schools and teachers in developing curricular experiences that are broad, balanced, relevant and differentiated  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/en/resources/sen_introduction">https://www.ncca.ie/en/resources/sen_introduction</a>
<b>Post-Primary Education</b>  Framework for Junior Cycle	The Framework for Junior Cycle contains 24 statements of learning, underpinned by eight principles that provide the basis for schools to plan for, design and evaluate their junior cycle programmes. The six key skills of the Junior Cycle are Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communicating, Being Creative, Working with Others, and Managing Information and Thinking. The key skills support students in reflecting on and taking responsibility for their learning  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle">https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle</a>

<p><b>Post-Primary Education</b></p> <p>Junior Cycle NCCA</p> <p>Level 2 Learning Programmes</p>	<p>The NCCA has developed Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LP) as part of the Framework for Junior Cycle that are designed for students who have general learning disabilities in the higher functioning moderate and low functioning mild categories. <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle">https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle</a></p>
<p><b>Post-Primary Education</b></p> <p>Junior Cycle NCCA</p> <p>Level 1 Learning Programmes</p>	<p>The NCCA has also developed Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LP) as part of the Framework for Junior Cycle that are designed for students with general learning disabilities in the range of lower functioning moderate to severe and profound categories</p> <p><a href="https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle">https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle</a></p>
<p><b>Post-Primary Education</b></p> <p>Senior Cycle (NCCA)</p>	<p>The Senior Cycle caters for students in the 15-to-18-year age group. It includes an optional Transition Year, which follows directly after the Junior Cycle. During the final two years of Senior Cycle, students take one of three programmes, each leading to a State examination: Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)</p> <p><a href="https://curriculumonline.ie/Senior-cycle/Curriculum">https://curriculumonline.ie/Senior-cycle/Curriculum</a></p>

## Appendix 7

### Developing reading comprehension skills

Gately (2008) has recommended the following approaches for helping students with autism to develop reading comprehension skills:

- **Priming background knowledge** – A teaching approach that proactively focuses on helping students connect information in text to what they already know by going through a text in advance
- **Picture walks** – A strategy suitable for texts with accompanying pictures and involves going through the pictures that accompany the story, making predictions about the story based on the pictures, and then looking to confirm those predictions
- **Visual maps** – An approach that appeals to the visual learning style of many students with autism. There are various types of visual mapping systems that can be used. A simple story map visually represents content relating to the setting, problem, characters and order of action within a story and the graphic is updated as the story progresses
- **Think aloud** – A modelling strategy within a broader reciprocal teaching approach where the teacher, via his or her own self-talk, models some of the main types of comprehension strategies such as predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarising. This provides scaffolding for students, making explicit how they need to approach a text to aid understanding. Visual recording of the information obtained through the think aloud process supports retention. While the teacher models strategies initially, the students are then required to talk about their own thinking in the same way, with teacher support as needed
- **Understanding narrative structure** – A visual mapping approach that seeks to order the narrative by identifying the main characters and their matched actions in a simple table

Who:	Did what:
Anna	Lost her dog
Anna's mother	Comforts her and helps her to find it



This information can be then transferred to a story frame which can be used to sequence the actions.


<b>This story is about</b>			
<b>First</b>	<b>Then</b>	<b>Next</b>	<b>Finally</b>
<b>What I liked about the story</b>			

- **Goal structure mapping** - An approach that sets out the order of the actions and how each character's actions influence the feelings and actions of others. It builds on the preceding work to develop an understanding of narrative structure. Goal structure mapping uses shapes, lines and arrows to organise the main events that have happened in a story but also how the actions of one character can influence the actions of another character. Emotion thermometers can help students to understand the intensity of feelings that may arise for characters based on events in the story. Teacher scaffolding and modelling is important as this is an area where students with autism can have difficulty arising from *Theory of Mind* and difficulties with social understanding

## Appendix 8

### School self-evaluation and identification of teacher professional learning requirements in relation to the education of students with autism (NCSE)

1	<b>For discussion</b>	<p>Consider whole-staff confidence and competence in teaching students with autism, school approaches to professional learning planning to date, and current professional learning priorities.</p> <p>Review what is working well and any challenges in supporting students with autism</p>
2	<b>Gather the evidence (staff self-evaluation)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reflection by teachers - reflection on professional learning for teachers supporting students with autism</li> <li>• School designed questionnaire for staff</li> <li>• Whole-staff and focus group discussions</li> <li>• Consider assessment reports (e.g. if PECS is recommended in professional report is there the expertise to apply same?)</li> <li>• Consultation and feedback from students and parents</li> <li>• Feedback from Inspectorate/NEPS/NCSE advisors</li> </ul>
3	<b>Analyse evidence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyse findings and feedback</li> <li>• Identify strengths and challenges for staff, groups and individuals</li> </ul>
4	<b>Consider requirements of provision for students with autism, match to existing competencies and identify professional learning needs required at whole-staff, group and individual teacher level</b>	<p>Consider practice and skills in supporting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive practice</li> <li>• autism-specific assessment</li> <li>• Differentiation of teaching and learning</li> <li>• Modification of the curriculum/alternative curricula</li> <li>• Specific knowledge and competencies associated with needs of individual students in relation to the learning environment, language and communication development, social development, behavioural development, emotional development, sensory processing, functional skills for daily living, academic development</li> <li>• Collaboration and teamwork</li> <li>• Collaborating with parents</li> </ul>



5	<b>Agreed approaches to enhance professional learning</b>	<p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alignment of professional learning with priority needs as identified above</li> <li>• Range of programmes/intervention approaches to meet the educational needs of students with autism from the various services</li> <li>• Nature of professional learning delivery (e.g. whole-school, workshop, process model)</li> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Ways of sharing good practice (e.g. presenting at staff meetings, joining cluster meetings for teachers in specialist roles facilitated by NEPS/NCSE)</li> <li>• Networking with other schools/parents</li> </ul>
6	<b>Timescale</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify clear timelines for each element of professional learning</li> <li>• Review existing structures/timetables to secure time</li> </ul>
7	<b>Monitoring implementation of professional learning and impact on</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek feedback from teachers, parents, students</li> <li>• Monitor students' progress: Formally and informally in consultation with parents and students</li> <li>• Agree ways to measure and record impact for student</li> <li>• Repeat questionnaires/focus groups at specific intervals</li> </ul>

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Special thanks to the DE Inspectorate, education partners and the stakeholders who contributed within the consultation phase of the development of this guidance document

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Catholic Primary Schools Management Association  
DCU School of Inclusive and Special Education  
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