

**Minimising Anxiety and Enabling Learning**  
Simple Strategies to Support  
Autistic Students in Secondary Schools

## Preface

I was diagnosed with autism when I started secondary school. Although having a diagnosis was helpful, there was no further support given as my needs didn't warrant an EHCP. I now have skills, strategies and experience to better deal with challenging situations, but it has not always been this way.

It took years' worth of trial and error to understand my needs. Whenever I would have a meltdown, my mum and I would have to dissect the situation, identify the reasons why I was overwhelmed and liaise with the school to come up with and implement supports. This cycle continued throughout most of my school career.

During Year 12, we were tasked to research and deliver a report or artefact of our choosing. Having wished I knew about I had known then earlier, I decided to research how to minimise anxiety amongst autistic students in secondary school so other students could benefit when they start secondary school. To make up for the lack of support, I created an easy-to-read guide that provides simple strategies for teachers to implement and utilises autistic student's experiences to show why these strategies are needed.

I hope that students and parents will read this to understand their needs and teachers to better understand their autistic students' needs.

If you find it useful, please pass it on.

By Hana Kinney

To get in touch, email [atypicalblossom@outlook.com](mailto:atypicalblossom@outlook.com)

[www.autisticineducation.com](http://www.autisticineducation.com)

Version 4.5 October 2023

© Hana Kinney 2023

# Contents

Introduction .....	4
The process for implementation .....	4
What is Autism? .....	4
The autistic person's experience .....	5
What educational impacts does Autism have on students? .....	5
Why are these strategies important? .....	6
The school environment .....	7
Orientation .....	7
Orientation day .....	7
Structure in the classroom .....	8
Priming .....	8
Visual priming in the classroom .....	8
Verbal priming .....	8
Additional priming strategies .....	8
Parents/carers and priming .....	9
Make the most of technology .....	9
Visual supports .....	10
Graphic organisers .....	10
Self-management tools .....	10
Dealing with unexpected situations: Social scripts .....	11
Discretion .....	11
Alert card and quiet room .....	11
Group work .....	12
Extracurricular activities .....	12
Hypersensitivities and distraction .....	13
Classroom layout .....	13
Allowance of supports .....	13
Useful Links: .....	14
Recommended books .....	14
References .....	15

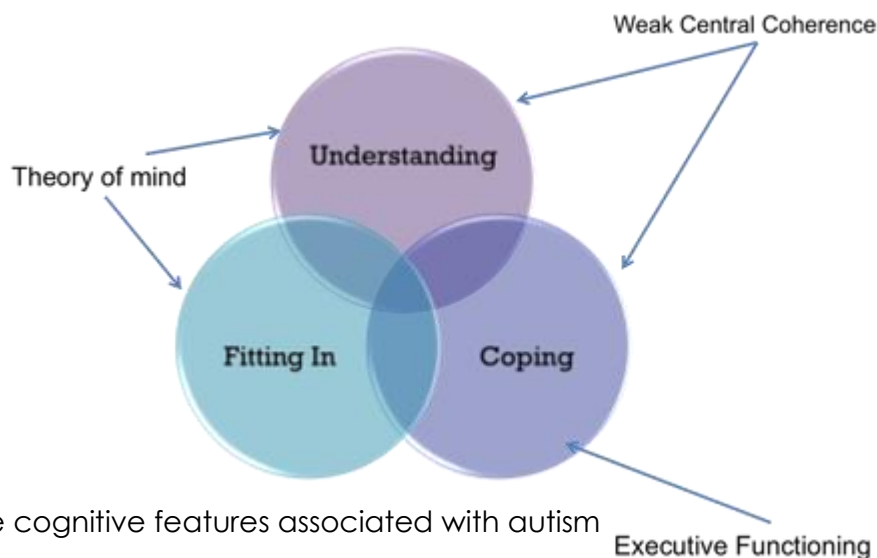


## The autistic person's experience

One of the main aims of this guide is to convey to teachers typical difficulties autistic students face at school so that they can see why the suggested strategies are important. For autistic students and their parents/carers, this guide may help identify sources of anxiety so that they can self-advocate. Throughout the guide, you will see coloured boxes which highlight these experiences.

### What educational impacts does Autism have on students?

Theory of mind, weak central coherence and executive functioning difficulties are underlying cognitive features associated with Autism. These cognitive features affect the way students process the environment:



The three cognitive features associated with autism  
(Hobbs, 2013)

- **Impairments recognising the mental states of others** (theory of mind) can result in difficulty understanding social interactions, relating to their peers and knowing what to do to fit in.
- **Hyper focus on the details of a lesson, piece of work or social situation,** (weak central coherence) can result in difficulty in understanding the big picture and coping when things change.

#### Hyper focus

This can manifest as "black-and-white thinking" where a student may take a teacher's instruction, the shame of a detention or talk of negative life outcomes very literally. This can result in an inability to move on in a task; or mental anguish in the belief that the failure is a reflection upon themselves.

#### Disorganised or poor executive function?

An autistic person may be completely unaware of upcoming deadlines. Long projects may be completely neglected due to the deadline being so far away. The student may also struggle retaining multi-step instructions meaning that they require them in written form.

- **Problems organising and coordinating multiple tasks** (poor executive function) can lead to difficulty coping with workloads, prioritising and displaying flexibility in problem solving.



## Why are these strategies important?

When completely overwhelmed and unable to escape a situation, autistic people can be prone to meltdowns or shutdowns. Another result of continuous stress is autistic burnout. Depending on the situation, students may react in the following ways:

- **Meltdowns** Similar to a 'fight' in the 'fight, flight or freeze' response, an autistic person will have increased levels of anxiety and distress which can be misinterpreted as a tantrum or aggressive panic attack.
- **Shutdowns** Similar to a 'freeze' response, autistic people can become so overwhelmed that they have a reduced ability to process what is going on. As a result, they may struggle to communicate or not communicate at all. (Ambitious about Autism, 2022)
- **Autistic burnout** Physical, mental or emotional exhaustion. Many autistic people believe this stems from having to navigate a typically neurotypical environment. The effects of burnout vary in individuals. Effects include a reduced ability to "mask" autistic traits and process what is going on, reduced ability to regulate emotion, increased levels of anxiety and increased sensitivity to sensory input. (Raymaker, 2022). Students with burnout may need time away to recover in order to continue with learning.

### Challenging behaviour or distress?

Autistic students may communicate their distress with what staff and students may consider as 'challenging behaviour'. This is when an autistic person needs help to understand the source of anxiety and a solution put in place.

## Perfectionism

Attention to detail and striving to do their best are often seen as positive attributes. However, perfectionism, often stemming from "black and white" thinking, is a need to get things perfect - an unattainable goal and a set up for failure. The resulting self-criticism can quickly become a source of anxiety and low self-esteem.

Changing thinking to formulate more realistic goals and remove self-criticism may take time and constant effort by parents/carers and teachers.

### What can perfectionism look like?

Students with perfectionism often procrastinate, or avoid a task altogether, not out of "laziness," but out of pre-emptive fear of failure. They may focus on one section of a task or a mistake and refuse to move on until it's perfect.

## The school environment

The challenges faced by most autistic students before even setting foot in a classroom can include:

- Knowing where they should go
- Knowing what lessons they have next
- How long they have to transition
- Navigating around other students
- Dealing with hypersensitivities

### What it's like?

For someone with Autism, school can feel overwhelming with the sheer volume of work, unfamiliar or unexpected situations and social expectations.

By providing structure you are helping students navigate and understand what to prioritise.

## Orientation

Provide an orientation day so that autistic students can know what to expect. Prior to this day, parents and students should be provided with:

1. a handout on what supports are available;
2. their timetable including form times and assemblies;
3. a clear explanation of the two-week timetable;
4. breakdown of the school day including times for breaks and transitions
5. a map of the school:
  - include exceptions e.g. one-way systems, inaccessible areas;
  - highlight the location of the Quiet room where students can recover when overwhelmed (or equivalent e.g. home base, safe space, calm room etc.);
6. a form to indicate hypersensitivities and preferred seating location where applicable (see p.13). Details should be discussed and agreed with a member of the SEND team;
7. fire drills: detail of the process and how students will be warned;
8. an alert card with instructions on what it is for and when and how to use it.

## Orientation day

Autistic students should have the opportunity to walk around the school with a member of staff so that they can become acquainted with the layout of the school and identify requirements to deal with any hypersensitivities. This day could also be used to:

- highlight supports in place such as visual primers in classrooms (see p.8);
- go through typical situations that may arise in a school day such as getting lost, being late, feeling anxious, forgetting books or homework, teasing etc. (see p.11);
- the form tutor and head of year should be introduced to the student and parent/carer;
- as soon as a key worker has been assigned, they should be introduced to the student and explain what their role is e.g. first point of contact for student and parent/carer.

## Structure in the classroom

Providing structure is vital to support autistic students. Without it, students can become anxious and unproductive. The following sections provide some tools that can be implemented to help with this.

### Priming

Priming can take many forms but essentially it informs students of the scope and/or aims of the lesson before the lesson takes place allowing them to be prepared. Having this in place for all lessons means students will more likely be able to learn core concepts or details.

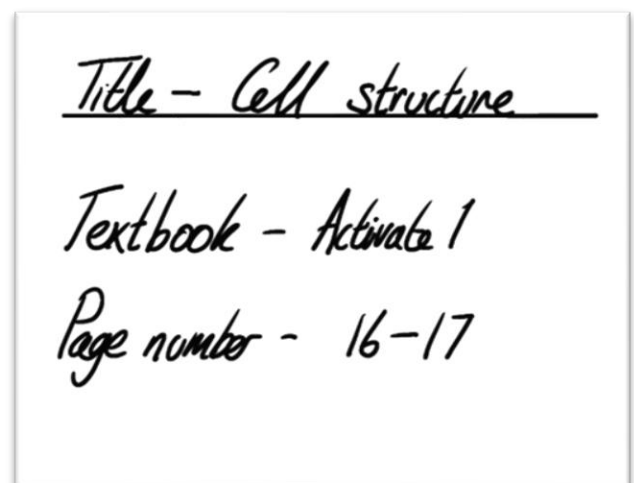
### Visual priming in the classroom

This is simple to implement. All teachers, where applicable, should put the following information on the whiteboard, preferably in the same location e.g. bottom left corner.

- Subject/topic
- Learning objective
- Textbook and page numbers

#### Why?

If an autistic student is not able to concentrate due to high levels of anxiety or if they can't process information, they can at least make a note of what content is being covered.



Example of visual priming on classroom whiteboard

### Verbal priming

A simple and easy win: All teachers should verbally state the intent for the lesson and the basic agenda for example:

- "First, we're going to read x chapters. Then I'm going to tell you what to take note on."
- "After you have finished taking notes, you may complete the worksheets. Worksheets should be stuck in your exercise book after they are completed."
- "Don't take notes just yet, I'm going to explain this section first and I will let you know when you can take notes."

### Additional priming strategies

Teachers may also provide the following prior to lessons to give them a preview of the work to be covered. For example:

- textbook pages to be covered;
- handouts;
- questions ahead of time;
- PowerPoint slides of content to be covered;
- lesson schedule for the forthcoming term.



## Parents/carers and priming

Involve parents/carers where possible to help prime students for upcoming tests, major projects or assignments by providing them access to this information e.g. via Google Classroom.

Sufficient warning must be provided for any tests otherwise students are likely not to respond well. If possible, provide a way for parents to be informed so that they can then prime students at home to be prepared.

For major assignments or projects, if parents are informed, they can remind or support students on a continuous basis to set interim deadlines, ensuring students keep on top of their workload.

### Out of sight, out of mind

Autistic students with poor executive function experience 'Out of sight, out of mind' i.e., even if timetables for project milestones and deadlines are published in a clear format, these can often go unnoticed.

## Make the most of technology

Throughout this guide, the use of homework apps has been recommended to help students and parents keep up to date with homework, tests, exams and extracurricular activities and can remove significant sources of anxiety. These apps are often used to support all students so there can be ambiguities and inconsistencies in how information is communicated. To ensure autistic students can trust the information on homework apps, schools could create a template and usage guidelines for all staff to follow e.g.

- consistently use it for all homework;
- include a deadline and ensure there are no contradictory dates within the task;
- use clear, unambiguous instructions;
- use bullets or checklists for all tasks;
- contradictory information given verbally should be clarified on the homework app and be taken as final;
- post timings, dates and locations of extracurricular activities.

### Why?

Difficulties with executive function means that autistic students can have problems with planning, organisation, working memory, task initiation and flexibility.

## Visual supports

Visual supports can help clarify information and help with comprehension. They can take many forms such as highlighted text, graphic organisers or self-management tools.

### Graphic organisers

Graphic organisers can be used by students to highlight important information and can help them understand the content better. Visual supports may include:

- highlighting important information on a PowerPoint;
- graphic templates for note taking to help students identify key information, aid comprehension or structure work for essays long answers.

#### Why?

Most individuals on the spectrum process visual information better than verbal.

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

Topic/Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Key Words/Important vocabulary

Explanation/main notes

Summary/Key points

Graphic organiser: Concept Map or Mind Map Template © 1.0

### Self-management tools

Self-management tools help the students stay focused, manage their time and meet deadlines. Examples of this include:

- a printed timetable to keep in their pocket;
- using a printed calendar of the month and physically writing in upcoming tasks and events helps students to acknowledge tasks and manage deadlines;
- structure for essay writing (paragraph structure and prompts of what to cover)
- a checklist of marking points;
- online app where homework and tests can be set. E.g. Show my homework, Google classroom etc.

OCTOBER						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
						1
2	3 Science & physical homework □ Arts - Art □	4 rel practice Gc □ Bio test + folder check □	5 FRS writing and/or articles □	6 Animal response revision (science) □	7 EPQ meeting 9:50!!! + Project review □	8
9	10 Permission record A □	11	12	13	14	15

Calendar template with tasks written in by hand

## Dealing with unexpected situations: Social scripts

Some students may not know how to act in certain situations. This can either cause the student to stay quiet and miss something important or become stressed. Providing a student with a social script can help prompt them to speak out for themselves. For example:

- **if you have forgotten your textbook** put up your hand and say to the teacher "I've forgotten my textbook, do you have a spare one I can use?"
- **if you are late for a class**, say to the teacher "Sorry I'm late." and sit down as there is nothing more you can do.
- **if you have forgotten to do your homework**, go to the teacher at the start of the lesson or when asked for homework and say "I've forgotten to do my homework, please can I hand it in later?" The teacher may ask for a reason but should give you a new deadline.
- **if you are getting overwhelmed**, use your alert card and go to the Quiet Room.
- **if you don't know what you are supposed to be doing**, put up your hand and say to the teacher "I'm sorry, I didn't understand, please can you explain what I should be doing?"

Support teachers or parents should discuss unexpected situations that come up and help create social scripts for future use.

## Discretion

Most autistic students do not want to stand out as being different so avoid singling them out to receive help. Try to give students support in a discrete manner instead. (Beth Siggers, 2012)

Some autistic students also may not respond well when put on the spot e.g. picked to answer a question. They may freeze or become agitated. If they look uncomfortable, be prepared to pick someone else or avoid picking them at random if they have indicated that they do not want to answer.

## Alert card and quiet room

If a student starts to become overwhelmed or feel themselves getting anxious, they may need to take themselves out of the situation and go to a quiet space to calm down. They may use a card excusing them from the lesson and try to regain control while stressed or during a meltdown. (Grandin, 2020) (Robertson, 2014)

If a student is not comfortable using a card, they may be allowed to leave the room when agitated. The teacher should be informed that the student has permission to do so.

### Processing takes time

The processing speed of an autistic person's brain may be like a computer with a slow internet connection. It may take longer for them to respond to questions. (Grandin, 2012) Extra time may be needed for them to process instructions and understand exam questions or complete homework.

**Leave  
I need to leave now**

An example of an alert card that can be used by students to go to the quiet room

## Group work

Group work, while necessary, can be a cause for anxiety. To minimise this, keep students in carefully selected groups at least for half a term. There may be certain people they feel more comfortable working with, which encourages them to participate. On the other hand, if they are grouped with people they feel uncomfortable with, they may not be able to communicate. It is also recommended that you assign roles where appropriate. (Solvegi Shmulsky, 2013)

Another potential issue with group work may be due to sensory issues. Group work often means more noise, more movement around the room and unpredictability. (Sobel & Alston, 2021)

### What it's like

Groups are noisy, unpredictable and working with others is demanding. Difficulties in reading social cues can also result in autistic students unable to speak or interject or even has the opposite effect of causing them to talk too much. (Sobel & Alston, 2021)

## Extracurricular activities

Clubs can be extremely beneficial to autistic students as they allow them to be sociable with people with similar interests. So, it is essential that they are accessible to autistic students by providing students, or parents with:

- a complete list of all clubs as soon as they are finalised in the school diary;
- provide a timetable including times, locations and teacher names;
- alerts with details of changes to timings or location or unscheduled events. If clubs are run during a normal lesson, students should be advised whether they should inform the teacher of their absence from the lesson.

'During the difficult years of high school, special interest clubs can be a lifesaver.'  
(Grandin, 2020)

All these details help autistic students to properly schedule their time and prepare themselves if needed.

## Hypersensitivities and distraction

Some students are hypersensitive to certain stimuli, making school more distracting or overwhelming. For example, fluorescent lighting, sounds can all overwhelm some autistic individuals.

### Classroom layout

During an orientation session, some students with sensory issues may indicate that certain areas of a classroom will be distracting or overwhelming. These requirements should be addressed in a seating plan where possible. You may seat them:

- Away from windows
- away from open doors
- away from flickering computers or lights
- away from or next to certain students (Robertson, 2014)

#### What it's like

For some the sound of a page turning or a pencil writing on paper can be highly distracting or even painful. For others, bright or flickering lights can be a source of distress.

### Allowance of supports

Some students will require additional supports to help them cope with their hypersensitivities. Prior to starting school, autistic students should be given a choice to use additional supports to help them cope with overstimulation such as:

- Tinted glasses
- Ear defenders
- Hats
- Make small changes to uniform
- Stim toys (fidget toys)

The student should be given a card stating that they are permitted so they are not penalised.

#### Stimming

Short for self-stimulatory behaviours, these repetitive movements may counteract an overwhelming sensory environment or alleviate anxiety. Some students may be able to control these, but others may need help to curb excessive stimming.

## Useful Links:

Evidence-Based Practices

[https://autism.unt.edu/sites/default/files/2014-EBP-Report%20\(NPDC\).pdf](https://autism.unt.edu/sites/default/files/2014-EBP-Report%20(NPDC).pdf)

<https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules>

AET

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/>

Burnout

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/autistic-burnout>

Perfectionism

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/making-sense-autistic-spectrum-disorders/201609/the-8-ball-hell-asd-perfectionism>

<https://intensivecareforyou.com/gifted-autistic-tempering-perfectionism/>

## Recommended books

The Way I see it: A personal look at Autism by Dr Temple Grandin

The Autistic Brain: Exploring the strength of a different kind of mind by Temple Grandin and Richard Panek

The Inclusive Classroom: A new approach to differentiation by Daniel Sobel and Sara Alston



## References

- Ambitious about Autism, 2022. Meltdowns and shutdowns. [Online]  
Available at: <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/information-about-autism/behaviour/meltdowns-and-shutdowns>
- Beth Siggers, Y.-S. H. a. K. L. M., 2012. Your Voice Counts: Listening to the Voice of High School Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 35(2), pp. 173-190.
- Grandin, T., 2012. Using Teachable Moments to Learn. [Online]  
Available at: [https://templegrandin.com/temple\\_articles/teachable\\_moments.html](https://templegrandin.com/temple_articles/teachable_moments.html)
- Grandin, T., 2020. *The way I see it*. 5th ed. Leeds: Future Horizons.
- Hobbs, J., 2013. Autism. [Online]  
Available at: <https://autismfriendlypractice.weebly.com/autism.html>
- Raymaker, D. D., 2022. Understanding autistic burnout. [Online]  
Available at: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/autistic-burnout>
- Robertson, L., 2014. Presentation A2: Classroom Strategies. [Online]  
Available at: <https://researchautism.org/resources/curriculum-in-a-box/understanding-autism-professional-development-curriculum/part-1b-videos-classroom-strategies/>.
- Sobel, D. & Alston, S., 2021. *The Inclusive Classroom: A new approach to differentiation*. 1st ed. s.l.:Bloomsbury Education.
- Solvegi Shmulsky, K. G., 2013. Autism Spectrum in the College Classroom:. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 37(6), pp. 490-495.
- Newcastle University, 2021. Autism rates increase. [Online]  
Available at:  
[https://www.ncl.ac.uk/press/articles/archive/2021/03/autismratesincrease/#:~:text=Around%20one%20in%2057%20\(1.76,Department%20of%20Psychiatry%20and%20Maastricht](https://www.ncl.ac.uk/press/articles/archive/2021/03/autismratesincrease/#:~:text=Around%20one%20in%2057%20(1.76,Department%20of%20Psychiatry%20and%20Maastricht)
- National Autistic Society, 2021. *NAS-Education-Report-2021*, London: National Autistic Society.