

Speak up for yourself

A workbook to help autistic students to self-advocate

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.

This kind of cycle is an overly painful and time-consuming way to investigate what difficulties you may have and how you can overcome them. This workbook compiles all the information I wish I had known earlier and is designed to help you think about how autism may affect you and your learning to hopefully save you some of the angst.

I hope that you will find this workbook helps you to better understand your needs.

If you find it useful, please pass it on.

By Hana Kinney

To get in touch, email atypicalblossom@outlook.com

www.autisticineducation.com

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Contents

Introduction	4
What is Autism?	4
What educational impacts does Autism have on students?	4
Meltdowns, shutdowns and autistic burnout	6
The school environment	9
Starting secondary school – what information would you find helpful?	9
Orientation day – an opportunity to know what to expect	10
Structure in the classroom	11
Priming	11
Visual priming in the classroom	11
Verbal priming	11
Additional priming strategies	12
Make the most of technology	12
Involving Parents/carers	14
Visual supports	14
Graphic organisers	14
Self-management tools	15
Dealing with unexpected situations: Social scripts	15
Discretion	16
Alert card and quiet room	16
Group work	18
Extracurricular activities	18
Hypersensitivities and distraction	20
Classroom layout	20
Allowance of supports	20
Recommended books	22
References	23

This can seem too theoretical but it's worth understanding how this applies to you.

- **Theory of Mind: Impairments recognising the mental states of others** can result in difficulty understanding social interactions, relating to their peers and knowing what to do to fit in.

Theory of mind: example

You may neglect telling your parent/ carer about important events as you assume they know about the events as well. You may start a new conversation topic and expect others to be able to follow, as you don't realise they cannot follow your thought process.

This affects me

- **Weak Central Coherence: Hyper focus on the details of a lesson, piece of work or social situation** can result in difficulty in understanding the big picture and coping when things change.

Hyper focus: an example

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.

This affects me

- **Poor Executive Function: Problems organising and coordinating multiple tasks** can lead to difficulty coping with workloads, prioritising and displaying flexibility in problem solving.

Disorganised or poor executive function?

You may be completely unaware of upcoming deadlines. Long projects may be completely neglected due to the deadline being so far away. You may also struggle to retain multi-step instructions meaning that you require them in written form.

This affects me

Meltdowns, shutdowns and autistic burnout

These are the things we want to avoid as it's exhausting. When completely overwhelmed and unable to escape a situation, we 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 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

Do you have good attention to detail and like to strive to do your best? These are great attributes but perfectionism, often stemming from "black and white" thinking, is a need or desire 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.

Getting used to and valuing failure, setting realistic goals and removing self-criticism will take time.

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.

This affects me

If you think perfectionism affects you negatively, share this with parents and carers so they can help you overcome this barrier.

Having read the short overview on how autism can affect people. The rest of the guide will go into more detail on common triggers and suggestions on how to minimise these.

Use these pages and questions to reflect and encapsulate your understanding of how autism affects you.

The following questions will be repeated at the end so you can see if your understanding of yourself and your needs have developed.

This is how Autism affects me: include how it affects you positively

These are the things that help me feel calm and happy

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 lesson they have next
- How long they have to transition
- Navigating around other students
- Dealing with hypersensitivities

Read the following pages and make a note of which of the following may help you.

What it's like?

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

Starting secondary school – what information would you find helpful?

Here are some supports schools could offer. Make a note of the ones you would find useful.

- | | Tick all that apply |
|--|----------------------------|
| 1. a handout on what supports the school have available; | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. a printed timetable including form times and assemblies; | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. a clear explanation of the two-week timetable (many schools spread their timetable over two weeks); | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. a breakdown of the school day including times for breaks and transitions | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. a map of the school including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ one-way systems, inaccessible areas etc;▪ location of the Quiet Room (see p. 14) where students can recover when overwhelmed; | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. a form to indicate hypersensitivities and preferred seating location where applicable | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. fire drills: detail of the process and how students will be warned; | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. an alert card with instructions on what it is for and when and how to use it (see p. 14 for details on the alert card) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Other (please outline your request here) _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Orientation day – an opportunity to know what to expect

If your school could offer you a day to go in before the start of term to walk around with a member of staff, what would you want from it? Make a note of what you would like from an orientation day:

- | | Tick if helpful |
|---|--------------------------|
| • Be shown the layout of the school e.g. the canteen, quiet room, classrooms for each lesson on your timetable, matron etc. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • To be shown supports in place such as visual primers in classrooms (see p.10); | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • go through typical situations that may arise in a school day such as getting lost, being late, feeling anxious, forgetting books or homework, teasing, being overwhelmed and can't take anything in etc. and what to do (see p.13); | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • meet the form tutor and head of year | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • key worker to be introduced to the student and explain what their role is and how and when to contact them | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Structure in the classroom

If you're feeling overwhelmed or anxious it can be difficult to take in what the teacher is saying. This section outlines some simple strategies that would provide (a) structure that you could rely on so that you can keep up or catch up when you're more able to.

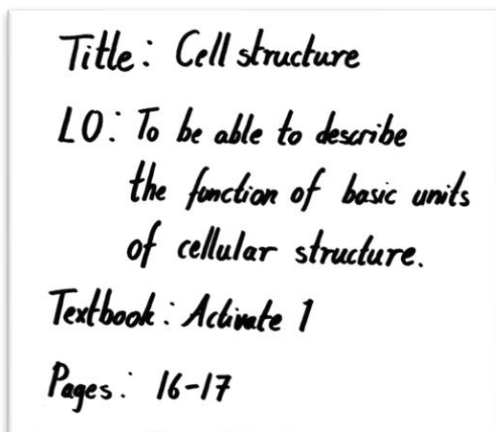
Priming

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.

- Lesson title/topic
- Learning objective (L.O.)
- Textbook and page numbers
- Title(s) of worksheet(s) to be completed in lesson



Example of visual priming on classroom whiteboard

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.

I would find this helpful

Why it's important to you:

Verbal priming

All teachers should verbally state the intent for the lesson and the basic agenda for example:

- “First, we’re going to read chapter x. Then, I’m going to tell you what to take notes 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.”

I would find this helpful

Why it's important to you:

Additional priming strategies

Teachers may also be able to provide the following prior to lessons to give a preview of the work to be covered. Be realistic. Will you have time to review it or will it just pile up? Tick those you would find valuable:

- Notification of textbook pages to be covered;
- handouts e.g. worksheets;
- questions ahead of time;
- PowerPoint slides of content to be covered;
- lesson schedule for the forthcoming term.
- Other _____

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;

Why?

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

- 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;
- be open to students pointing out when ambiguities or areas of confusion arise.

I would find this helpful

Why it's important to you:

Involving Parents/carers

If executive function is an issue for you, it may be difficult to keep on top of deadlines even if you have technology to remind you.

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).

Teachers should not spring tests on students: sufficient warning must be provided for any tests otherwise students are likely not to respond well.

I would find this helpful

Why it's important to you:

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 or forgotten.

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.

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.

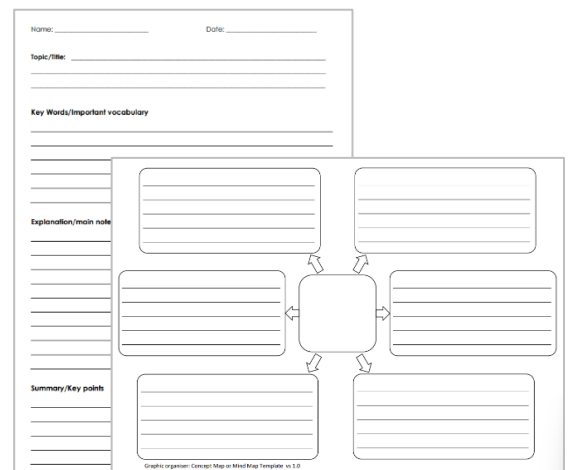
Graphic organisers

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 or answers.

I would find this helpful

Why it's important to you:



Key Points note-taking template and concept map/Mind map template

Why?

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

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 Boreano & personal homework □ Art - Art □	4 rti practice □ Bio test + folder check □	5 PFG writing handing articles □	6 Personal response revision □	7 EPO meeting 9:50!!! + Project revision □	8
9	10 Presentation record. A □	11	12	13	14	15

Calendar template with tasks written in by hand

I would find this helpful

Why it's important to you:

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:

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

- **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?"

I would find this helpful

Notes:

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 Sagers, 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.

This is important to me:

How do you want these situations handled:

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.

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.

I would find this helpful

Why it's important to you:



Examples of alert cards 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)

I would find this helpful

Why it's important to you:

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;
- Provide details of changes on 'homework' apps such as Google Classroom e.g. for timings or location or unscheduled events.

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

- If clubs are run during a normal lesson, students should be advised whether they should inform the teacher of their absence from the lesson.

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

I would find this helpful

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. Some sensitivities can also vary depending on how tired or anxious you are.

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.

I would find this helpful

Outline your sensitivities and what you would like put in place:

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)

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.

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

I would find this helpful

Outline your requirements:

Now that you have read the entire guide, answer the questions below and reflect on how your understanding of autism may have developed or changed.

This is how autism affects me

These are the things that I can do to self-regulate

This is something that I feel hasn't been addressed in the guide?

This is something that I only relate to slightly. Here are the things I would like to investigate further:

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

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