

Protocol for Working with Students on the Autistic Spectrum in Mainstream Education

This guidance was written by The Umbrella Group which supports parents of children with ASD in Dorset

Preparation and support of pupils with ASD by staff in mainstream school

1. **Get to know the student** to understand their needs, issues, likes and dislikes. Don't just rely on what information gets passed on from primary school. Meet and discuss with the child and parents before they start Secondary School whether a diagnosis is formal or suspected.
2. Students may need **extra visits** to a secondary school before starting year 7 or entry year.
3. Sending a **home/school diary** to the pupil prior to starting Secondary school can help the parent prepare their child for the new school.
4. Remember a child who is considered to be "high functioning", may struggle with other aspects of autism such as **socialisation** and fears which others may consider irrational. Coping with a school day can be exhausting for a child with ASD particularly if they have been **masking to fit in**.
5. If possible all students with ASD should have a **sensory assessment** from an Occupational therapist qualified in Sensory Integration. Their advice may be invaluable for recommendations in the classroom.
6. Student **profiles & passports** such as those used in special education could be an invaluable, concise, comprehensive tool to pass on to staff (including supply staff). Information can be gathered from pupil and parents from filling out an information form.
7. Students can experience **heightened anxiety** if they feel staff are unaware of how they are feeling and what situations might increase their anxiety. Discussing anxiety may actually make it worse as the focus on it increases. Student support may need to **contact a subject teacher prior to the student's entry** if the pupil with ASD has concerns about particular lessons. There may be pattern for a student with ASD in particular subjects a student finds difficult such as absenteeism or outbursts.
8. Meltdowns will always have a trigger and a reason which may not always be obvious. There may have been a build up over time over an issue and not necessarily relate to something that happened immediately before an outburst. Many students may hold it together until they get home and so staff may not be aware of the challenges their parents face. **Don't always assume they are 'fine' at school.**
9. ASD students may need to have something to hold to ease their anxiety to help them concentrate on lessons. Or use subtle ways to make them feel calm such as pressing down on their chair seat with their hands to create deep pressure.
10. Students (including neurotypical pupils) have **issues with school toilets** which may have consequences in health, confidence and concentration. Discreet permission to use the Disabled toilet for ASD students may be a solution.
11. **Girls with ASD are not so easily detectable** because they can mask the condition. They may appear quite social. However, the pupil may be anxious and staff need to learn pick up on the signs, as well as listen and act upon what parents and their children have to say. Girls with ASD would benefit from hearing from older women with ASD about their challenges.
12. **Don't assume that all ASD pupils fit the same box!** They are all individual just as is every pupil within the school. They are not all 'Rainmen' and don't all fit the same stereotypes. Please don't assume that they don't have empathy or imagination.

Tools and adaptations to help ASD children and young people in school

1. A **liaison book for student/parent/ teacher** may also be a possibility but needs to be treated as confidential. A student with ASD may find it easier to express their feelings by writing them down.
2. If the student and parents are in agreement, it would be useful to have a **disclosure session** with their tutor group and teacher to allow the class a better understanding of the individual their character, likes/dislikes, thought processes and behaviour.
3. **Students with ASD can find it difficult to deal with change in routine** which can have a knock-on effect to how they cope with a school day. If the timetable/staff is going to change, an ASD student needs preparation/forewarning. The same is true about special events such as trips, and changes in environments
4. ASD students may have **difficulty with executive functioning/planning**. Reminding of deadlines and checking on progress would be beneficial, as well as the opportunity to engage in student reviews more frequently.
5. Checking that a student has the **homework written down** and understands the task is crucial. Homework club maybe useful because it is structured into the school day. ASD students may struggle to do homework at home.
6. Strategies such as **social stories can help prepare a pupil for what is going to happen** at a future event and for unstructured time such as going in to school, breaks or lunchtime. Telling students where they can go at lunchtime would be useful. **Lunch clubs** (such as chess and computer club) could be beneficial.
7. **Language is important**. ASD students may take things said very literally. Idioms are commonly misinterpreted. They may not pick up on visual and audio cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, or mood.
8. **Avoid open ended questions** such as "What would you like to do?" and offer choices or guidance on a task if possible. Questions such as "How was that lesson?" What did you like / find difficult ... etc. may be more appropriate.
9. **Visual aids and prompts** may help other students as well as those with ASD.
10. A trained and carefully matched **mentor or buddy** could benefit both an autistic young person and the mentor as having the opportunity to discuss when things that went wrong with a peer or trusted member of staff can help understand how to do things differently. A peer mentor may act as a translator of behaviour and it could be a positive role to include in a personal statement

Guidance to help promote positive communication between parents of ASD pupils and teaching staff

1. Listen to what parents have to say. They know their child best and are often aware of signs of anxiety which may not be picked up on at school.
2. Build positive relationships with the young person and parents. A student can appear to be coping but actually struggling to hold it together. It is often at home where meltdowns happen because of anxiety about school whether it be something that happened that day, an upcoming event, and relationships with other students and staff etc.
3. Establish good lines of communication with the parents including how to contact staff if there is a concern. Parents and their child could use a home/school liaison book to convey information which might have an impact on school life.
4. Give parents enough time to speak at school meetings with other professionals and notify them of what the meeting is for, how it will be structured and who will be attending. Give good notice of when the meeting will take place and how.

- Please be aware that students and their **parents may not be aware their child has ASD**, but will still need support. There will always be children and young people with ASD who have not been diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder within a mainstream setting.

Anxiety

It is highly likely that all students with ASD will have anxiety. Ask the student what would make them feel more at ease? It may be something that can easily be sorted such as where they sit in the classroom or an exit card. Seating position can have a big impact on how a pupil copes with a lesson. Be aware that an exit card may make the pupil more anxious and might need a subtler way of indicating they need to leave the room such as placing a particular object on the desk. This should be discussed between teaching staff and pupil.

Staff may become more aware of a pupil's anxiety from a type of behaviour. The ASD pupil needs to know where they can go if they are feeling particularly anxious. They may need to leave the room to have their own space or speak to a member of staff or student support services. Recognise that if a student goes out of the classroom or to the ISLC it is for a genuine reason. They need to feel they are being taken seriously if they ask for help.

Phrases such as "Are you ok?" may receive a "Yes" when an anxious student is **not** "OK". Staff need to have an understanding of appearance and behaviour which may indicate a person is not in a calm state. It may be more appropriate to ask if they need help which could be offered to the whole class so not singling anyone out. *Be aware that asking how the student is feeling may actually induce anxiety especially if done repeatedly.*

A student needs a **visual indicator** such as a card system to show how they are feeling which can be discreetly shown to staff such as a traffic light system for example (**green** - feeling good, **yellow** - feeling ok, **red** -not feeling good) or some signalling system created by the student. One example is the student can place something on their desk to indicate they are feeling anxious such as a character rubber.

The **incredible 5 point scale** uses a scale to help children be aware of emotions such as anger and anxiety and is particularly useful for ASD students

[Incredible 5-Point Scale downloadable resources](#)

The Incredible 5-Point Scale: Examples

1 Happy Feeling great Doing like to do	2 Happy Feeling a little nervous	3 Nervous Feeling worried Anxious like I can't concentrate	4 Anxious Feeling really worried Anxious like I can't concentrate	5 Very Anxious Feeling really worried Anxious like I can't concentrate
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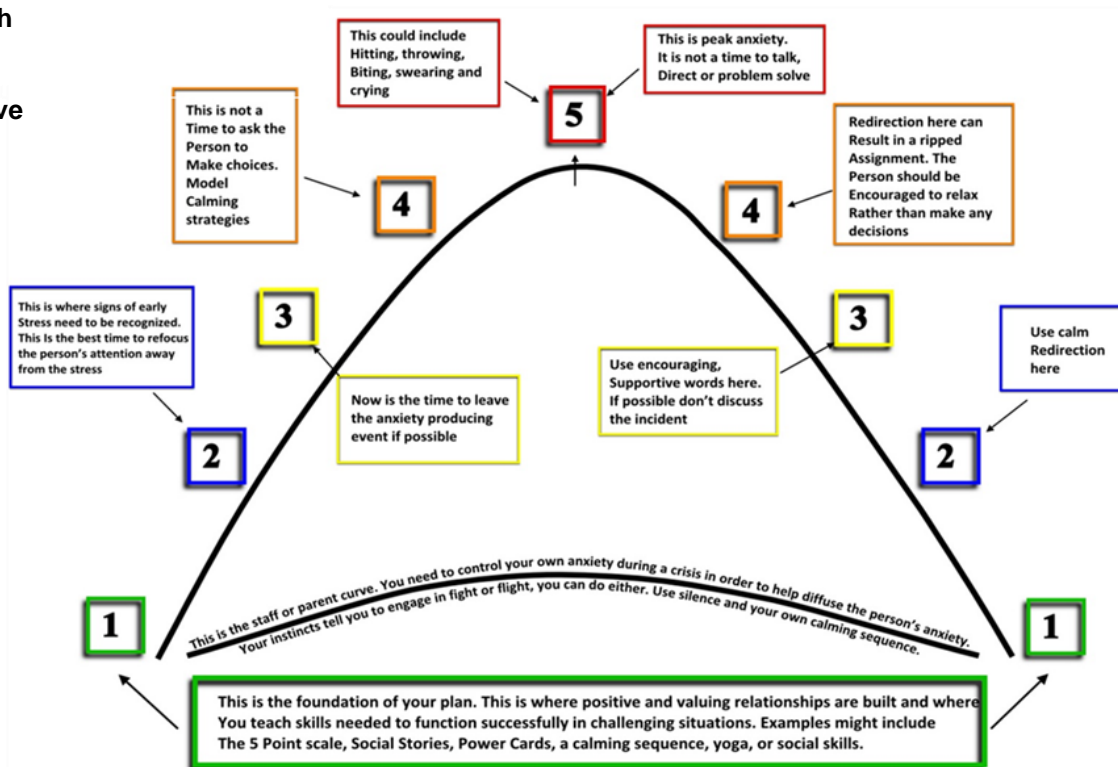
Some students with ASD do not like people standing too close to them. They may want to sit on the end of a row or near a door. It is the TA's that will often have to work with students on the spectrum and should be aware of this need for personal space when working with them. Some pupils may find working with particular staff difficult and this may be more to do with sensory perception than the ability of the staff.

Anxiety may affect concentration and understanding instructions. If possible staff should check they understand the task they have to do.

Suggestions of techniques, resources and support on how to manage anxiety will benefit other students too especially at stressful times like the exam period. Advice or sessions from people such as yoga teachers, CBT therapists may help with relaxation techniques.

[Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Curtis](#) devised a model to illustrate how anxiety affects someone's ability to learn in the form of anxiety curve. It shows behaviour depending on what stage of anxiety they are at and how this can have an impact on how an ASD student behaves and how much information and instructions they can follow. If a child is anxious they will not learn.

Staff need to establish where a student is on the curve at that moment.



As more children are diagnosed with ASD, the number of pupils on the spectrum will increase within mainstream schools. Whilst it is recognized that it is not easy to fully support their needs, hopefully this information from parents and children will help schools to understand and recognise the signs and behaviour to assist staff in teaching and nurturing those on the autistic spectrum.



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