

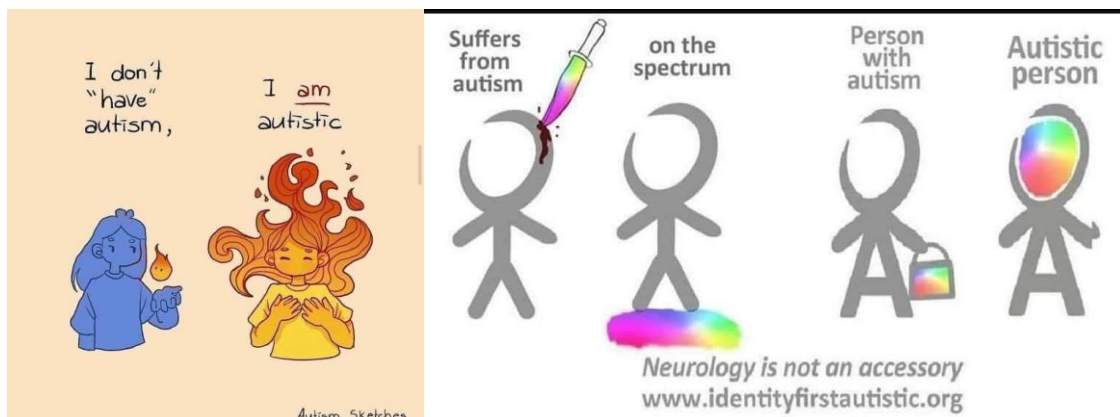


Supporting Autistic Children in Mainstream Educational Environments.

This document is taken from the supporting slides that were shown during a talk presented by Katie Baylis for Spectrum Connect at Fulham Community Centre. These notes are intended as a aid to memory for those who were present on the day. If you didn't attend the talk event, hopefully the notes will still provide some guidance.

Before we start the notes properly, just a brief outline on the language we use in the following document. We use "Identity first" language. This means we always use the phrase "Autistic person" not "person with Autism".

- When referring to a diagnosis, it is of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Majority of the Autistic community dislike being referred to as ASD because they are not a disorder.
- Disability training specifies as industry standard for medical and care industries still teaches "person-first, disability second language is preferred". (Person with Autism)
- Currently, Autistic self-advocates, such as Yenn Purkis in Australia, speak of being Autistic as part of identity, where even they previously had written texts in person-first language. (Autistic Person)
- Most Autistic people currently prefer this, but not all.
- We advocate listening to how a person defines themselves, and be led by them.
- But for default we defer to the preferences of the Autistic community and their requests to use identify first language.
- Or just call them their name.



To begin...

There are many roads to education

- ▶ It is important to look at your child as an individual, and be child-focused.
- ▶ Sometimes what would logistically fit your family, or has fit a sibling, will not be the best environment to facilitate learning for your particular child's learning and sensory profile
- ▶ Choosing and navigating schooling can be an emotional and exhausting process, it is important to gain support, advocacy and insight from others

- ▶ Options for schools can include
 - ▶ Mainstream school – inc. Government, Religious or Private
 - ▶ Special education unit within a mainstream school
 - ▶ Specialist school
 - ▶ Home school/Unschooling

For the majority of this document we are assuming a position within a mainstream class in a mainstream school however some of the contents will be relevant for other environments.

If you do choose to pursue alternative placements in the public system there are steps that need to be followed...

- ▶ In Government schools, whenever there is a transition into a different bracket for schooling, a certain process is followed in order to recommend what appears to be the most suitable option for your child to move into
- ▶ For example – childcare or kindy to Primary school, primary to middle school.
- ▶ The current childcare or kindy or primary school will be asked for reports and observations
- ▶ The current kindy or school talks to parents
- ▶ Diagnostic reports are obtained
- ▶ A teacher, and usually for a child with a disability, an Educational Psychologist will be sent to observe the child, and collate information gathered into a report of recommendation for placement.
- ▶ A meeting with parents and all involved in providing recommendations occurs, and parents are given a choice

When choosing a school structure you should weigh up the following considerations to the needs of the individual child.

- ▶ School is a structured, protected environment, where it is your child's main source of being around peers and learning how to exist within the world.
- ▶ If they are not to be in a school environment, either mainstream or supported small class, or separate special options, and are home schooled – it is important to ensure that many social opportunities and opportunities to gain independence away from primary carers is available.
- ▶ It may not or never, be appropriate for some children to be at school full time, as based on their particular needs, mental health and/or disability, and a form for a Part time exemption can be sought – which needs to be signed by both the parents and Principal
- ▶ As when they leave schooling age – what next?

From a schools perspective

- ▶ Professionals (including educators and Educational Psychologists) have “responsibilities and the expectations that arise from their professional roles”, and should work within the terms of the relevant agreements, contracts, policies and laws (Jewell, 2010)
- ▶ Principals and teachers must extend a duty of care to all students, with and without disability, and staff
- ▶ Accordingly, within their professional capacity and skill sets, and also within their particular policies, educational decision-makers must consider the schools physical environment at the

time, as well as availability, experience and knowledge of staff, availability of materials and resources; as against a child's learning and sensory profile of needs.

Your Rights and Relevant Legislation

- ▶ Commonwealth of Australia (1992) Disability Discrimination Act: child cannot be denied entry on basis of disability to an education institution
- ▶ Commonwealth of Australia (2005) Disability Standards for Education: responsibility of the school to provide support
- ▶ Department of Education and Children's Services (2007): inclusive education
- ▶ Government of South Australia (1972) Education Act: it is the parent's right to choose education setting for their child
- ▶ United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: human rights are the same for everyone and should be facilitated where there are disabling barriers

Children and students with disability policy – from SA Dept Ed, 1 July 2020

- ▶ This policy aims to:
- ▶ *Make sure department preschools, children's centers, schools, programs and services are inclusive of children and students with disability*
- ▶ *Make sure all children and students with disability who are attending a program or service are provided with a personalised learning and support program that meets the functional needs of the child or student and the requirements of the Early Years Learning Framework, the Australian Curriculum, South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) and modified SACE*
- ▶ *Clearly set out the legal responsibilities of the department's personnel in providing inclusive learning programs and services to children and students with disability.*
- ▶ See for full document - <https://edi.sa.edu.au/library/document-library/controlled-policies/children-and-students-with-disability-policy>

Remember - The Final Decision

- ▶ Rests with the parent (and this is protected within afore-mentioned legislations)
- ▶ But it is important to consider all information, reports and recommendations, as what is best for you, may not be best for the child.
- ▶ Once a decision is made, it is up to the school to submit a package detailing the child's needs for support – and submit to the Education Head Office Disability Panel
- ▶ Based on the information that the school provides to the Disability Panel, your child will be assigned a level of funding needs (ranging from 1-9), and this will be delivered to the school.
- ▶ ****Parents are able to request and see a child's level and annual amount of funding****

Once schooling begins remember

- ▶ School is often a challenging place for neurodiverse children to navigate, but with the right environment, reasonable expectations, adaptations and accommodations, understanding, patience, team work, kindness and positive attitude – it can be a place for acceptance, learning, fun, connection with peers, and growth

- ▶ The road will often be a little bumpier, and require more attention, and sometimes – a complete change in direction may be needed – and that’s ok!

When transitioning to a new school or class

- ▶ In Week 0 (before your child enters the classroom), request a meeting with the child’s main teachers, and School support staff, and the Director of Inclusion (if there is one) and the Principal, to discuss your child’s greatest challenges, to brainstorm and suggest reasonable accommodations and adaptations
- ▶ If you need, you can bring an advocate or supporting professional who knows you and your child
- ▶ It is useful to provide an A4 “About me” page for school – where there are direct dot points regarding sensory hypo/ hyper sensitivities, eating and drinking, toileting and self care, emotional and behavioural considerations, additional communication needs (such as an AAC device), triggers for meltdowns
- ▶ Enter the meeting respectfully – while your child is most important to you and you are their strongest advocate - teachers can have 25 children in one class, (or more!) where they are balancing the same types of recommendations and information for a group vastly different students.

Each year – Conduct a meeting between parents and teachers to formulate the One Plan

- ▶ In Education Policy, all indigenous students or those with disabilities must **meet once per year to** formulate a One Plan – also known as IEP, NEP.
- ▶ it is an individual plan of learning which includes reasonable adaptations and accommodations to facilitate your child’s learning.
- ▶ It must include information about your child’s physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural challenges and barriers to accessing education while ensuring safety for the child and others
- ▶ A One Plan must take into account different types of communication and play as being ok and valid, and teachers, other parents and children ideally be accommodating and educated
- ▶ If an Autistic child is hurting or impacting others unintentionally by not knowing the social code – it is not their fault, but we need to guide with using the One Plan
- ▶ It is important to positively phrase – your child has their own valid neurology and talents and interests, but may need some social cheat sheets to make their life dealing with neurotypical peers and challenging sensory environments easier

The school environment and the social “hidden curriculum”

- ▶ Rules or guidelines in society that are not explicitly told or taught directly, but taken for granted that “everyone knows”, “goes without saying”
- ▶ Knowledge (or not) affects social interactions, friendships and relationships, school performance, safety, metaphors, idioms, body language, slang
- ▶ These “social norms” provide us with an expected idea of how to behave, and function in order to basically “keep everyone safe and happy”
- ▶ By age 8, most neurotypically developing children have a good understanding of social norms, just by existing in social situations and absorbing these rules, through incidental little interactions.

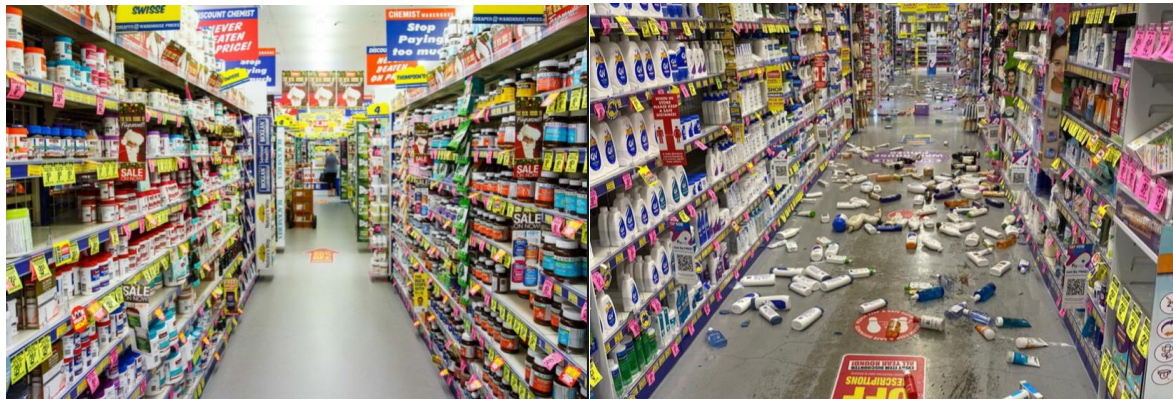
- ▶ There are norms defining appropriate behaviour for every social group and social role. As an individual moves from one group to another, their behaviour changes accordingly. For example, interactions with a teacher vs peers vs parents
- ▶ Human beings have norms to guide and direct their behaviour, to provide order and predictability in social relationships and to make sense of and understanding of each other's actions.

How does Autism affect the school experience?

First, consider the definition of Autism as a diagnosis...

- ▶ Substantial challenges in social communication and interaction
- ▶ Difficulty initiating or responding to social interactions
- ▶ Difficulties in recognising emotions in self and others
- ▶ Challenges in interoception (knowing my own needs)
- ▶ Challenges in using and understanding non-verbal communication
- ▶ Sensory Hyper- or Hypo- sensitivity (in all senses, and possibly in different degrees: touch, sight, smell, hearing, taste, feeling/ intuition)
- ▶ Difficulties in maintaining and understanding relationships, and adjusting behaviour to suit the context and the audience (eg, peers vs teachers vs family)
- ▶ Challenges in adapting and being flexible to changes in routines
- ▶ Repetitive motor movements, use of objects, speech, interests
- ▶ **These challenges most often result in far increased social anxiety**

Consider these 2 images



School can be overwhelming for neurotypical children. Now imagine entering that school and not understanding the underlying “rules” and order.

A schools environment can be busy sensory explosion of sounds, visuals, movement, smells, textures and more. The environment triggers...

- ▶ Anxious? Overwhelmed?
- ▶ ...and what does anxiety do? – heightens senses...
- ▶ But what if you already have a sensitive sensory system!?
- ▶ And people, especially children, are unpredictable in movement!
- ▶ ...but if you don't have the hidden social curriculum inbuilt – why are all these people saying these things and sitting here!?
- ▶ How do they know this?!

- ▶ How do I find out?! What if I do something wrong (again!)
- ▶ ...it is too hard and stressful... just let me exist over here for a little while...
- ▶ AND MELTDOWN WHEN I FINALLY FEEL SAFE TO DO SO IN THE CAR OR HOME!

So why does home trigger the meltdown?

Answer, 99% it doesn't. Home is the safe place that allowed the emotions accumulated from the day to come pouring out. Home isn't the trigger, it's the pressure relief valve.

What can be done to reduce that building pressure?

Practical Strategies for the Classroom

- ▶ **WALLS, CEILING AND DÉCOR:** Too many colourful posters, decorations, art work and an array of colours and designs can trigger sensory overwhelm for some students and an inability to concentrate. Visuals are definitely important for students, but consider if all serve a purpose and if necessary.
- ▶ Check for other clutter that can be removed, such as stacks of old books, piles of papers, and craft materials that are no longer needed. If you aren't using it for your immediate teaching needs, put it away or get rid of it
- ▶ **LIGHTING:** Fluorescent lights can be painful to both ears (with constant buzz) and vision, consider changing these to warm LED lights. If you have a lot of windows, natural light is best.
- ▶ **CARPETS:** Using mats on your floors helps minimise noise. Carpet squares or mats are also useful to define different areas of your classroom and create boundaries. For example, to show a child where to sit during Mat time. To avoid overstimulation, opt for neutral colours.
- ▶ **SEATING:** is the seating arrangement conducive to both small group work and large group instruction? Are there clearly defined walkways? The following ideas can be useful for sensory hypersensitive students:
 - ▶ Arrange seating to flow with your classroom schedule
 - ▶ Turn desks away from windows and doors to avoid outside distractions
 - ▶ Put tennis balls on chair feet to reduce scraping sounds
 - ▶ Use kick bands to help students expend excess energy
 - ▶ Incorporate flexible seating options - Even students without sensory processing issues can benefit from alternative seating. Some students might learn well on exercise balls, wobble stools, bean bag chairs, or large cushions. Other students might prefer stand-up desks, or to spread out on the floor. Be open to moving away from the traditional desks and chairs when building a sensory-friendly classroom.
- ▶ **LABELS:** Using pictures to label cabinets and bins around the classroom will help your students understand where items can be found, as well as aiding when you ask students to put things away.
- ▶ You can also label different areas of your classroom with pictures so students know what activities take place there. This also fosters independence.
- ▶ Additionally, as students with sensory issues typically do well with routine, be sure to create a visual daily schedule at the front of your classroom. Students can better prepare for the day when they know what to expect.

- ▶ **QUIET AREA:** Have a dedicated area in your classroom where students can go to remove themselves if feeling sensory overwhelm or dysregulated, or have quiet time. This area might be in a different room or space in the school. You may want to include headphones so students can block out the other classroom noise (if not at the child’s desk), a tent, swing, books, peapod, egg chair, fidget toys or calming items. Ensure not to overload the area with too many distractions.
- ▶ *Be careful to not present this area as a punishment, but rather as a place for relaxation. Explain the purpose of the area to all your students, and normalise the need to go there so there isn’t a negative stigma attached to it.*

Always remember to let the child maintain autonomy. Anxiety is often connected to a lack of control. Ensure the child feels like they have control over their access to accommodations.

- ▶ Everyone has different interests and finds enjoyment differently, but preferences are not always easily visible or able to be recognised with people who have significant challenges with communication
- ▶ Follow the child’s lead, and recognise their social needs and wants, and weigh these up against social expectations – and the real importance.
- ▶ Facilitate choice by providing visuals of available options at recess as lunch times

Incorporating sensory items in the classroom

- ▶ Have fidget toys or tools available to your students. Think about how to use sensory toys in your classroom. You may allow students to keep the toys at their desks, or you may have a specified place where students can pick them up. Do what works best for your students.
- ▶ You might find it necessary to implement a rule system for fidget toys. If so, put it in writing. Then, send it home with the student and make sure that both the student and carer agree to the rules. This will help reduce any issues with fidget toys in your classroom.
- ▶ There are a wide variety of fidget toys and tools available, but you’ll want a few different types so that your students can find what works best for them. Here are a few popular fidget tools:



Other supports

- ▶ **VISUAL TIMER:** To minimise time-related stress, try displaying a large timer in the front of your classroom. Use this to show students how long they will be doing an activity. Students will be able to prepare for transitions between activities as they see the clock counting down.
 - ▶ **SONGS AND RHYMES:** Another way to prompt students throughout the day is to use songs and rhymes. You can use a song or rhyme when it's time to change from one activity to another or to explain how to do an activity. Songs and rhymes, particularly with actions, are great tools to help students learn and remember.
 - ▶ **MOVEMENT BREAKS:** This is so important! It is important to feed a child's sensory diet – 5 minutes every 60 minutes, physical activity is needed! If your students are having a hard time sitting still, they likely need a few minutes of movement. Incorporating motions into your lessons can help students expel excess energy and refocus them so they're ready to learn. So, allow students to stand up and move around whenever you can fit it into your day.
(Numerous studies show correlations between movements and students' ability to learn. When you use movement in learning and allow students to move more in general, you'll likely see positive academic and behavioural results.)
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The Importance of Routine and Predictability

- ▶ It's important to create a routine and stick to it as much as possible.
 - ▶ Each morning, go over what students can expect each day first thing in the morning. This will help your day flow more smoothly. Prepare your students ahead of time for any changes in routines. For example, remind them often if there is a school assembly or a special classroom activity coming up.
 - ▶ Additionally, be sure that students know if there will be a fire drill or other type of drill. Tell them as soon as you know about it, and remind them often. Any drill with an alarm can be overwhelming for students with sensory processing issues. You can help to avoid meltdowns by preparing them ahead of time.
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Using SPINS to Form Connections

- ▶ Special Interests (SPINS) are intense and sometimes all-encompassing passions. These can be *anything*.
- ▶ These special interests can be central to the person, and all they want to do or communicate about.
- ▶ SPINS are important to the child, and these can be used to bond with you, the parent, but also with others, such as teachers and peers
- ▶ In social situations with other children at school, teachers and SSOs can aid the child to interact with peers incorporating the child's SPIN into conversations
- ▶ SPINS are also very useful to engage children in academic tasks which they find very challenging, or do not see the purpose – such as writing tasks

LASTLY...

Preparation is Key!

- ▶ To reduce Anxiety – increase certainty and perceived control
- ▶ Before going to school, or when a routine at school is changing, talk to your child about what will happen, where it is, who will be there, what time, how long, purpose of the event
- ▶ Show photos of the classroom and/or people, a map, use pictures or AAC device to accompany verbal communication of the event
- ▶ Figure out what works best for your child – some Autistic people are detail-orientated and need ALL the information, others find it overwhelming to have too much language
- ▶ Be cool and calm (at least on the outside) – children pick up if you are anxious
- ▶ The goal is to reduce anxiety, and help your child feel calmer and more comfortable entering the school.
- ▶ Frame everything positively – giving it a go is the aim, whatever happens is ok
- ▶ Listen to your child – if they are worried about something, do not dismiss their concern but acknowledge it. Even if you cannot change it.
- ▶ “That’s so frustrating we forgot your drink. How can we help you feel better...?”