



CREATING INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

*for Primary School
Pupils with Autism*

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WHAT IS AUTISM?

"Autism is a developmental disorder with symptoms that appear within the first three years of life. Its formal diagnostic name is autism spectrum disorder. The word "spectrum" indicates that autism appears in different forms with varying levels of severity. That means that each individual with autism experiences their own unique strengths, symptoms, and challenges." (Autism Research Institute, 2024)

Autism affects over millions of people in the UK; however, approximately only 700,000 people have had a definite diagnosis. This equates to roughly 1 in 100 people. (Beyond Autism, 2021) The number of diagnosed autistic people has gone up by about 300% over the past 20 years. This is because autism has become a lot more known in society and medical professionals have recognised that autism is a large aspect of a person's life, of which they may need extra support to help them in their day-to-day life. (Public Health On Call, 2025) As autism has become more well known in health and educational settings, it has encouraged more families to seek assessments and support for their children.

Every person on the autistic spectrum will experience different symptoms, which affect them in different ways. They may struggle with sensory sensitivities, social interaction, emotional dysregulation, specific routines, focused interests, delayed speech and language skills, and many more. (CDC, 2024) Autism can also affect a child's educational development and not allow them in getting the full support they need to develop skills in an educational setting. For example, some autistic children may find busy classrooms overwhelming due to noise and sensory stimulation, whereas others may struggle with changes in routine or communicating with peers and teachers. (McGoldrick et al. 2025)

AUTISM SPECTRUM

Not like this:



But, more like this:



(SIMPLYPSYCHOLOGY.ORG, 2026)

WHAT IS INCLUSION?

"Inclusion is the practice of including and accommodating people who often face discrimination and exclusion due to race, gender, ability, sexuality, or identity." (Jagoo, 2024) Inclusion is about ensuring that everyone has a sense of belonging and acceptance in the setting they are in. Within education, inclusion mean creating a safe environment where all pupils are given equal opportunities to learn, participate and succeed.

When linking inclusion to autism, it is important to understand that every autistic learner experiences the world differently. Creating an inclusive classroom is not just about allowing autistic pupils in mainstream education, but about ensuring they feel valued, respected, supported and able to fully participate alongside their peers. Sometimes, that means adapting an activity to suit the pupil with autism, but it still allows them to take part. (Astraaba.com, 2025)

Sensory Barriers

Autistic pupils can experience sensory sensitivities that affect how they respond to their environment. Primary school classrooms are often busy, noisy, and visually stimulating places, which can become overwhelming for autistic pupils. Examples of sensory barriers include loud classrooms, bright fluorescent lighting, crowded corridors, strong smells and sensory overload caused by excessive noise or movement. Some children may become distressed by sounds that neurotypical pupils are able to ignore, such as chairs scraping, classroom chatter or school bells. (Cutting, 2019)

Sensory overload can make it difficult for autistic pupils to concentrate, regulate emotions and participate fully in lessons. As a result, some children may appear withdrawn, anxious, distracted or emotionally dysregulated within the classroom environment. In some cases, pupils may avoid activities or refuse to enter certain spaces because they feel overwhelmed.

Mainstream classrooms are often designed around the needs of neurotypical learners, meaning autistic pupils may struggle to access learning comfortably. This highlights the importance of inclusive practice, where teachers make reasonable adjustments such as providing quiet spaces, reducing unnecessary noise, using calming classroom layouts, or allowing sensory breaks throughout the day. By recognising sensory needs, schools can create environments that are more accessible and supportive for autistic learners. (Autism Speaks, 2018)

BARRIERS FACED BY AUTISTIC LEARNERS

Social Barriers

Social interaction can be particularly challenging for autistic pupils within primary school settings. Examples of social barriers include isolation, bullying, friendship difficulties, exclusion from play, and difficulties understanding social rules. Playtimes and group activities may feel especially stressful because they often involve unpredictable interactions and unspoken social expectations.

Autistic children may struggle to form friendships due to differences in communication, interests, or social understanding. As a result, they can become isolated from peers or excluded from social activities. In some cases, autistic pupils may also become targets for bullying because they are perceived as "different" by other children. (team, 2025b)

A lack of peer understanding can negatively affect wellbeing, confidence, and self-esteem. Feeling excluded from friendships or classroom activities may increase anxiety and reduce a child's sense of belonging within school. This demonstrates why inclusion is not only about academic participation, but also about social acceptance and emotional wellbeing. Schools can reduce social barriers by promoting autism awareness, encouraging peer support, and creating inclusive opportunities for cooperative play and group learning. (Marsh, 2024)

Communication Barriers

Many autistic pupils experience communication differences that can affect interactions with teachers and peers. Examples include difficulty interpreting social cues, misunderstanding instructions, challenges with group discussions and difficulty understanding figurative language such as sarcasm or idioms. Some autistic learners may also struggle to express their thoughts verbally or may require additional processing time before responding to questions. (NHS England, 2022)

Within primary schools, communication barriers can impact both academic progress and social participation. For example, a child may misunderstand multi-step instructions during a task, causing frustration or confusion. In group work situations, autistic pupils may find turn-taking, maintaining conversations, or interpreting facial expressions difficult, which can affect collaboration with peers.

Teachers may sometimes mistake communication differences for disengagement, rudeness, or lack of interest. This can create misunderstandings between staff and pupils, particularly if teachers are not trained in recognising autistic communication styles. Inclusive practice involves adapting communication methods by using visual supports, simplified instructions, predictable routines, and clear language. These strategies help autistic learners feel more confident and included within classroom activities. (Aspiedent.com, 2024)

INCLUSIVE PRACTICE FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS



Structured and Predictable Routines

A lot of children with autism like to stick to a routine and get very overwhelmed if something in their daily routine has changed. It can cause them to become unregulated and unsettled for the rest of the day. In order to support them in the classroom, providing them with tools which will help them stay settled and clearly see how the day will pan out will support them in being able to focus and take part in the activities.

For example, having visual timetables, creating clear transitions between activities, doing countdowns or warning before changing to the next task and by having consistent classroom expectations will help the learner in staying emotional regulated and will help them have a better day in school. (CAMHS, 2018)

These methods are effective to support children who struggle with change and routine as it is clearly being set in a way for them to understand what they are doing that day. By having predictability, it can reduce the pupil's anxiety and help them feel safer and more secure in that classroom environment. It also gives them the chance to mentally prepare for the next activity they are going to do.

To this approach, there are some limitations. Sometimes, autistic pupils can become too reliant on routines which could make any unexpected changes that may happen, more difficult for them to understand and regulate themselves. Some disruptions, like staff absences or special events, cannot be avoided. When these disruptions do occur, it can cause the pupil to become unsettled and unregulated for the duration of the day.

Sensory Friendly Classrooms

One main area that many children with autism suffer with is heightened sensory issues. Being in a classroom can be quite an overstimulating environment, also for children without autism. To support children in being able to stay engaged and not become overwhelmed in a classroom environment, is to create quiet areas or small spaces that children can take themselves off to when it all gets a bit too much. By having flexible seating arrangements and fidget toys for pupils to have will allow them to stay engaged in the activities, as they are able to regulate themselves easier. To support them further, reducing noise and lighting in the classroom can prevent a child with autism from becoming unregulated. (team, 2025a)

Putting these changes into practice can create a calming environment, reducing emotional distress, as well as preventing sensory overload. Also, by having less triggers in the classroom, it can improve the child's ability to focus, communicate and participate within the activities. Not only does having inclusive sensory environments benefit autistic pupils, but it also supports other children in the classroom who may struggle with sensory needs. (Thrive, 2025)

Unfortunately, there are some difficulties in putting this into practice. Some schools may not have the funding, resources or the space to create sensory friendly classrooms, meaning some autistic children may be at a disadvantage as they won't be able to concentrate as well as they could if they had that extra space. (inclusiveteach.com, 2026) As all autistic children struggle with different areas, teachers may not be able to safely balance all of the sensory needs each individual child has, causing some of them to miss out on that inclusive environment.

Clear Communication Strategies

Having clear communication strategies in place for all children is important, but especially children who are diagnosed with autism. A lot of children with autism are non-verbal meaning they are unable to communicate through words. (Clinic, 2025) By understanding and recognising the level of the child's communication skills, there are many different ways that support can be put into practice. For example, having visual support cards such as symbols or pictures can help the child interpret what you are trying to say, helping them understand what is going to happen next.

For children with autism who may have some communication, by using clear, simple and direct instructions can help them digest what you are asking them to do, rather than giving them loads of instructions at once. This gives them a chance to process what has been said before having to respond. As well as this, it can support them in remembering the instructions more easily as they have time to think and understand what has been said. (Advancedautism.com, 2025)

Like any other approach, there are limitations to putting this into practice. As all autistic children communicate differently, communication strategies need to be personalised to each individual child. This could become an issue if there aren't enough staff to help and support the children in developing these strategies. The teacher needs to be aware of each child's communication needs which can prove difficult in a larger class.

Differentiated Teaching

Creating differentiated teaching plans for children with autism can allow them to still experience the activities the other children are doing; however, they are planned to fit their individual needs so they can understand the task they are set. By incorporating the child's personal interests into the activity, they are more likely to stay engaged and focus allowing them to complete the task. Using different resources can also personalise the activity more as they can use things that support their holistic development. (Autism Association of Western Australia, n.d.)

Also, by splitting the activities up into smaller steps, it can help the pupil feel more in control of the activity, making it more manageable for them to complete the task. It can also reduce the feelings of overwhelmingness and anxiety as they can set small goals at a time. By also using a checklist of the broken-up tasks, the pupil can clearly see what the next steps are. (Leigh, 2023) By differentiating teaching methods to individual children, it improves the child's participation and confidence, as they are able to do something at their own pace that they can clearly understand.

When it comes to differentiated teaching methods, it can become quite time consuming for the teacher as they have to not only plan for each individual pupil who needs differentiated teaching, but they also then either have to teach another member of staff the way to teach it to that child, or teach it to the child themselves. Not having the staff support or resources can make it difficult for children to have different variations of the lesson planned.

Positive Relationships and Emotional Support

Children need to feel safe and secure when they are in school. Many autistic children may feel anxiety, stress or unregulated emotions due to their needs. By being that person a child can trust, they can have a much greater time in school, maximising their full educational potential. By being understanding and empathetic to the child, it supports positive and trusting relationships to be built between one another. This then also supports the teacher in knowing the child more closely, learning how to support their individual needs in the classroom. (Atkinson, Wood-Downie and Wright, 2024)

For children with autism, having that person in school who they know can trust can make their day go a lot more smoothly as they know that they will be respected, safe and listened to. Having positive relationships improves the pupil's confidence and wellbeing, which will encourage them to participate more in classroom activities.

However, providing consistent emotional support for the child can become challenging in a large classroom, as the teacher is responsible for multiple children at once, so can't also spend one on one time with the pupils. With limited staff numbers and lack of specially trained staff, consistent emotional support may not always be available, but it is important to try and keep positive relationships between the teacher and the pupil.

LEGISLATION

The Equality Act 2010

According to MIND (2023), "The Equality Act 2010 is the law that protects you from discrimination. It also gives you the right to challenge discrimination." This means that if you have any of the protected characteristics of the act, you are protected from discrimination in different areas. As autism is recognised as a disability in the act, it proves that you are entitled to support and resources in schools to ensure you are getting the most out of your education and that you are being treated properly. The Equality Act 2010 applies to all schools in the UK, meaning that schools have to follow this piece of law.

Schools are required to make reasonable adjustments for any learner that is diagnosed with autism, to reduce barriers in education. This could be creating sensory-friendly environments, visual timetables, additional adult support, and many more adjustments. This is to ensure that children with autism can still have the same experience in school as the other children in their class. (National Autistic Society, 2026) It is so important that all schools follow this act as it promotes equality and inclusion within education, preventing exclusion, bullying or discrimination.

Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018

"The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (the Act) makes provision for a new statutory framework for supporting children and young people with additional learning needs." (Welsh Government, 2023) This act was introduced to create a more inclusive and learner-centred approach, ensuring children with additional learning needs are receiving the appropriate support that they are entitled to.

One aspect of the ALNET Act that is really beneficial is the Individual Development Plans (IDP's). An IDP is a legal document which discusses the children additional learning needs, the support they need and the outcomes they hope to achieve. (Snap Cymru, 2024) IDP's are so important for children and staff to have in place so everyone can be in agreement of what the child needs.

During an IDP meeting, the child's parents, school staff and medical professionals come together to create a plan for the child for when they are in school. The pupil is always placed at the center of planning and support, ensuring everything that is said or is going to happen is in the best interest of that child. If children don't get an IDP if it is needed, won't be able to get the support they do need in school to ensure they thrive in education. (Swansea Council, 2023)

Conclusion

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects individuals in many different ways, meaning every autistic child will have their own unique strengths, challenges and support needs. Within primary education, autistic learners can face a variety of barriers, including sensory, communication and social difficulties, which may affect their ability to fully participate and succeed in school. This highlights the importance of inclusion, ensuring that all children feel valued, supported and able to access learning opportunities equally.

Inclusive practice plays a vital role in supporting autistic pupils within mainstream classrooms. Strategies such as structured routines, sensory-friendly environments, clear communication methods, differentiated teaching and positive relationships can help reduce barriers and improve pupils' confidence, wellbeing and participation. Although there can be challenges in implementing these approaches, including limited time, staffing and resources, making reasonable adjustments can have a significant positive impact on a child's educational experience.

Legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 and the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 further reinforces the importance of inclusion by ensuring autistic learners are protected from discrimination and provided with the support they need through reasonable adjustments and Individual Development Plans (IDPs). Overall, creating an inclusive educational environment is essential in helping autistic children feel safe, respected and able to achieve their full potential both academically and socially.

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