

UNDERSTANDING AUTISM IN PRIMARY

SETTINGS

In a primary school setting, autism can be understood as a developmental difference that can affect communication, social interaction, sensory and flexibility of thought. Autistic learners can all display different characteristics that are unique to them, one that can be shown in autistic learners is their sensory processing, where the child experiences sensory sensitivities, such as noise, lights and movement. Also, it is important to focus on what children with autism can do, rather than what they cannot, this means taking a strength-based approach, this is evidenced by Guldberg, K. Bradley, R. Wittemeyer. K., Briscoe, J., Phillips, C. and Jones, G., (2019) as they state strengths that may show in autistic learners, such as they can have a strong attention to detail where they notice different patterns and details that others might not see, many may also have a strong memory where they have excellent recall of facts or routines that they are interested in. Finally, understanding autism in a primary schools setting is very important as it can help to understand the challenges that children with autism may face while being at school, this can include a child having difficulties with transitions, such as moving between activities, rooms or routines, they may also then have social challenges where they may struggle to interact with others. (Guldberg, K., Bradley, R., Wittemeyer, K., Briscoe, J., Phillips, C. and Jones, G., 2019)

Inclusion for autistic learners means ensuring that they have the same opportunities as neurotypical learners and creating an environment that is supportive, accessible and adapted for their needs rather than expecting them to fit into neurotypical norms. Children with autism can thrive when inclusion is prioritised as they are more likely to build confidence, develop social skill and succeed academically, this happens when appropriate accommodations, fostering acceptance and empowering children with autism is provided. (AstraABA,2025) This leaflet will go into more detail on support for Teaching Assistants (TAs) in delivering inclusive practice for autistic learners.



(Dreamstime, 2026)



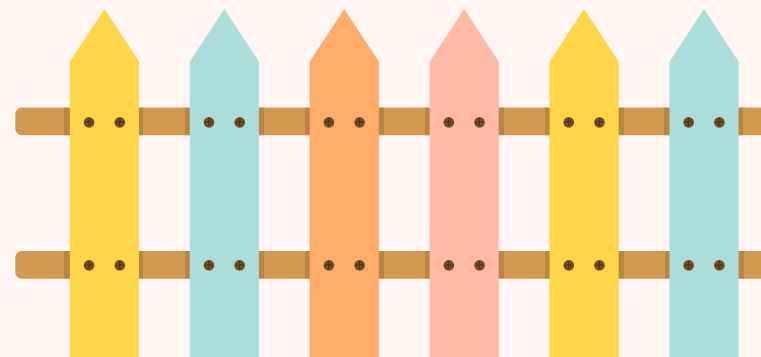
INCLUSIVE SUPPORT FOR AUTISTIC LEARNERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

A GUIDE FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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(Dreamstime, 2026)



Sensory Regulation Strategies

In primary settings many autistic learners can experience sensory issues, this means that they can be over-sensitive, also known as hyper-sensitive or they may be under-sensitive which can be known as hypo-sensitive to sensory input. Having these sensory differences can often lead to stress, anxiety and reduced academic performance for autistic learners. There are many different sensory regulation strategies that TAs can use to help autistic learners manage their sensory input and stay regulated.

Welsh Government (2025) emphasises that many autistic learners often need regular breaks from sensory input to prevent overload. Ways that TAs can provide sensory breaks for children is by offering short breaks in a quiet and low stimulating space, they can also allow time away from a busy classroom, this could be time in a sensory room or an outdoor space, this can also link to providing movement breaks for the student such as walks, stretching, jumping or running. Using sensory breaks can work for many children with autism as they help to reduce anxiety and help to return to a regulated state, Welsh Government (2025) highlights that sensory issues can cause higher than average levels of stress, anxiety and depression' so by using sensory breaks can reduce their sensory load and directly improve their emotional regulation. Another, sensory regulation strategy that TAs can use for children with autism is adjusting the environment, to do this TAs can reduce the noise of the environment such as giving ear defenders to the child or taking the child to a quiet corner. Another way to change the environment is to dim bright lights, minimise clutter and to provide sensory friendly seating, this can include wobble cushions or beanbags. By using these adjustments to the environment, it can help to reduce sensory overload and help children to stay calm and focused, encouraging them to be ready to learn. Some children with autism may need sensory input to stay regulated such as deep pressure or movement. Ways that TAs can provide this is by offering fidget tools or weighted items this can include lap pads and cushions, also using sensory circuits including movements like jumping, pushing or stretching, these are known as proactive sensory input and these work for autistic learners as they help to meet their sensory needs proactively and help to prevent dysregulation and supports engagement in learning. Lastly, when children become overwhelmed, Welsh Government (2025) suggests responsive and calming strategies, what TAs can do to achieve this is to guide the child to a quiet space, offer calming sensory input such as soft texture, deep pressure and rhythmic movements, and by using grounding tools, this can include stress balls or tactile objects. By using these responsive strategies during overload, it can help the child to feel safe again by reducing the fight or flight response that can be triggered by sensory overload. (Welsh Government, 2025)

Welsh Government (2025) explains that sensory issues can be very common in children that have autism, and that when a child experiences these it can lead to stress, anxiety and reduced academic performance, by TAs supporting these sensory needs it help children to stay calm, focused and ready to learn, each of these interventions need to be tailored to each learner as every learner with autism is different.

The Equality Act 2010 links with sensory regulation strategies in many ways, firstly the Equality act requires schools to take 'reasonable step to avoid substantial disadvantage' (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015) as for some autistic children sensory overload may be seen as a substantial disadvantage as it affects access to learning, emotional regulation and participation in school life. Therefore, all the sensory regulation strategies mentioned can qualify as reasonable adjustments. Another, link between the Equality Act 2010 and sensory regulation strategies is as a part of the Act schools must anticipate the needs of pupils with disabilities and plan adjustments in advance and not reactively, this means that schools must expect that children with autism may have sensory needs, that there needs to be planned sensory friendly environments and that sensory tools and supports need to be provided proactively, this then shows that sensory regulation strategies fulfil the Act's requirements or anticipatory adjustments. Lastly, the Equality Act links with sensory regulation in many ways as they can be seen as legally supported as they remove substantial disadvantage, act as reasonable adjustment, count as auxiliary aids and services, adapt the environment to prevent discrimination and ensure equal access to education, this can make sensory regulation good practice as well as a legal duty for school under the Equality Act 2010. (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015)

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Visual Supports:

Visual supports are any visual tool that can help a learner to understand information, visual support that can be very useful are visual timetables, now and next boards, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), symbols, photos and icons, also task breakdowns or step by step visuals. Welsh Government (2025) state that these visual supports are effective as many autistic children find verbal instructions difficult, but by having visuals it provides a more stable reference that can reduce confusion for the child. Also, visuals can reduce anxiety, this is because predictability can lower their anxiety and help them to have a better understanding of what is happening now, what is happening next and what is expected of them, which all help to reduce uncertainty, this links to lower stress, anxiety and challenging behaviour in autistic learners. Welsh Government (2025) highlights that visuals can 'improve comprehension and support communication development' it can do this as they can help children who struggle with expressive language, need extra processing time and children who benefit from non-verbal communication, this can also link with visual supports helping autistic learner with their independence as when visuals stay in place children can check instructions without asking an adult, complete tasks step by step and also help them transition more independently. Lastly, they can improve engagement and learning as it can help autistic learners to stay focused, understand expectations, engage in tasks better and participate in routines.

Teaching Assistants can use these visual supports effectively in many ways, firstly TAs can use visual timetables to show the children the structure of the day and to help them to prepare pupils for any changes, then by TAs using now and next boards throughout the day they can break tasks into more manageable step, which help to provide clarity and predictability. Another, visual support that TAs can use is visual scripts; by using these it can provide children with sentence starters or phrases, this also supports social communication and help with their conversation skills. Then, TAs can reduce reliance on adult prompts by using task breakdown visuals, it does this by providing step by step instructions for activities and supporting their independence. Lastly, TAs can help children to understand expectations without using overwhelming verbal language by using visual cues for behaviour such as, visual rules, emotion scales and choice boards. (Welsh Government, 2025)

The ALNET Act 2018 requires schools to remove barriers to learning, make reasonable adjustments, provide accessible communication, use person centred approaches and ensure that needs are met through IDPs. (Welsh Government, 2018) When these visual supports are consistently used in primary setting it can fulfil these duties as it makes communication more accessible for children with autism, they can help to reduce the barriers that are made from sensory overload and verbal processing, they also help to support making routines more predictable, while also helping autistic learners to understand expectations and lastly visual supports are a reasonable adjustment that are easy to implement. (Welsh Government, 2025)

BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

Systemic barriers:

These barriers are made because of policies, systems, resources or organisational structures that are in education, firstly an inconsistent identification of needs can be a barrier in primary schools as when learners with autism are identified late, the support that they should be getting is delayed.

Attitudinal Barriers:

These barriers can be caused by beliefs, assumptions or misunderstandings from adults, understanding autistic learners is important otherwise misunderstanding autism can happen, to stop this barrier understanding that some autistic behaviours are not them being defiant or attention seeking but seeing it as them trying to communicate there unmet needs. Also, don't have low expectations and underestimate an autistic learners abilities, as by doing this it can limit there opportunities for challenge and independence. Lastly, it is important to remember to have child centred practice, so that children are involved in decisions, rather than making all of the decisions for them.

Sensory and Environmental Barriers:

These barriers can come from the physical environment, sensory input and classroom organisation. Firstly, it is important to try and avoid the barrier of unpredictable routines as for children with autism sudden changes and transitions in their day may cause them to become anxious, as many autistic learners need structure. Another, barriers can be inaccessible teaching materials, this can mean that when doing activities with children with autism you are using too many verbal instructions, having unclear expectations of what needs to be done, this can then link to the barrier of having physical layout issues, having this barrier means that the area you may be doing an activity in is too crowded or that the workstation is unclear, this can make it hard for an autistic learner to navigate what they are meant to be doing.

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CONCLUSION

To conclude, when supporting children with autism in a primary setting, it requires recognising all children's unique strengths and needs. After reviewing predictable routines, structured transitions, visual supports and sensory regulation strategies it is clear that they are essential adjustment that help children with autism to feel safe, understood and ready to learn. These supports help to overcome barriers to inclusion such as, sensory, systemic and attitudinal and help to create an environment where autistic learner can participate meaningfully and confidently. Teaching assistants play a massively important role in delivering these supports through consistent communication, proactive planning and responsive regulation strategies, by them having these daily interactions it can help to reduce anxiety, build trust and promote independence, ensuring that all children with autism have access to equal learning. Also, it is important that all of these practices are underpinned by key legislation, such as ALNET Act 2010, the Equality Act 2010 and the UNCRC, which all place clear duties on schools to remove barriers, provide adjustments and uphold children's rights to education, dignity and participation. Overall, effective inclusion is achieved when schools commit to understanding autistic learners, adapting environments.

Predictable Routines & Transition Support:

Having predictable routines and supported transitions are essential for children with autism, this is evidenced by the Welsh Government (2025) as they explain that many autistic learners often experience high levels of stress and anxiety in schools as classrooms can become busy, social and unpredictable environment.

Clear, consistent and predictable daily routines are beneficial for children with autism as uncertainty for them can increase their anxiety and reduce their ability to engage in learning. TAs can help to make routines more predictable by providing visual timetables to show how the day will be structured, they can also give advance warnings of change such as, tidy up time is in five minutes, also by keeping routines throughout the week consistent. Then by using now and next boards to break tasks into more smaller steps and by providing visual reminders of what the classroom expectations and sequences are. Using these supports can work as predictability can reduce anxiety that may be caused by communication and sensory challenge, also visual routines may reduce reliance on verbal instructions and consistent routines can help children to feel safe, which then improves their emotional regulation and academic engagement. (Welsh Government, 2025)

Many children with autism can find transitions between activities, rooms, lessons or staff difficult, Welsh Government (2025) explains that sensory issues and communication differences can heighten stress during these moments. TAs can provide support in these moments by preparing the child with visual cues, this can include now and next boards, countdown timers and photos of the next location, they can also provide the child with sensory breaks before or after the transition, also by walking through the transition with the child before it happens, for example visiting a new classroom before the change happens. Lastly by keeping transitions calm and unhurried, by doing this it reduces sensory overload for the child. By providing this support it helps to prepare the child and reduce the fight or flight response that can be triggered by sensory overload, also visual and structured transitions support helps children with autism to have a better understanding of what is happening, this can then help to lower their anxiety and improve behaviours. (Welsh Government, 2025)

Overall, Welsh Government (2025) guidance states that many children with autism of experience sensory issues, high anxiety, difficulties with communication and socialising and stress in busy and unpredictable environments. Which is why predictable routines and supported transitions can directly reduce these barriers as they provide structure, reduce sensory overload, support communication, increase emotional safety and improve their access to learning, which makes them essential to inclusive practices. (Welsh Government, 2025)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has several rights that can directly link to predictable routines and structured transitions for autistic learners. Firstly, it can link to these supports as Article 3 is best interests of the child as having predictable routines and supported transitions reduce anxiety and distress for autistic learners using these strategies is acting in the child's best interests, particularly as unpredictability can cause emotional or sensory overload. As children with autism often communicate better with visual support, choice boards or structured routines, by using these through predictable routines and transition support, it upholds their right to be heard from Article 12 as they have a better understanding of what is happening, can express preferences and participate in decisions about their day. Lastly, Article 28 a right to education can link as many autistic learners cannot fully access their education when transitions are sudden, routines are unpredictable, sensory overloads occur and when expectations are unclear. By having this support, it removes barriers to their learning ensuring that they have an equal access to education. (Welsh Government, 2021)

