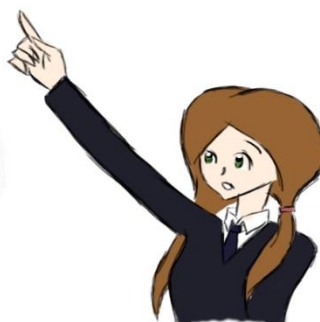


Dos and Don'ts When Supporting Young People with Autism in Mainstream Schools – an illustrated guide.



imagination



communication



social interaction



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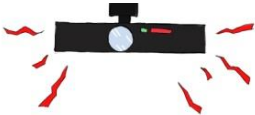
Illustrated by Naomi Langton

In this pamphlet Gareth D Morewood considers key dos and don'ts for SENCos planning support for students with ASC to help provide the foundation for a strong, inclusive supportive programme.

Autism can be characterised by a 'triad of impairments':

- social interaction
- communication
- imagination (flexibility of thought and behaviour).¹

These three areas can be most challenging for any young person as they develop, but even more so for those with autism. They can face significantly increased challenges at school, and are at an increased risk of a range of negative outcomes. SENCos need to consider these challenges when deciding how best to support students with ASC.



DO: Provide a suitable environment

Firstly, it is important that students with autism are not simply expected to fit into existing classrooms and school structures. Some will benefit from a screened work area (such as that used in the **TEACCH method** [www.teacch.com]); mobile screens can be made easily in technology departments or by site maintenance teams. SENCos should also consider each learning climate. Enhanced sensory awareness may mean that the humming of projectors or other seemingly incidental noises are like a bee buzzing in the ear for a student with autism. Ask specialist staff to work with the student on a 'sensory audit' and classroom checklist. SENCos need to consider flexible solutions in order to be inclusive.

DO: Train staff and educate peers

It is essential that all staff in your institution have a basic knowledge of autism, and specific information about each student. Equally, my recent work with young people who have needs on the autism spectrum indicates it is also important for all students to understand what autism is, as they are often the best form of support. If they don't realise a fellow student has a hidden disability, such as autism, they may simply see someone who they can 'wind up'; this is where a knowledgeable staff can help to spot these situations. Promote inclusion and awareness by delivering whole school assemblies, or agreeing a 'script' with individuals about their autism and reading it in classes (with or without the student present).



DO: Have an ASC-friendly rewards system

Most schools have a reward system, but it may mean less to students with autism. It should be based on realistic, achievable targets, and rewards need to be as immediate as possible. Often, small token rewards are sufficient. Or, if you are feeling adventurous, give your student half an hour on a games console or computer game before home-time! Do some research and develop a clear system that is easy to use and provides regular 'rewards' – things we may think are not worth much may be what motivates your student with ASC.

DO: Provide visual support

Using visual aids to support an understanding of events and systems in school is a tried and tested method that benefits all students. Most children find it easier to understand things visually, but this is especially true for those with autism. Visual timetables, as well as images of events, lessons and activities are easy to make and help support routines in school. Lists, common objects and calendars help students with autism understand sequences of events, as well as accept unusual events before they occur. A change in routine may be difficult to deal with, so pre-learning provides a smooth transition into a new system.



DO: Invest in transition

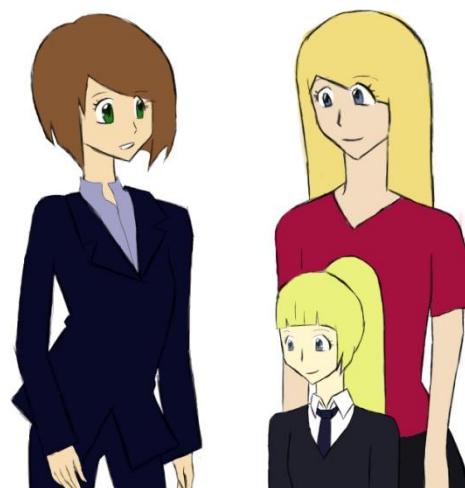
Transitions can be difficult for all students, but particularly so for those with autism; and I don't simply mean transition from primary to secondary schooling; daily transitions can be extremely challenging. Students with autism can have very disturbed sleep patterns² and the transition from school to home may be the most important part of the day for key support. Developing a visual aid for getting dressed, brushing teeth etc. may assist parents and carers greatly. Being flexible with the start time of school or transitions between lessons can also help; sometimes simply allowing a secondary school student to leave five minutes early and arrive five minutes late avoids the busy transition periods, and is a simple solution to many potential difficulties.



DON'T: Forget the parents and carers

Parents and carers can experience very difficult times at home – at school we have the young people for six hours, but they are 'learning' at home for 18 hours each day! Supporting parents and carers with visual aids for home and school routines, as mentioned above, helps to reduce anxiety and stress.

We often support parents/carers with visual schedules for changes in school routines; for example a year/form photograph or an educational visit. Discussing the changes in school routines with the student and developing a visual schedule to support this in advance is very powerful. Copies can then be sent home, left in school and miniaturised for the young person themselves. A parent/carer can then go through the visual prompt with the individual the evening before any trip or photo, and again staff can support this change in routine upon arrival to school. Not a magic answer, but will definitely reduce the autism-associated risks with such events!



DON'T: Expect students with autism to manage a standard timetable

It is rare that a student with autism can simply manage the prescribed timetable of a school week, so SENCOs need to create supportive time-slots to help ease the build-up of pressure each day. Due to the specific needs associated with autism, some students will need 'down time' – in a secondary school, this may mean a slightly reduced number of subjects and in primary school perhaps a designated rest period each day. Also, SENCOs can help to ease some of the internalised pressures of trying to conform to a general schedule by supporting lessons through 'pre-learning' relevant vocabulary and providing some 'asocial' learning (on the computer).

Timetable

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1					
8:50-9:45					
2					
9:45-10:40					
Reg					
10:40-10:50					
Break					
10:40-11:10					
Reg					
11:10-11:20					
3					
11:20-12:15					
4					
12:15-13:10					
5					
13:10-14:05					
6					
14:05-14:55					

DON'T: Forget the communication environment

Students with autism find communicating difficult; they may have good conversational skills, but their comprehension may be poor. They may misinterpret or ignore humour, irony and sarcasm, have difficulty with new vocabulary, and can often struggle to indicate that they have not understood something. Specialist support can help with developing and practising skills – this can be a designated member of support staff under the guidance of a speech and language therapist. However, it should be timetabled and regular (ideally daily), with visual support and regular opportunities to practice strategies and skills.



DON'T: Ignore the positives

It's important to remember that young people on the autism spectrum may also:

- be loyal and dependable
- have exceptional memory
- display persistence in pursuing topics
- adhere meticulously to routines and appreciate order
- have particular areas of knowledge, skill, etc.

Explore opportunities to use these qualities to promote positive messages about autism across the school. It will also provide an increased sense of worth and belonging to the young person, which will be hugely beneficial to their learning experience.

well done



References and further reading:

¹ WING, L and GOULD, J (1979) Severe impairments of social interaction and associated abnormalities in children: epidemiology and classification, *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 9(1), 11-29.

² WIGGS, L. (2004) Sleep patterns and sleep disorders in children with autistic spectrum disorders: insights using parent report and actigraphy. *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology*, 46: 372–380

MOREWOOD, G. D., HUMPHREY, N. & SYMES, W. (2011) Mainstreaming Autism: making it work. *Good Autism Practice Journal*, 12(2):62-68.