

SCHOOL HANDBOOK FOR

STUDENTS



Autism Spectrum
Information Advice
and Meeting Point

Forward

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read our Student's Guide to School, aimed at those with conditions at the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum.

As a young person with Aspergers syndrome, I know that school can be very difficult for teenagers with a form of autism.

We wanted to create something which would help you to understand that you are not alone and that by working with your parents and teachers you can find approaches which help you to achieve your own potential in school.

We knew that writing a book for students alone wouldn't do enough - we wanted to help teachers understand the condition better and also YOUR personal needs, so we have produced guidebooks, which also helps parents and teachers prepare for the year ahead, and a small booklet for you and your parents to share your personal experiences with teachers.

We don't have all the answers but we hope this series will help generate a conversation and create greater awareness.

We will also be working this year, through a new schools programme, to educate more students in Ireland about the condition, as we believe it something everyone needs to understand in order for school to be a little easier for those of us with the condition.

We hope you enjoy the guidebook and please do check out our website, AslAm.ie, to learn more about our work and get involved.

Many thanks and best wishes for the year ahead.

Kind regards,

Adam Harris

FOUNDER, CEO AslAm.ie





1. Getting Ready

Starting back to school after the long summer break can be stressful. You might have found you were only settling in to the new summer routine or you simply find school difficult to deal with and suddenly it is September again.

However, with good preparation and a positive outlook you can make the most from school. Very few people love school, but it is something we all go through and hopefully get something out of – so here are some tips to get off to the best start the year and make school as an enjoyable and stress-free as possible.

GETTING BACK INTO ROUTINE In the week ahead of school get back into a habit of getting enough sleep. Go to bed earlier and get up earlier – easing your body clock back into the school term. As odd as it might sound, you will need energy to cope with the demands of the new school year and the changes that might involve so make sure you get enough sleep.

PRACTISING During the summer we can all get a little 'rusty' in certain areas we might find difficult. When was the last time you handwrote a list or notes? When was the last time you had deadlines or timetables? Think of skills which you need in school but find difficult and try to practise them in the days before school.

GET ORGANISED Disorganisation leads to stress in school. Use the time before school, and the early days of term, to get your notes in order, make lists of what you will need for class and come up with a way of remembering things for school.

WORRIES You may have had negative experiences in school last year, you may be worried about a new challenge this year or the unexpected of what is to come may really be making you feel anxious. It can be very hard to ask for help or talk about how you feel but it is a key part in getting the support and help you need. Why not make a 'worry list', if you don't want to talk about it, and let your parent's read it or why not try and make this new school year different by making a list of things you like about school, you don't like about school or things you would like to change – if nothing else maybe it can get everyone thinking.

KEEP BUSY If you are worried about school ahead of it starting, it is important to try and keep busy and not let it get on top of you. Why not use the last few days before school to do things you enjoy.



2. Coping with Change

The start of the year can be difficult as there is so much change going on – new teachers, classes, courses and routines. There are often many new faces around a school and many familiar are gone. The routine you had grown accustomed to is suddenly changed and you are expected to adapt. While this can be daunting, with some preparation, it can also be an opportunity to make sure things which haven't worked in the past can be started anew.

Here are some of our tips for coping with change:

PREPARE YOURSELF Preparation is important. It is difficult to walk into a building and be thrown into a change. Talk to your parents and school in advance of the new term. Find out if your locker will be in a different area, if you will have new teachers, if any teacher has left the school, what you will be learning this year and so on. While this doesn't change the fact that things will be different, it gives you time to reflect and prepare yourself and to flag any concerns with your parents before the first school day.

MANAGE THE CHANGE If you find change particularly difficult, see if you can take it in steps. If there is an increased workload, you might not be able for 2 hours extra study a night immediately, but you can build up to it piece by piece. Maybe your school can help you make some changes and transitions slower? Also consider the importance of keeping things calm – if everything is changed at school try and keep things as you like them at home so you are not trying to cope with too much at the same time.

OUTLETS If you are stressed about school and how it has changed, be sure not to keep all the worry inside you. Do activities, after school, which help you to relax and consider ways of managing your stress – exercise, talking to someone, writing or taking a rest with some mindfulness or meditation.

EDUCATE Remember change does always throw up something positive, even if it seems invisible at first. It's a new school year with new teachers. Through using our "All About Me" booklet you can ensure they understand you better and work with you to find the best approaches to support you in school.

WHAT IF? The really scary part of change can be not knowing what to expect. Use our "What if" page in this booklet to plan with your new teachers and parents what you are worried about, what to do if this event or thing happens and what support you will receive.

3. Challenges of The Classroom

Classrooms can be a difficult environment – it can be hard to cope in its busy atmosphere, difficult to sit still and concentrate and hard to keep pace and stay calm. However with a few tricks, and some support from teachers and family, it can become easier.

Here are some tips for coping in class this year:

SENSES Classrooms can be very noisy and seem crowded. At times there can also be irritating noises such as squeaky whiteboards, people making annoying noises and different machinery in different rooms. In our “All About Me” booklet why not make a list of all the noises you find difficult and share it with your teacher? Maybe there is a coping mechanism you can use. If things get very noisy you might need to ask to step out of the room for a minute or go to a quiet area of the room, maybe you block your ears and so your teacher needs to know why or perhaps by discussing noises you find difficult with your teacher, these noises can be reduced or avoided or maybe you can be prepared for when they will happen. Even if you don't want to talk to your teacher personally by giving the “All About Me” booklet to them or asking your parent to mention it – a lot can be achieved through communication.

CONCENTRATION This is something everyone finds hard some days. The class may be dragging on or you might have something worrying you which is stopping you from focusing. Maybe you are someone who gets absorbed by their own thoughts sometimes and drifts off. Concentration is an important part of learning however and so it is worth putting some effort into improving it.

- What makes you distracted or lose concentration? If you can pinpoint this you can work with your school and parents to try and come up with a solution to avoid this loss of concentration.
- Does exercise help? If you exercise throughout the day or before school is your mind better able to concentrate? If so maybe you can work this into your daily routine.

- Anxiety: When we are stressed or worried about something it makes it harder to concentrate on what is going on around us. Is there a way you can park your worries? Can you write them down in a notebook and come back to them later? Can you talk to someone about them in school and then concentrate again? Some days when you are very anxious do you need some time away from everyone to get your thoughts back together?

- Note-taking: If you find concentration difficult make sure you write everything down. That way you have something to come back to later when you are better able to concentrate.
- Being kept on task: You may be someone who can concentrate better when someone is keeping them on task. Can you concentrate better in class when you are doing a piece of work rather than just listening? Do you find it helpful when the teacher prompts you through a question or task if you are losing focus?

Concentration is a challenge for many students so consider these questions, talk to the people supporting you and try and get the best plan in place for you.

SITTING STILL If you are a person who likes to keep moving, finds seating uncomfortable or just finds it very tough to sit still, the classroom can be a challenge. Consider equipment you can get to make this easier – maybe a stress ball you can keep on your desk or a moving' sit cushion which will provide you with movement. Also consider asking if you can take a brief walk between classes during a double class to break the period sitting still up.

SOCIAL ASPECT The social aspect of the classroom can be tough. You might find other students irritating in the classroom or maybe you find it difficult to work in a group or concentrate if people are sitting beside you and talking. It is important to not take this frustration out on other students and also to try your best in group work. However maybe if you explain how some social aspects of class can be stressful or distracting for you, your teacher can seat you somewhere you are better able to concentrate or put you in a group or pair with people you can work with better.

KEEPING-UP The school year is short and the curriculum is long. It can be very tough for teachers to cover everything and so they may move quite quickly and you may find it tough to keep up. A good practise to get in to is to write instructions down as they are called out so you don't miss a step, ensure teachers understand the pace you can cope with and not to be afraid to ask for something to be repeated or explained again.

BEHAVIOUR There is a certain standard of behaviour expected in classrooms. Aside from the etiquette of communication (putting your hand up, not contradicting a teacher, avoiding what might be perceived as 'cheeky'), it is also important to manage any frustration you may have while in class. Situations can very easily go from a small disagreement to a major confrontation with a teacher or other student if we get frustrated and lose patience. If you are feeling very upset or annoyed, discuss at the start of the year if there is a signal you can give to get some time out. Never try and resolve a disagreement when you are angry, as hard as it is, step away, take a deep breath and come back to the matter when you are feeling calmer.

ROUTINE / SCHEDULE Having a structure and routine is important to many people, if it changes in any way it can be worrying and create uncertainty. If schedules are important to you, consider communicating this to your teacher. If you can be made aware of changes ahead of time, you will be able to prepare yourself better.

APPLICATION It can be hard to apply yourself to a piece of work if you don't feel ready or in the right frame of mind, this might be particularly true if it is something you need to think about or a subject you find more difficult or enjoy less. If you are asked to do a piece of work in class, try to focus on it and avail of the opportunity to ask questions if you are stuck. Don't feel too bad if you can't get it all finished though - many perfectionists find it difficult to work against the clock and when they are not ready, so it is a skill you can work on with your teachers overtime. If it is an ongoing problem consider asking to be allowed complete the exercise at home.

4. Getting Organised

Organisation can be really difficult – remembering all the different items and deadlines for each class, keeping everything together and easy to get and working out what you need and what you don't need is much easier said than done.

However organisation is important, especially in secondary school, and staying on top of it will help reduce the time you need to spend looking for things and also the anxiety about forgetting or losing things.

Here are some tips for organisation this school year:

At the Start of Term

COLOUR CODE When you are standing at a locker, full of books and equipment, it can be difficult to identify what you need, especially while it is so busy all around you and you are in a rush. When you get your time table, why not colour code it? For each subject, you then match the colour you assign on the time table to the equipment. For example maths might be blue and so you stick a blue sticker to your copy, the spine of the maths book, your geometry set and other equipment you might have. Then do a count of objects and see how many you have for each subject. Write this number on the subject space in the timetable. From now on, when you go to your locker you will see “Maths” in blue and the number “3” written beside it – all you have to do is find 3 maths objects. Easy!

FILE IT RIGHT AWAY When we are rushing out of a classroom or finally finished our homework it is an easy temptation to just stick any loose notes in our bags instead of placing them in a folder. It seems like a great idea at the time but when you forget, or they build up at the end of your bag, you are suddenly left with a heap of notes, with useful information, that are unusable or will take hours to sort. Teachers can also get annoyed by this due to the time and costs of photocopying. By filing it right away you make things so much easier when it comes to study for exams at the end of the year.

ASK ABOUT LOCKERS TIME Do you find it difficult using your locker when it is very busy and you are surrounded by people or, perhaps, it is very noisy? Do you find having a bottom locker very difficult? If so, mention this to your parents and teachers at the start of the year – maybe they can arrange for you to be able to access your locker at a different time? Staying organised is hard enough without being surrounded at the same time!

ALWAYS USE A CHECK LIST When you bring things home for homework or study there is always a danger they will never return to school, the same is true of remembering to bring books and equipment home for the work in the first place! The trick is to keep a checklist of things you need to remember to bring home, and the same for going to school each morning, you can add to the list throughout the day as you get assignments etc. Then when you get home in the evening, write down everything you need to remember to bring back the next day plus staple items like your lunchbox and keys, for example. Then before leaving either home or school go through each item on the list and ensure it is in your bag.

KEEP A DEADLINE CALENDER Homework and big assignments can be stressful. They are even more stressful when they are left until the last minute or you forget the deadline and as a result don't get the work in on time (and all the consequences that go with that). For this academic year, why not get a calendar just for deadlines? Each time you get a deadline, you can write it in your journal and then transfer it to a calendar at home. Work with your parents and teachers to make sure you get a plan in place to meet the deadlines and don't forget to bring the work in on the day it's due!

GET EXTRAS Worried about forgetting a geometry set or your notepad? Do you always leave books at home? Why not talk to your parent's about getting some extra books or equipment? You can leave them in the school office and then if you forget your original you can go and get it - always bringing it back at the end of the day so it is there whenever you do need it.

TALK TO YOUR TEACHER If you find it really difficult to stay organised, talk to your teacher at the start of the year about this. If you don't feel comfortable maybe your parent will do it for you. If the problem can be explained well maybe the teacher will be more understanding that you can be disorganised and might even have ideas for how you can improve.

Throughout the Year

USE A JOURNAL Sounds like a no-brainer, right? Many students don't use their journals but it is so hard to remember all the different books, deadlines and pieces of information unless you do. Make sure you write down everything you need to remember to do or bring to your next class and also any guidance the teacher has for your work (how many pages, what topic etc). Make sure you then check the journal when you go home each evening and tick each item off as it's done. Using your journal properly will greatly reduce the odds of forgetting things and getting stressed about it

CLEAN LOCKER / BAG ETC Lockers and bags can get full, messy and even dirty. As the year wears on, it can become difficult to find things and they can become a lot like an 'Aladdin's Cave!' To avoid this and stay on top of things, plan a regular clean / sort out of your locker and bag. Take out anything you don't need, file any straggling notes and put everything back in tidily.

DO A CHECK Whatever approach you take to staying organised, as the year progresses see if it is working. Are you still organised? Do your parents and teachers think so? Be prepared to work with them to find a better way if things can be improved. Also at different times in the year you might find it harder to stay organised - when you are preparing for exams for example - so you may need to take extra measures or need extra help at this time.

STAY CALM When you are disorganised it is easy to feel overwhelmed, upset or stressed. However this won't help the situation! At the start of the year fill out our "What if..." card with your teacher and agree what you should do if you forget something. Go to the card and follow the steps - you may still feel stressed but at least you are doing the right things to fix the problem instead of just worrying or getting very stressed.



5. Making Full Use of Supports

At times getting help, support or resources can be annoying. You might feel you don't need them or maybe you wonder if other people ask questions. However getting supports in secondary school does not give you an unfair advantage in exams or say anything about your intelligence – it simply ensures that you have the help you need in order to a) have as happy time at school as possible and b) are enabled to reach your potential within the education system.

If you are offered support of any kind, think twice before rejecting it and, even if it makes you uncomfortable, at least have a chat about it with your parents, teachers and school management.

Some supports, which some people with autism receive are:

SNA If you find a particular time of the day difficult or would benefit from having someone to provide support, reassurance and guidance – you may be allocated a Special Needs Assistant. Fewer people are given an SNA full-time now so you may only have one part-time or may not need one at all.

RESOURCE HOURS If you are exempt from a specific subject in school, or during certain non-exam classes, you may be offered resource hours. These classes which take place either one to one, or in a small group with a resource teacher, provide a big opportunity for you to get to focus on an area you might find difficult in school or an aspect of the curriculum you are struggling with. Resource teachers are also there to help and will often be the first point of call if you need any additional supports in school.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY / TYPING Do you find handwriting difficult or find that the use of a laptop or tablet helps you to stay organised or concentrate? Some schools may permit you to use your laptop or other such device in school and do your homework on it. Talk to your parents or teachers if you think this is something you may benefit from.

RAS IN EXAMS The Reasonable Accommodation Scheme is a scheme run by the State Exams Commission. To give a fair chance to students with additional needs, they permit certain changes in how an exam usually works for some students. You may be permitted to type or record your exam, you may get someone to read for you or receive a spelling and grammar waiver. There are several different options based on individual need. Talk to your school guidance counsellor / resource teacher about this service. You will need to apply and if, for example, you are hoping to type your State exams it would be important to get to practise this in school exams.

DARE The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a scheme available to students applying for 3rd level courses through the CAO. You submit your application with your CAO form and students with conditions on the autism spectrum automatically qualify, as well as ensuring your future college is aware of your educational needs, it also provides a points reduction scheme (up to 12.5% in point reduction) for many courses.

SUPPORT Aside from the statutory support available to students, many schools are very keen to support and help students if they are finding something difficult. If support is offered to you don't decline it without thinking carefully, and if you are worried, concerned or stressed about something don't be afraid to get tell school management, a resource teacher, supportive teacher or SNA (or get your parents to) as if they are unaware of your difficulty with something they can do nothing to help!

OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL You may access some type of support outside of school, which will help make school itself more manageable. This may not be the case for everyone and the support might be different for everyone - maybe it is occupational therapy or counselling, stress management or relaxation classes. At times you may get fed up with this support or feel it makes you look different, but if it is beneficial don't give up on it and do voice concerns you may have about the support with the professional and your parents - maybe they can come up with a solution to make it better.

6. Communication Guide

At times school can be a stressful environment and it can be difficult to understand what a teacher wants you to, what they mean or how it is best to interact with teachers. Equally it can be challenging to interact with the many different students, their personalities and their way of communicating.

Here are some of our tips for effective communication with others in your school.

Teachers / Staff

INSTRUCTION Following instructions in a busy classroom can be difficult. It can be especially difficult if a number of instructions are given at once – it's easy to lose track or be unsure what the next step is. If you find these type of instructions, called 'rote instruction', difficult be sure that your teacher knows this. If you cannot follow the instructions ask for them to be repeated when he/she has finished giving them. Also consider noting each step when they are given so that you can follow them after he/she has finished speaking and it is time to begin.

VAGUENESS Human beings have a habit of being vague, and this is frustrating. If you are given a task, such as writing an essay, and not specifically told all the 'rules', like how long it should be, what it should be about and what to include specifically, it can be very hard to know where to start. If your teacher gives an instruction you find difficult because it does not have a clear boundary – ask him/her to help you by setting a clear outline, of what is expected, for you.

TERMS OF EXPRESSION As if following lots of instructions or listening intently wasn't challenging enough, the Irish habit of using 'terms of expression' such as "how long is a piece of string?", "don't be there until your back" or "the straw that broke the camel's back" can make it even tougher. If your teacher throws in a "term of expression" such as this frequently, why not write it down and ask them to explain it when they have time. Many people have favourite "terms of expression" which they use frequently and so if you can learn the explanation of what their favourites mean, it may make things easier.

HUMOUR Everyone has different senses of humour and at times we can all confuse or even insult each other if we don't understand that another person is joking or don't see the fun in what they are saying. You may think a teacher is being mean or angry with you when in fact they are only joking. Sarcasm as a form of humour can be especially difficult to understand. If you are struggling to see when a teacher is joking or when they are serious, ask for this to be more clearly defined for you. A key thing to remember is if they are joking they don't mean what they are saying and do not mean to cause offence.

ATMOSPHERE Atmosphere is a hard thing to explain and also, at times, to sense. There are times though when the mood of people in a room influences the general mood in a room. For example, when people are all studying there may be a common sense of stress in the room or if a teacher is annoyed with a class, for misbehaving, there may be an upset feeling among everyone. When there is a 'negative' atmosphere such as the two described this can influence how people will communicate – they may be more irritable, more rushed or may be less open to answering questions or supporting you. If something is going on, like studying or everyone is getting ready to go on a tour, it is not always the best time to ask a question or to use the bathroom for example. Ask your teacher for some specific examples of this and when they happen try and sense the atmosphere. Human beings are changeable and so sometimes things happen out of the blue, but at least if you know the appropriate behaviours for these scenarios it is easier to cope, even though we can all judge the atmosphere wrong sometimes! A key thing to remember is often a person may snap or get annoyed when they are busy or there is a negative atmosphere, but it is not personal, it is just they are trying to cope with all that is going on – let's face it we are all like that sometimes!

LISTENING SKILLS We all can get easily distracted, even by our own thoughts, and so, when listening to someone, it is easy for our mind to 'zone out' for a time. However, listening is a very important part of learning but also of being able to cope, in terms of knowing what is expected of you, what is about to happen etc. Listening to someone attentively is also an important sign of respect. Try to focus on what is being said and if you do zone out, ask for a teacher to repeat themselves. There are many great games you can get on your phone or your computer and also many educational tools which can help with this so talk to your parents or teachers if this is an issue for you.

TALKING IN TURN When there is a big room of people it is important to maintain order in a discussion, otherwise no one will be heard or learn and everyone will get frustrated. It is a difficult job for a teacher to try and maintain that order and it is why, in most schools, you are expected to raise your hand if you wish to ask a question or make a point. When we have a really urgent question or a really interesting thing to say it can be difficult to not just speak out of turn but try and train yourself hard to put up your hand and wait your turn – that way everyone will be listening, and no one will be annoyed, when you do get to speak.

BEING DIRECT Being direct is a great life skill – if people were more direct there would be less communication 'break-downs' and instructions would be clearer. However being direct can also seem aggressive, rude or cheeky if you are too matter of fact. That is why it is always important to think twice before you say what you think and, if you do say something which a teacher or others feel sounds rude, for example, ask them to explain how it would be better put across.

KEEPING CALM At times communication may go dreadfully wrong. You might feel you cannot articulate how you feel or are not being listened to. However this is a communication fault. If you get irritated or angry this will escalate the situation to a full 'breakdown' where people will not understand why you are upset and you will still not understand why they can't understand you. So when this happens try to take a deep breath or even step away for a moment and address the issue when you are feeling calmer.

Students

TURN-TAKING When talking to other students it is important not to speak over each other and to take turns in speaking. Again, it ensures everyone is listened to and everyone is happier!

CONVERSATION We all like talking about things we are interested in and part of a conversation is the challenge of what we are going to say next. However it is important when speaking to other students to show an interest in what they are talking about and what they are interested in, and for the other students to extend the same courtesy to you.

SOCIAL EDITING Sometimes we have private or personal information which we may be happy to share with other people but which may make other people feel uncomfortable. Avoid sharing such information with people you are not good friends with in particular as it is also important to keep such information private.

Another important thing to remember is honesty is very important but sometimes it is best that we keep our real opinions private – where they might make others feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. For example, if a student asks if you like their outfit it could cause offence to answer "No". Equally, if you have a really strong opinion on something which others don't share it is sometimes important to tone down that opinion or to keep it to yourself.

LANGUAGE Like our advice in the teacher's part of this section, if there are words, terms or phrases you don't understand you should ask for an explanation. If there seems to be a private joke or a phrase that gets a big reaction this could be something which you might be expected to know, or which may be a little vulgar, and so it is a good idea to get advice on this at a later stage.

OVERLOAD If people are asking lots of questions or you need some space, do get this space – explain that you don't like too many questions in a row or if you need a little space, excuse yourself and take a break!

BE YOURSELF Communication is difficult enough when being yourself without trying to change who you are, how you speak or how you interact with each other. Of course consider the social rules such as those above but also be comfortable with who you are and don't feel you need to change!

7. Socialising

As a young person with autism you will know the challenges that socialising can present. For each person on the spectrum it presents different challenges and yet many young people with autism would like to socialise, and indeed you will find many people will be only too glad to have you as a friend!

Socialising is complex for all teenagers, as people become teenagers they start to spend more of their spare time with friends and less with family and they try to develop an identity and a group of friends that represents them. As everyone involved is going through so much change personally, the teenage social scene can be full of drama and conflict but also the forming of close friendships and the development of a strong group of friends who will always be there for you. So, don't worry! No one, as much as they might let on, will feel totally comfortable with themselves and all will have to be self-conscious with regard to how people see them and what they think of them.

Socialising and friendship is one of those areas where it is not as simple as saying "Do this, this and this and you will get on well". Socialising is a big grey area, which doesn't suit so many of us with autism who prefer the more straight forward 'black and white'.

Here are some useful pointers and tips though for overcoming anxiety and other challenges around socialising:

DON'T TRY AND BE SOMEONE YOU'RE NOT When we feel really different or alone and just desperately want to be liked and accepted it is very easy to try and be like everyone else and try to fit into expectations or stereotypes, even telling lies or behaving differently, just to make friends and become popular. This doesn't work though! No one can ever be someone they are not and the mask will slip! People will see you are not who you are trying to be and will only be suspicious as to why that is the case. The only things you should seek to change are any bad habits or negative behaviours which may ostracise you from others and prove a barrier to friendship, other than that be proud of who you are! You should seek, and will find, friends who like you because of who you are rather than some pretend alter-ego. If they don't like you for who you are - forget about them!

CONSIDER GETTING INVOLVED IN CLUBS OR ORGANISATIONS If you find it really difficult to navigate social situations with no clear structures then why not consider getting involved in a club or organisation which shares your interests? There may even be some clubs like this in your own school. There you will have an opportunity to meet other young people your own age who share your own interests, which may make it easier to make conversation and break the ice!

DON'T BE AFRAID TO TAKE THE PLUNGE If you get an invite to a social event or activity it can be very scary – you might get anxious about all the things that might go wrong or how different or uncomfortable you might feel. Don't let this get in the way – try and push yourself to give it a go. If it doesn't work out it you can always go home or try again another day but you might enjoy yourself more than you thought! This could provide a foundation for future social opportunities or maybe you could organise something yourself to mark a special occasion.

BE DISCIPLINED IN YOUR CONVERSATION SKILLS Be sure to show an interest in what other people are saying and not to talk only about your own interests. If you show an interest in others, they are more likely to be interested in what you have to say and be more interested in hanging out with you. Also, look beyond your own interests, everyone needs balance, and not everyone will necessarily have the same interests as you, so try and find out about their interests and talk about other topics as well as your own interests. This is good because you will also learn about new topics and activities which may interest you.

SOCIALLY EDIT When chatting with others be careful not to say anything which might be seen as inappropriate (or what many of us with autism might just see as saying it as it is). Don't tell anyone anything too personal or ask personal questions and don't be critical in your comments to others. Also don't get too panicked if someone gets information wrong – better to let this slide, some people might feel they are correct and might become embarrassed or annoyed if you correct them!

UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF FRIENDSHIP Friendship is a gradual process and you can have different types of friend – a friend you see once a week, a friend you see at certain events or activities, a friend you get very close to and see every day. Don't expect to become anyone's best friend overnight and don't hassle people too much. Instead, why not try and arrange when you will see friends the next time (or even a rough idea, as these type of plans can change!) for the first little while. Overtime you may grow closer to people and begin to see some people more often than others.

DON'T PANIC! The tips above are just examples of what might be useful to keep in mind, but everyone has different levels and types of challenges around socialising. Being happy and being yourself is the most important thing in life and everyone with autism is a little bit different. If you want more ideas on socialising why not speak to your own parents or someone who already supports you in such challenges. They may be able to give you some personal tips and ideas knowing you as well as they do.

8. Should I Tell People I Have Autism?

This is the question many secondary school students worry about – should I keep my condition to myself or is it ok? Will it be good to talk about it to other people?

It is a big and very personal question and really there is no right or wrong answer, but we will try and take the pros and cons apart for you here and enable you to make a decision for yourself.

First off, it is important to realise that you don't need to explain yourself to anyone. You are who you are and you should be proud of that fact! There is no obligation on your part to tell anyone you have the condition. However you might decide that you would like people to know. This might be because:

- You feel misunderstood and you feel that people might be more understanding if they knew why you behaved in certain ways.
- You might want to access certain supports or services.
- You might feel that you have tried to hide your difficulties for a long time and you would like to be more relaxed and upfront about them.
- You might want people to understand what having autism is like, and so you might want to speak about your experiences to enable that to happen.
- Plus of course any number of personal reasons!

So why wouldn't you want people to know you have autism? Maybe you are afraid that people will treat you differently or over-compensate or even be patronising (though well-intentioned) towards you. You might feel that people would see the 'label' over you and this could prove a further barrier to making friends and socialising.

There are certainly many benefits in being upfront about your condition. These include:

GREATER ACCESS TO HELP If you are more upfront about having autism it is a lot easier to explain to people your needs and concerns. You will be amazed how most people will be only too happy to help if you simply explain what you are finding difficult.

FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE Some people are so afraid of others finding out that they have the condition that they almost try to be someone else or mask their normal behaviour. This isn't really very healthy or fun – why would you be anyone but yourself? Often when people speak about their condition they are amazed by how little people care, how they still feel the same way about them and really all that has changed is that others want to make sure they make allowances for you. This can be a big weight off your shoulders!

FEEL MORE UNDERSTOOD Autism is an invisible condition and people with it can often feel frustrated at how the world doesn't really get how we work or why we behave as we do. Because people are not aware we have a disability at times we can feel they see us as strange or difficult as opposed to people living with special needs. Through telling people you have Autism, you may feel more understood by others than before.

HELP OTHERS It is not only yourself you help by speaking about your condition but also others who might not be capable of speaking for themselves or who are yet to follow us. Through being upfront about having autism it normalises it and enables people to understand autism better. A better understanding is what the autism community needs.

Are their major cons to telling people you have Autism?

This is a difficult one, because if anyone does react negatively (which is unlikely), the problem is really with them and not you and so maybe you just learn something about someone earlier than you would have anyway. The major disadvantages are probably the following:

BEING UNHAPPY ABOUT IT If you are a private person and you feel much happier with people not knowing your condition and find it easy to get the help you need and the understanding you need this way, then telling others may just not be for you.

PEOPLE NOT UNDERSTANDING AUTISM We agree that people certainly don't understand autism as much as they should and this may lead to frustration if people don't really get your abilities and needs or see you as an individual before a label. However we feel that people certainly want to know more and with time will know more.

So there it is, it is a very personal decision. Overall, we feel autism is and should be seen as normal and that people should be seen as they are. Therefore we don't think that people should be ashamed or embarrassed to say they have autism, or equally, feel they have to explain their behaviour. However at times being upfront and accepting who you are, through speaking out about it, can be good, not just for you, but for others too!

9. Getting Through Homework & Study

Homework. Study. The dreaded topic!

Homework and study can be difficult. Reapplying yourself to work after a long day in school is no one's idea of fun! Concentration can be difficult and so can finding the right space and staying on task. However, get a good system and plan in place for tackling the workload.

Here are our tips for making homework and study less awful this year:

GET INTO A ROUTINE The crucial rule for homework. Find a time of the day after school when you are best able to concentrate and get into a habit of getting down to work at this time. Work out when you need to take breaks and for how long. Of course this may be a little different some days but having self-discipline when it comes to homework, and not putting it off or doing it randomly, is half the battle.

FIND THE RIGHT SPACE It is impossible to work in the wrong environment. You might find it hard to work anywhere where there is noise. Maybe you need a totally empty desk with no distractions. Maybe you find after-school study too long and regimented with not enough breaks. Whatever it is you need, work with your parents and teachers to find the right environment and space for you to study in, distraction free.

PRIORITISE In secondary school there is never a shortage of work to be done. However a key skill is identifying what you need to get done on a particular day - where is there more to be completed? What is due next? This is an important skill and maybe your teachers and parents can help you to learn it better. It is particularly important when it comes to study, we can all be tempted to study the subjects we like or are good at but maybe we need to give more attention to the areas we enjoy less or find more difficult.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS You cannot complete work if you do not understand what you were expected to do. If you don't understand exactly what a teacher wants you to do or how they want it done be sure to ask a question or go up to them at the end of class. It is much better to ask now, than find out you don't know how to complete a task when you get home.

ATTEMPT, ATTEMPT, ATTEMPT The reason you are in school is to learn and so you don't have to get everything right all the time. Sometimes students can get very upset if they can't get things just perfect. Other times people get frustrated and so don't even put an attempt on paper. The most important thing with homework is to test if you are able to do something independently. When doing homework be sure to make a real effort and get it on paper, but if you are still struggling and have made an effort, bring it in to show your teacher. That way they will be able to see you find it hard and explain it again.

DEADLINE PROBLEMS If you are finding concentration very difficult, are very stressed at a certain time or are just finding the work a little difficult, you might be worried you won't meet a deadline. Explain this (or ask your parent's to) at an earlier point (rather than the day before the work is due!) and your teacher may be able to give more time or provide some assistance.

CONCENTRATION Staying focused on a piece of work, especially after a long school day, can be very tough. You might find your mind keeps wandering off, you are fiddling with things or you just cannot apply yourself. If you are struggling to concentrate try and take a break and come back to the piece of work. Talk to your parents or teacher about getting help with concentration skills and work in a distraction-free environment. You may only hold concentration for a short period of time so try to make these periods productive and break them up with exercise or time-out. Try setting goals of what you will get done before you take a break. On days your concentration is poor this can be really frustrating and stressful, try to stay calm as stress will make concentration even more difficult. If concentration is a problem for you, make sure teachers are aware of this at the start of the year so they can be more understanding if it leads to some days being less productive than others.

PRESENTATION Presenting work well can be difficult but it does make a big difference. An attempt presented nicely can make a better impression than a perfect piece of work poorly presented. Take care to keep your work clean and in a folder. Try to use your best handwriting (or if you type use an appropriate font). Presentation is something we all need to work on and an important life skill - if you find it difficult, ask in school for some guidance and help with presentation skills.

10. Exams

Exams – no one likes them, most people find them difficult, and few people show their full talent and ability in this high-pressured setting.

That is the backdrop all students sit exams against. However there are added challenges for those sitting exams with autism, these include:

CONCENTRATION Due to hyperactivity, over-stimulation and introversion problems many people find focusing on one thing for a long period of time immensely challenging. This specific problem not only makes studying for exams tough but may mean that it is also more difficult to maintain concentration in the exam.

SITTING STILL You might feel the need to move around and find it difficult to sit still for lengthy periods of time. As a result the requirement to sit still and in one place in an exam hall or special centre can cause frustration and discomfort and lead to increased anxiety and reduced concentration as the exam wears on.

ANXIETY Exams are very anxious affairs and so if you already are an anxious person they can be even more nerve-racking! This anxiety often grows as the exam wears on and if you feel you aren't doing as well as you could due to certain difficulties or unexpected challenges. This anxiety can also be increased by the presence of other students who are also stressed and the atmosphere and environment of the exam hall.

EDITING The desire for perfection and a major interest in a specific subject can actually cause challenges for some with high-functioning autism or Aspergers syndrome in particular. Some students find it difficult sticking to a certain amount of time per question on the paper or selecting the required information for the answer

COMMUNICATION It can be a challenge to articulate your knowledge or transfer what you know into a comprehensible answer. Equally you might find comprehending some question or words in the exam difficult.

If you are experiencing problems with preparing for or sitting exams it is important to look for help from your school/college and explain your difficulties. Most teachers will be only delighted to help in anyway they can if they are just aware of where the issues lie. While different plans and supports will work for different people, below are some common supports:

REASONABLE ACCOMODATION SCHEME This is a support available state examinations and there are similar models for third level exams. Students with specific learning difficulties or special needs can apply for a range of reasonable accommodations, which simply level the playing field and make the exam more accessible for those concerned. Included in the RAS is the possibility of typing or recording your exams or obtaining a scribe, the possibility of obtaining a spelling and grammar waiver or accessing a reader who can explain words to you or read you the exam paper. Talk to your guidance counsellor or resource teacher about accessing this system for State exams and also for in-school exams.

SPECIAL CENTRE All those in the RAS scheme will sit in a special, smaller exam centre for State exams and college exams. However students who find anxiety or sitting still or concentration particularly challenging may be able to apply to the relevant authorities to obtain a single student exam centre. A doctor's letter can often be useful supporting evidence in this regard.

DARE For students sitting State examinations it is worth considering applying for the Disability Access Route to Education through your CAO application. If you are successful in your application, you will not only benefit from ensuring your third level institution is aware of your special needs but will also enable you to access a reduced points entry scheme, this is to enable students with autism and other disabilities who may not perform as well in exams but are performing under more challenging conditions, a fair opportunity at obtaining a college place of their choice. It is particularly useful for students with autism who do not demonstrate their full potential in exams.

BUILDING A GAME PLAN People affected by the challenges listed above must not try and conform to traditional approaches to the exam paper if they find they do not work well for them. Talk to your teachers about developing an approach to the paper which suits your specific needs in the exam - for example maybe you decide you will take a moment between each question to give your mind a break. Make a plan, try it out beforehand and then stick to it!

11. Stress & Anxiety in School

Stress is a very natural process in your body. Everyone gets stressed at some time in their lives. Stress is your body's way of telling you that it is trying to cope with too many things at the moment and that it needs a break.

SIGNS OF STRESS

- Breathing fast.
- Dry mouth.
- Sweaty hands.
- Feeling sick in your stomach.
- Your heart feels as if it is racing.
- You may have a feeling that you just want to run out of the room or away from people.

You might experience one, several or all of these feelings. They will all disappear very quickly once you have been able to relax for a few minutes.

WHAT CAUSES STRESS? There are lots of causes of stress. People have different reasons for getting stressed. For some it may be sitting in a room with too many people, noise, light or odours. Others find they become stressed when they feel that things are out of control or that they are not sure what is happening next. Your body produces a hormone called adrenaline to keep you focused and help you carry out whatever actions you need to do during the day. If something causes you stress then the adrenaline flows faster and you get all the feelings of stress described above. Everything in your body speeds up, and you can feel dreadful.

HOW TO REDUCE STRESS? Just as stressful things make the adrenaline flow faster, calming things can make it slow down. Different techniques work for different people. Here are some examples of what you can do when the stress symptoms start.

- Take a break from whatever is stressing you.
- Leave the room.
- Take a walk outside if you feel that is right for you.
- Sit down and take three slow deep breaths in and out.
- Go to a calm, quiet space to settle down and allow your body to come back to normal.

Many people find that the bathroom gives them the space and privacy to calm.

The most important thing to remember is you are not the only one who gets stressed, but it can affect us all differently. If you feel stressed talk to your parent or teacher, they will be able to help you. There is a lot more information available.

IDENTIFY WHAT STRESSES YOU

Think about these questions and write down your own answers:

WHAT MAKES YOU STRESSED?

Think about times you feel stressed -

Eg: Going new places, meeting new people, lunch break, assembly or a particular class...

What happens to your body at this time?

Eg: Heart racing, breathing fast, sweaty, sick, headache etc...

How do you feel?

Eg: Frightened, panicked, embarrassed, angry etc...

WHAT MAKES YOU CALM AND RELAXED

Think of what makes you calm -

Eg: Being in a quiet place, music, reading, exercise, certain pictures...

What happens to your body at this time?

Eg: feeling relaxed, calm, steady, easy breathing...

How do you feel?

Happy, content, in control, confident...

Once you become aware of what makes you feel stressed then you are more prepared to deal with it.

- Practice relaxation exercises regularly and teach your body how to relax.
- Prepare yourself in advance for stressful situations. For example, sit near the door if crowded rooms make you uncomfortable, then you can leave easily. Use schedules to keep yourself on track with work and avoid getting out of control.
- Talk to your teacher or parent to plan with them ways of helping you control your stress.

If you feel that you are stressed but not able to cope with it speak to someone like your parent or maybe your doctor and they will help you.



14. What if...?

When things go wrong it can be a little bit confusing or even worrying -

What will I do? Who should I talk to? What's going to happen?

It is important to have a plan and stick to it. Don't panic and follow the steps you agree with your parents and teacher in advance.

What if this happens?	What I do.	What will my teacher do?