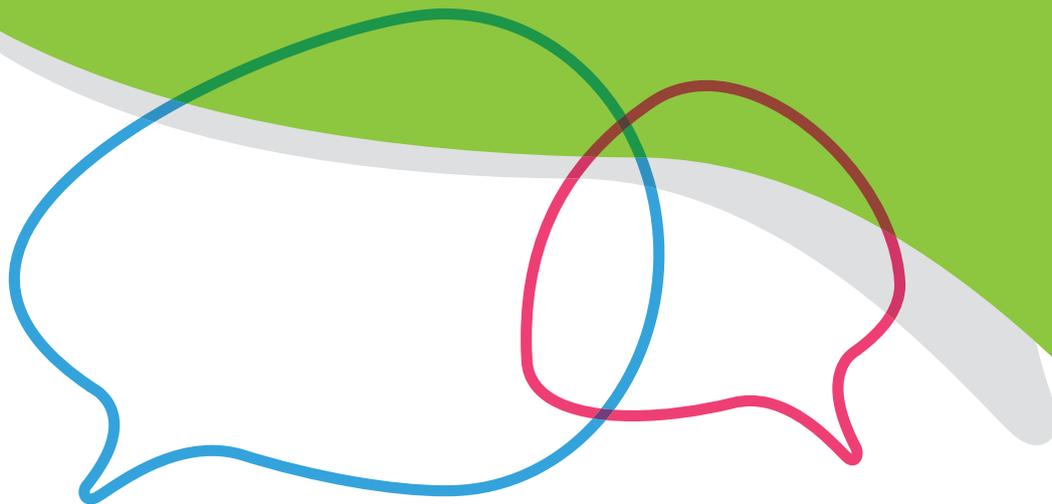


SCHOOL HANDBOOK FOR

PARENTS



Autistic Spectrum
Information Advice
and Meeting Point

1. Settling Back Tips

We all know that settling back after the long summer break can be tough. For people with autism it can be especially difficult – the routine of the summer that they may only be adjusting to, is suddenly gone again. Change in school teachers and classrooms can bring further difficulty and the process of making school work for your son and daughter, and educating those in the school community about Autism, must begin again.

Here are some pointers to help the settling back process be that bit easier.

DISCUSS IN ADVANCE Prepare your son or daughter for the new term by raising the subject from time to time, focusing on the positives aspects of school they like. If social stories are a tool you use, consider a social story on returning to school. Associate the return of school to other things they like. For example the return of activities they may be involved with or a less boring day.

ARRANGE A VISIT See if you can pop in to the school one day before the return of the school year as an opportunity to meet the new teacher (this will provide them with an opportunity to get an insight into your son or daughter also), see where they will be sitting and adjust to the new classroom environment. It might also be useful if you can arrange a play date or meet up with some school peers also, so things seems familiar on the first day back.

RULES REMINDER Do a quick run through classroom etiquette and rules prior to the return to school so your son or daughter will know and remember what is expected of them, and also things to try and manage such as speaking out of turn or sitting for periods of time.

ENSURE THE TEACHER UNDERSTANDS Ensure your son or daughter's teacher understands how difficult the first few days may be and ask that the possibility of breaks or time outs be available if the day is particularly difficult.

FIRST DAY BACK Try to get there early so the classroom is quiet enough when your child arrives and it is not daunting. Consider arranging something nice for after school so there is something to look forward to.

HOME LIFE Due to the upheaval to routine, back to school brings, try and keep things calm and 'safe' for your child at home in the first few weeks back. Ensure they have a quiet place they can go to, to relax, without questions, siblings etc. and discuss the possibility of easing back into homework with your son or daughter's teacher.

IDENTIFY CHALLENGES EARLY Communication with school is always important, however it is crucial at this early stage, as challenges arise, that they can be addressed quickly and limit the negative experience of your child. If possible, discuss with your son or daughter each day if there was anything they didn't like or made them uncomfortable. Equally write or talk to the teacher(s) at this early stage as they may report things that were challenging during the day or maybe you may see what was challenging when your child gets home – discuss approaches together.



2. Coping with Change

A new school term brings change and that is perhaps the hardest part of settling back for students with autism, particularly those making the big switch to secondary school for the first time.

Making change easier within a school

DISCUSS THE CHANGE IN ADVANCE If you know there will be a new teacher, classroom or schedule in place in September discuss this with your son or daughter in advance so that they can prepare themselves. Assure them that just as they liked the old way, they will, over time, love the new way. Try and establish what particular aspect of the change is causing anxiety to your son or daughter and discuss this with the school prior to starting term – a) so they are prepared for the difficulty your son or daughter may experience at the start of the year and b) so they can look at allowances and supports for your son or daughter to adjust to these changes.

MANAGE THE CHANGE Discuss the management of change with your child's school. For example it may be a different classroom and a different seating arrangement but maybe a child who is known to be understanding or your son or daughter gets on with can sit next to your child. If there is a new teacher maybe they can follow some of the same approaches that worked well for your child from another teacher.

ENSURE THERE WILL BE SUPPORT Make sure your SNA, teacher, principal and others involved in the education of your son or daughter are aware of the challenges you feel the new year will present. Discuss a plan for how this change will be managed and what support they will receive i.e. time-outs, understanding, etc.

PROVIDE OUTLETS Ensure your son or daughter will have outlets such as exercise or activities in which they can take out any frustration or upset from the changes in school life. Maybe a run or a period with a punch bag is helpful, maybe having an SNA or yourself to talk to about how they found something difficult – however it works make sure the anxiety, stress or upset is not being 'bottled up' by your son or daughter

MAINTAIN FAMILIARITY When everything seems to be changing in school for your son or daughter it is crucial they can see some familiarity. Maybe a teacher from last year can come and say "hi" on the first day and assure them that they will really get on with their new teacher. Perhaps a similar seating plan or some element of the school day they find pleasant can be maintained so it doesn't all change suddenly for your son or daughter.

STABILITY Keep the routine either side of the school day the same and try and reduce variables while your son or daughter adjusts to major changes in their school day.

INCENTIVISE We all like to be rewarded and coping with change when you find it difficult certainly warrants recognition. Consider offering a little reward at the weekend for your son or daughter after they get through their first week back in school.

The Move to Secondary School

EDUCATE The most important part of any new aspect in your son or daughter's life. Ensure the teachers and school community in the new secondary school have a good understanding of your child. Circulate a profile with information on what they find hard, what they excel at etc., to teachers in advance of the term commencing. Request that the principal ask teachers to take the time to read and understand this document. Also ensure they understand the invisible nature of the condition and how it affects each person differently.

DO A TOUR Visit the school in advance with your son or daughter. Do a 'dry run', navigating the school and areas they may find hard – using stairs, negotiating the school yard etc. Try to include the opportunity to meet some of their teachers during this tour.

BUDDY SYSTEM / WHO DO YOU KNOW? Ask the school to consider a buddy system with older pupils who can be a friendly, understanding face on the corridor for your son or daughter and can note sources of upset / bullying or concern when teachers may not be around. Also, consider working out if there are any students starting who you know already who can serve as familiar, friendly faces in your sons or daughter's school.

GUARD AGAINST BULLYING / NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES AT AN EARLY STAGE Through the above steps and regular communication with teachers identify any bullying (which can often start early in the school year) or other negative experiences early on, as the sooner these are addressed the less likely they will seriously impact your son or daughter's experience of school and association with it.

THE SENSES Going from a single classroom in a much smaller school where you spend your days, to a loud, busy environment with lots of moving around, different smells and different noises can be tough. Enquire from your school if they can arrange an alternative time for your son or daughter to move class or if they can get some help with this at the start. Also see if there is a place they can go at break times if they are finding the noise, smells or other sensory aspects difficult to deal with.

BE ORGANISED See our organisation section of this booklet. Get good systems in place early on – this is so important in secondary school.

SUBJECT GUIDES Either with your own knowledge or with the support of your national school construct subject guides highlighting for each teacher what your son or daughter may find difficult in their class and, if you have tips that have worked well, ways they may go about addressing them.

MAKE SURE SUPPORT IS EFFECTIVE People are much more self-aware at Secondary School, your son or daughter may already feel quite different and perhaps is uncomfortable being 'labelled' any further. Make sure the supports that are provided are discreet and do not make your son or daughter feel like they stand out from everyone else. Additionally, find out exactly what supports they will receive and how they will benefit the actual needs of YOUR son or daughter in Secondary School – this links with your son or daughters IEP which you should ask your school to work on with you and your son or daughter.



3. Preparing Your Child for Starting School

Education in a mainstream class is not always suitable for every child with autism.

Some children have their needs met in:

1. An autism class within a mainstream school.
2. A special education class in a mainstream school.
3. In a school that supports only students with special educational needs.

They may continue with their education in this setting or they may gradually transition into mainstream classes with support.

Special Classes

Special classes or units work with much smaller numbers in the classroom. The general ratio is 6 children, 1 teacher and 2 special needs assistants. The physical layout of the classroom will appear different to mainstream classrooms to some extent. Children may work at 'workstations' to reduce distractions when they are doing work that requires concentration. They come together around one table to do group work or eat lunch. This environment will be different in appearance to that of their sibling's classroom so it is important to prepare your child for a new setting.

Starting School

Ask in advance of the start date if the school have a 'social story' about coming to school, that will include pictures of familiar parts of the class, school and staff. Read this story with your child at a time when they are relaxed and add a very positive and exciting tone to the story, reassuring them that this is a good place. As with mainstream classes, ask if it is possible to visit the school and classroom in advance to allow your child to spend a little time there and familiarize themselves. Taking photos of them in the classroom can also help remind them of where they will be going.

If the school has a uniform, make sure to allow your child to wear it well before the start of the term. Some schools allow the children in the Autism classes some leeway with uniform, especially if they have particular issues surrounding textures on their skin. Allow them to wear shoes that they are familiar with and that are easy to take off and put on. The same with trousers for the boys, if they have not been used to zips up to now, don't pick first day at school to try them out.

Unlike mainstream school admission procedures, parents often receive late notice that a place has become available in one of these classes and that makes advance preparation very difficult. Parents in mainstream have the Summer holidays to prepare their children. They also have the advantage of neighbours and friends whose children are attending the same school, so they can share the excitement and experience. Parents of children attending an autism class or unit may live a long distance from the school and feel quite isolated at this time. If at all possible try to make contact with other parents whose children are at that school. A phone call or chat in advance makes such a difference for everyone - big or small.

If you have the chance to meet with the teacher in advance of your child starting, prepare your questions and write them down. Bring a notebook and pen for the answers, because you will forget. By clarifying some details in advance you can reduce any unnecessary confusion or stress on the first day of term.

- Start and finish times as they may be different from mainstream classes.
- Lunch policy.
- Arrangements for speaking with the teacher other than set meetings.
- Knowing the names of the other children in the class means that you can talk to your child about who their friends will be.

Having a calendar or mini planner is useful to show your child the days that they are in school and the days that they are at home. A visual schedule at home and in school makes transitioning so much easier for most children. We all need to know what to expect in our day.

Communications with School

The use of a journal/diary in an autism unit/class is ESSENTIAL not just a suggestion. Many students in autism classes are non verbal or not functionally verbal. Good communication between home, school and anyone else working with your child is essential to keep continuity and avoid any confusion. Remember, one positive comment can make such a difference to a child when you can praise them for something that day. If you feel that you are not receiving enough information speak to the teacher. This is recommended practice in special education.

Some students will use school transport. A driver and bus escort are employed to keep the children safe during their journey to and from school. They are not required to have any training in autism so make sure that you discuss any 'particular' issues your child may have while travelling. Generally the same staff will be allocated to your child's minibus for the term. Ensure that you are notified in advance about any changes taking place with transport - eg: significant route, staff or time changes. Prepare for change in advance.



5. Challenges of The Classroom

The classroom at both primary and secondary school level can be difficult for those with autism. As you know, it is busy and often noisy place. It requires students who may be hyperactive or have short attention spans to sit still for long periods of time and focus and apply themselves to a task. In primary school, it may be where students also eat their lunch and so it may have aromas and smells which will be hard for a child on the spectrum to cope with. It might require a degree of socialising, sitting at a group table or doing group work – something which can be quite daunting for people on the Autism Spectrum.

At times, stress levels can run high and this may increase the anxiety of a child with autism and due to the busy nature of the classroom the child with autism might find it difficult to talk only in turn, to stay tuned and to get help when they are stuck, which due to learning disabilities often associated with the condition, may be more often than other children.

However, it is not all bad. The mainstream classroom can provide many opportunities for a child with autism also. It provides the chance for a child on the spectrum to be educated in their own community, to gain an understanding from local children their own age and to learn behaviours from them and, even overtime, provides opportunities to socialise with these children. It also allows children with autism the opportunity to follow the same curriculum, as far as their own personal abilities lie, as the other children and, in the case of some with autism and Asperger's syndrome in particular, to excel in the areas they are interested in.

So, what can be done to provide those with autism the best opportunity in the classroom? This is no small question, varies from student to student, and an area which much research has been conducted in. However here are some basic tips to help your child in the classroom, at both primary and secondary school levels.

CONSULT See our page on communication – it is so important that problems in the classroom can be identified through frequent, mutually understanding communication with school.

WHEN MAKING GROUPS, PICK SELECTIVELY If your child finds sitting at group tables in the classroom very difficult as if they can sit at a table with children who are slightly more mature or are very kind in nature, even for the first little while, as this will enable your child to feel more comfortable in the classroom setting. Change is difficult for people with autism however it can also be important to encourage those with the condition to mix, any changes of groups during the year ask to be involved with and for the teacher to consider where the child will work best and to gradually make the change, maybe explaining the idea behind the change to the child on the spectrum first, as when changes are explained they can often be managed better.

ROTE INSTRUCTIONS / QUICK INSTRUCTIONS As your child may find vague, quick or rote instructions difficult, discuss this with your class teacher and ask them to provide clear, step by step instructions to your child and also to consider their ability to concentrate on instructions if there are other noises/distractions at the time.

PROVIDE AN OPT-OUT If your child really struggles to sit still for long periods of time, has a tendency to get stressed or everything is getting too much for them on a given day – ask about the possibility of time-outs in the form of walks or time away from the classroom. This can work really well if an SNA is assigned to the child. Defusing the stress or anger built up in the child will prevent negative behaviours from happening and hopefully lead to improved concentration upon their re-engagement in the class.

BE FIRM BUT AVOID HEAD ON CONFRONTATION It is very important that children on the spectrum, like any other child, know boundaries and, as far as possible, integrate into the regime of the school day. However children with autism will behave in a manner which may seem disruptive but they do not realise that they are being disruptive, for example, continuously speaking out of turn or talking to themselves or fiddling or doodling with things in their pencil case. Equally, at times people with autism can become very frustrated and behave in a very socially unacceptable manner. Of course this needs to be addressed and cannot be seen to be acceptable, as it will benefit nobody in the long run. However, it is crucial that your child's teacher knows the difference and is also able to address both types of behaviour in an appropriate manner – avoiding head-on confrontation.

UNDERSTAND THE AIMS, FOCUS ON THE STRENGTHS Discuss a strength based approach with your child's teacher. See our "Focusing on Strengths" and "Individual Education Plan" pages.



6. Challenges of School Social Life

Socialising as a whole is challenging for people with autism. Things like, reading facial expression and body language, making small talk and simply ‘fitting in’ can present challenges for people with autism.

Socialising in a school context can be particularly challenging though, indeed many people with autism encounter bullying at one point or another, as so many people with autism are disinterested or find it challenging to socialise with people their own age. Additionally, the stereotypical school break can add to the challenges of socialising as it can be so difficult for someone with autism to deal with large open spaces like the school yard, cope with the many smells and noises associated with school breaks and partake in games like other children. Some children with autism find losing difficult, many like very definitive rules in a game and others are simply enthralled by their own thoughts or imagination or will only play games they like.

It is a delicate balancing act for teachers and SNAs between gently encouraging children with autism to get involved at break time and become friends with other children their own age and getting on the child’s nerves and making them even more apprehensive in terms of mixing with other children.

Here are some tips which may be useful in terms of addressing problems with socialising in school for children with autism.

IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM As we always seek to emphasise, autism is a huge spectrum, it affects different people in different ways and so often the problems around socialising may arise in different ways. For example, some children might like to socialise and be included but end up getting very upset if things do not go as they would like them to. Others may be keen to get involved but simply struggle with how to go about it or find it difficult to find common ground with other children while others are naturally very introverted and struggle to socialise at all. It is important that your son/daughter's teacher knows to look at each child with the condition individually, identify their own specific difficulties with socialising and seek to take steps to help them in this regard.

CONSIDER A BUDDY SYSTEM These can work really well. Why not ask your son/daughter's teacher to try and identify 2-3 students in the class who are known for their kindness or being a little bit more mature to be a 'buddy' to the child concerned. They would be asked to make a special effort to include him/her in games, talk to them in school and speak to you if they feel that he/she is being bullied/excluded. This may take place against a backdrop of explaining what autism is to the class or everyone in the class getting a buddy as we all need help sometimes.

TRY TO FIND A SPECIAL INTEREST As some students with autism struggle to socialise as they simply find it difficult to make conversation or relate to others their own age, this can be a really useful tool for breaking barriers. Explain your son/daughter's interests to your class teacher and see if there is a way to integrate them into socialising. This could be movies, books or video games. This could take place in the form of a break time or after-school club or simply a once-off ice-breaker. It could be very worthwhile.

EDUCATING STUDENTS Where people are accepted and respected for who they are, everyone benefits in the long run. Students who are exposed to people with different challenges at a young age benefit from learning to be more understanding and compassionate. Why not discuss with your school taking steps to talk about inclusion and even disabilities like autism in your son/daughter's class. Any approach should stress that different is not just ok but brilliant! Highlight how everyone in the class looks a little different, has different challenges and is good at or finds certain things difficult. Students should be challenged to consider what it would be like to be lonely or not involved in the school yard and ask people to make a special effort to be inclusive. Why not ask your school to invite AsIAM to give a workshop or to organise an Autism Awareness Week?

TRY TO MAKE PLAYTIME/LUNCHTIME COMFORTABLE Many challenges associated with autism are exasperated by the anxiety felt by those with the condition. Discuss this fact with your child's teacher/SNA – ask them to try to make school breaks and other socialising opportunities comfortable for your child's needs. This would include assurances that they can opt-out if they feel uncomfortable or can talk or be near to an adult they trust. Discuss the yard/break area with your school – is it clearly defined? Can anything be done to manage noises and smells or provide opt-outs?

7. Importance of Communication

Good communication between home and school is essential for children on the autism spectrum. It not only enables you, as a parent, to highlight areas which your child is finding difficult in school but is mutually beneficial in monitoring patterns in your child's behaviour.

If your son or daughter has had difficulties or has been upset by something at home, it is crucial school knows about this so as to understand why your child's concentration may not be as good as usual or their behaviour more challenging. It is equally important that you know how your child is performing and behaving in school so that you can see how this impacts on his or her mood at home. Equally, as many children on the Autism Spectrum do not speak about their feelings or may not talk about something that upsets them, good communication between home and school provides opportunities to identify issues which may be upsetting them and to address them before they get out of hand.

Communication between parents and teachers can take a number of different forms, however here are some suggestions which have worked particularly well for others in the past.

DIARY This is a simple and time effective way of keeping in touch. Each morning you write a note on your child's form that day, any news from home which may be important or any concerns you have around school. Some days this may require a long note, on other days it may be a couple of sentences. Your son or daughter's teachers respond to these notes at the end of the school day and the diary is permanently kept in your child's schoolbag. Ask your child's teacher at the start of the year if they would be willing to do this. Should you do it, take care to be discreet in how it is managed so that the writing of notes is not something the other children in your child's class have to be aware of.

PERIODIC MEETINGS It may be useful to meet your child's teacher(s) more frequently than a once-off parent-teacher meeting. At the beginning of this academic year ask your child's teacher and principal if you could organise a meeting

per term or, more commonly, if the need arises. It may also be useful to invite other stakeholders to these meetings such as SNAs or Resource teachers. At these meetings, any issues which have arisen through the year should be looked at and an approach agreed and possible joint school/home approaches to certain behaviours or difficulties can also be explored. If your school agrees to an IEP, these meetings are perhaps useful for reviewing progress and implementation of this plan.

JOINT APPROACHES Sometimes communication can lead to positive joint approaches to address certain issues your child may be facing. For example, you may have a particularly useful way of addressing a problem your child has with a certain smell, which could also be implemented in school or maybe a stars system in school which helps your child to concentrate could also be introduced at home. Communication can lead to cooperation and cooperation can only benefit your child.

8. Importance of Organisation

Staying organised, remembering books, arriving on time for class, having all the equipment needed and meeting deadlines, can be difficult for people with autism. It can be especially tough in secondary school where there are so many different teachers, books/equipment and deadlines.

When people with autism are disorganised this can often lead to anxiety -

"I have forgotten my book, what will I do?"

"Will I get in trouble?"

"I am lost and don't know how to get somewhere"

This can make school all the more difficult - here are some tips for preventing disorganisation and planning for the worst!

At the Start of The Year

COLOUR CODE Consider colour coding the timetable and equipment the same way for example highlight 'English' in blue and put all the notes in a blue folder, wrap the book in blue paper or attach a blue sticker - this means when going to the locker rather than remembering each little item your child simply has to bring everything coloured blue.

GET EXTRAS This can be an expensive option but it has worked well for some parents. In addition to the books and equipment your child needs to consider buying cheap second hand extras. Give an extra pencil case, books etc. to the school secretary in secondary school or the class teacher in primary school. This way if things go missing, there isn't a need to panic and your child can simply get the extra and return it after.

LABEL EVERYTHING Without using your child's name it is good to put a phone number or initials on every item from school uniforms through to school bags so if things get left behind you have a better chance of seeing them again.

GET GOOD SYSTEMS IN PLACE FROM THE WORD GO

From the word go get systems in place. Make sure tasks for school aren't left until the last minute, keep a wall chart of assignments and a timeline for when they should be done (maybe even ask teachers if assignments/homework can be

given early to allow more time) and come up with a system for keeping things ordered and together which works for your son or daughter.

TALK TO TEACHER AND PLAN FOR THE 'WHAT IF'S' Take the time to mention the problem your child may have to their teacher(s) at the start of the year. Ensure they understand it is not just a case of being forgetful and that they approach the problem, if it arises, in an understanding way. Discuss approaches as to what will happen if... they forget / lose / don't do something on time and go through these with your child - put the "what to do if..." steps on cards so your child will be able to overcome their anxiety in the event they do forget something.

Throughout The Year

KEEP TABS ON THE BAG/BASKET/LOCKER Make sure your child only brings home the books/equipment they need (but make sure those books/equipment do come home) so they are not carrying huge amounts or risk damaging / losing copies or books. Everyday make sure any loose worksheets or notes go in the proper folder. Each morning before you leave make sure everything that is needed is back in the bag. Try and make your child get responsible for this themselves, with your support, as much as possible.

CHECK THE JOURNAL Make sure everything that needs to be written into the journal is written in during class each day. At night go through it with your son or daughter and keep a master sheet of what needs to be done and when.

BE FLEXIBLE As the year progresses things which seemed or sounded like they would work great may fail when tested. Work with the teacher and your son or daughter to come up with new ways of staying organised.

9. IEP - Individual Education Plan

Individual Education Plans are provided for under the EPSEN Act, 2004.

However, they are one of a number of provisions within the Act which have yet to be enacted by the Minister for Education & Skills. That said, many schools have already begun to provide Individual Education Plans for students with special educational needs.

So, what is an Individual Education Plan? An IEP is designed to be an holistic process including all the key stakeholders in the student's education to establish, a) how the student is performing presently, b) what are the priority education goals for the student to achieve within a fixed period of time, c) what resources or supports are required in order for these goals to be obtained and, d) when this plan should be reviewed and evaluated.

It is important to note that IEPs should only include educational goals surplus to the curriculum being followed in the classroom, in other words not every child with Autism will need the curriculum to be adapted as a whole or to get support in all areas of the curriculum. Therefore the idea of the IEP is to identify areas outside of what is being thought in the classroom or the approach which is being taken in the classroom to support the child in achieving goals and targets in these areas. An IEP is also meant to take into account a child's ability to learn and reach these goals at a pace they can manage, therefore the goals set out in the IEP should, a) focus on priority areas and, b) be realistic in terms of time allocation and expected outcomes.

The process should involve the class teacher and parents as well as the student and the person responsible for special education in the school, generally the resource teacher and other key stakeholders in the student's education, such as an SNA. By including the different stakeholders in the process it not only allows all to have their views heard and noted but also allows a positive and inclusive approach to be taken which, critically, gives the person with Autism an opportunity to identify areas they would like to work on as well as parents who often have a different perspective on what they would like their child to achieve and what supports they feel they need to

achieve this! An IEP also has the potential to play an important coordinating role in education ensuring that educational approaches and goals for a child with Autism are the same in the classroom and the resource room and are fully understood at home also.

While schools are not yet obliged to provide an IEP it is a really useful tool for all involved so if you have not obtained one or something along the lines of an inclusive and target-driven plan for your child's education why not ask the school can one be put in place and refer them to the document below for further information?

The NCSE has a detailed document relating to IEPs and the standards and best practise associated with them, with a particular emphasis on the obligations which will be involved when the requirement is implemented. This document can be viewed at:

**NEED
QR
CODE**

10. Resources, Exemptions & Assistive Technology

Many students with autism require additional supports, services or aids in school. Knowing what your child is entitled to, how you access that resource and ultimately getting it can be very daunting and confusing so here is an inventory and details of the various supports available to people with autism in schools.

Classroom & Learning Support Services

SNA (SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANT) Special Needs Assistants are appointed to provide for the care needs of children with Special Educational Needs.

Children with autism often benefit greatly from the support of an SNA who can assist in numerous ways - helping the child to concentrate, ensuring they follow what is going on in the classroom, supporting them when they are suffering from anxiety or behavioural problems, removing them from the classroom situation when things get too much and supporting them during playtime and other activities which the child may struggle with. To sum it up, an SNA becomes a face which a child with autism can come to know and trust and can act as an excellent 'safety net' in the classroom situation as well as helping a child with autism become more independent in the classroom setting.

SNAs are allocated, based on the needs of a child, by the National Council for Special Education through its network of SENOs. If a child with Autism has a diagnosis prior to starting school, the school should apply for SNA hours prior to the child starting in the school or at a later date if diagnosis comes only during their time in school. Not all children are allocated an SNA on a full-time basis and may only get an SNA on a part-time basis or for times of the day which are most challenging for the child.

RESOURCE HOURS Resource teaching hours are often very beneficial to children with autism. They provide an opportunity for one to one (or in some cases alongside a few other children) support from a teacher in areas of the curriculum which the child finds difficult.

Resource teaching can be of particular benefit to children with autism as it allows the teacher involved to develop techniques and teaching approaches which work for that child. Additionally, it provides focused support in areas which a child with autism may struggle with or may fall behind with in the classroom setting.

Once again, resource teaching hours are allocated by local SENOs. The maximum allocation is 4.25 hours per week and the SENO will make an allocation based on the needs of the child and the resources which are available to allocated to the school. A diagnosis of autism is recognised as a relevant need for this additional teaching support.

Assistive Technology

LAPTOPS/TABLETS Many students with autism benefit from the use of a laptop or tablet computer as a means of writing their work/assignments, using learning tools and staying organised. There are grants available for the purchase of such technology and you should discuss this possibility with your school or ask if your child may be permitted to use this technology in school and for the submission of homework etc.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT There are also grants available to schools for the purchase of special furniture or seating which your child may require for sensory purposes. Discuss such grants with school management. Additionally, there are many tools/equipment which may work for your child to help them cope with their surroundings or help them to concentrate which you may use at home, from sand timers through to weighted jackets. Discuss the use of this equipment in school with your child's teacher/school management

Exemptions

IRISH LANGUAGE EXEMPTION A diagnosis of autism alone does not provide an exemption from the study of Irish in primary and secondary school, however some children with autism may qualify for an exemption from the study of the language if they also experience any of the following difficulties:

- students who function at an average or above-average level of ability, but who have a specific learning difficulty that is so severe that they cannot reach expected levels of attainment in their mother tongue
- students who have a general learning disability due to a serious intellectual impairment and who are not acquiring basic language skills in their mother tongue
- students who have a general learning disability on account of a serious sensory impairment, and who are not learning basic language skills in their mother tongue.

Should you wish to apply for an exemption from the Irish language for your child you should approach your school principal and make the request. You should discuss what documentation will be required with your school principal - you will need evidence of the disability in question from a qualified psychologist and may also require a report from a medical specialist. The school will then prepare a full report on your child and the Department will make a decision.

THIRD LANGUAGE EXEMPTION Some schools may require the study of a third language (Spanish, French, German etc), this is not a statutory requirement and so if your child finds the study of languages difficult you should speak with school authorities about this directly. However if your child is exempt from Irish or isn't exempt from Irish and/or a third language and is approaching their Leaving Cert and CAO application you should take the time to look at the language requirements of various college courses. NUI (UCD, TCD, NUI Maynooth, UCC, NUIG) require a third language for entry however there is an application process for exemption from this requirement and you should speak to your child's school about this at that time.

Exam Supports

RAS (REASONABLE ACCOMODATION SCHEME) This is a support available in state examinations for students with disabilities. 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 / resource teacher about accessing this system for State Exams, the system is accessible at Junior Cert level on the basis of diagnosis and there is a more comprehensive application process for some RAS supports for the Leaving Cert.

It is important to discuss this as early as first year however. For example, if your child will have to type exams in state exams they will need to begin practising and also using this method in school exams to ensure they are used to it.

DARE (DISABILITY ACCESS ROUTE TO EDUCATION) 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.

11. Focusing on Strengths

Having autism, and the many challenges that come with it, is only a part of any child. Every single child has talents and abilities – and your child is no different!

A great way to make school more enjoyable, and to address areas that your child finds difficult, can be to try and integrate their interests and strengths into every day school life.

Academic

A great way to get around subjects your child really hates or finds difficult is to try and make them interesting.

If they love soldiers for example, discuss the possibility of making maths with the resource teacher all about subtracting and adding troops.

If they find handwriting and presentation skills really difficult but excel or are fascinated by a specific subject like the Moon or Ancient Rome, why not explore the possibility of them making a project in school about this subject, where they can focus on what they love and work on these skills at the same time.

If fine motor coordination skills are difficult they can they be incorporated into a game or something interesting.

These are just a few examples, the possibilities are endless. Discuss these ideas with the class teacher and resource teachers at the beginning of the academic year. They enable your child to really feel good about what they are good at and at the same time provide an outlet for brushing up on areas they find tough – everyone is a winner!

Social Skills

Socialising, in its most basic form, can be difficult for people with autism. Playing in the school yard might be impossible or finding common interests with other children may be difficult – so why not see if your school can enable your child to socialise in a way they find easier.

Are there any activities which take place during lunch time like chess or computer clubs, which enable your child to be in an environment they prefer and provide an outlet for socialising – maybe even without realising it.

Maybe your child can be provided with an outlet to show off their abilities in a way other children may never see them. Do they know everything about movies or do they have a great memory? Maybe classroom games could be played where your child will stand out and have an opportunity to show that ability to others also.

12. Homework & Study

For a person with autism to concentrate all day in school can be difficult and so homework or study at home can be a difficult task, requiring your son or daughter to reapply themselves in a less structured environment with less support than in school.

Here are a few tips to try and make homework and study, if you have a child in secondary school, easier this coming academic year.

TALK TO THE TEACHER This is an important first step. Many students in both primary and secondary school with autism may really struggle with a certain piece of homework, or may be perfectionists, and insist on spending hours on end on one single piece of homework leaving no healthy balance between work and rest. Discuss the possibility of setting a time limit, monitored by you, on homework. This is particularly important for primary school. In secondary school while work may need to be done by a certain date perhaps a teacher will discuss options like providing assignments early or being very clear in his/her instructions as to what is expected, the importance of even just a good attempt etc.

ATTEMPT, ATTEMPT, ATTEMPT This links to the conversation with teachers. Education and learning is about trial and error. Ask teachers to explain to your son or daughter (they will be more believing if it comes from a teacher!) that once a good attempt is made they will be happy and can build on that, in other words a Mona Lisa isn't expected for each week's art homework!

STRUCTURE & ROUTINE It is very important that you get your son or daughter in to good habits from the moment term starts. Find a time of the day, after school, where their concentration is at its best, this may be after an after school activity or as soon as they arrive home, and get into the habit of beginning homework at this time. If concentration presents a problem ensure regular breaks, and getting up and moving around to burn off energy can also be positive. Ensure the space they use for homework is distraction free as those with overstimulation can get distracted easily.

LOOK AT OPTIONS The best option for your son or daughter is may be coming home after school and getting down to work, though this mightn't be the case, particularly if they find the school day long enough as it is. Equally, the home environment may just not work as a study environment for your son or daughter so you should consider a homework club or after-school study which will be accommodating to their needs.

PLAN Work through deadlines with your son or daughter and if you think some will pose a problem talk to the teacher at an early point to avoid anxiety. Many teachers will be very understanding of your child's needs and happy to give an extension if the problem is explained to them.

PRESENTATION Just a little tip – presentation is always half the battle, even in terms of what looks like a good attempt and what looks like a mess. Ensure your son or daughter keeps their homework assignments safe and tidy so that when they hand them up their effort is clear and, according to YOUR child's abilities, their best attempt is presented.

13. 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?

My Child

While our range of handbooks for students, parents and teachers on autism are invaluable for getting an overview on the challenges of people with autism it is also important to realise that no label defines anyone and that every person on the Spectrum is affected in different ways, to varying degrees by autism.

This booklet will enable parents to share with teacher's specific information about their children with autism.

This book is all about my child:

SENSORY

Coping with certain environments and surroundings (noises, smells, textures) can be a source of great discomfort, anxiety and distress for many people with Autism. Different environments challenge different individuals and it is important to understand the specific sensory processing challenges of each individual with Autism.

My child struggles with environments such as:

My child will get distracted or upset by the following smells, noises or textures:

COMMUNICATION

Communication is a key problem for people with autism. Some people with autism are verbal while others are not. Many with the condition find it hard to articulate feelings or to initiate conversation / ask questions. Understanding and comprehending language can also be difficult and this can be a source of distress - as many with the condition are literal thinkers and so find humours, terms of expression or narrative instruction difficult.

My child finds it difficult to understand...

My child finds it difficult to communicate when...

My child manages instructions / directions best when they explained by...

CONCENTRATION

Concentration or sitting still for long periods are a particular challenge to many on the Spectrum. It can be especially difficult for a child to hold concentration when they are not being stimulated or are distracted by their surroundings or anxiety.

My child finds it difficult to concentrate in school when...

He/She finds it easier to concentrate when...

Ways to help my child's concentration are...

IMAGINATION

It can be difficult for my child to imagine or understand things they can't see or visualise. This can make certain aspects of the curriculum challenging.

My child finds it hard to understand or imagine...

STRUCTURE / ROUTINE

Routine and structure are important to most people with autism as they reduce anxiety by removing or limiting the unexpected.

My child's routine for school is...

**Changing things like seating plans or the schedule for the day can be stressful for my child.
You can help reduce this stress by ...**

ORGANISATION

Some people with autism find deadlines and things like keeping bags/lockers/baskets tidy or remembering equipment difficult.

My child has the following problems with organisation...

We try to help my child stay organised by...

BEHAVIOUR

At times people with autism can display challenging behaviour. This is often because they are anxious about something or struggling to communicate or process their surroundings. It is important to understand the difference between these frustrations and how they should be addressed and defiant or deliberately 'bold' behaviour.

My child often displays more challenging behaviour when...

My child behaves the following way when they are upset or frustrated about something, related to aspects of their condition:

You can often tell when someone with Autism is having a bad day or is about to experience mood change or display challenging behaviour. You can see this in my child because...

When we experience challenging behaviour at home we...

We try to avoid the following interventions as they tend to escalate the situation...

ANXIETY

Anxiety is a major challenge for many with Autism. When a person with Autism is anxious their other challenges or difficulties can often become more pronounced.

My child is likely to get anxious when...

When my child is anxious you can tell by...

Ways which we find useful for preventing anxiety are...

When my child gets anxious, approaches which have worked for us are...

SOCIALISING

Many people with autism find socialising with their peers difficult.

My child finds the following aspects of socialising difficult...

My child finds it easier to mix with peers when...

Ways the school could help my child learn to socialise/mix with their peers are...

ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS / DISABILITIES

Many people with autism also have additional learning needs or disabilities.

The additional learning needs of my child are...

As well as autism, my child also has a diagnosis of...

The additional learning needs / supports required for this diagnosis are...

STRENGTHS / INTERESTS

The challenges of autism are just one small part of my child. My child has some interests and abilities which are actually linked to their condition. This can be really good - though sometimes we may need to restrict their talking about this and try and broaden their interests. Equally, like every other child, they are full of talents.

My child's special interest is...

My child is also interested in...

YOUR SUBJECT

In every subject my child studies they may find different aspects of it challenging because of their condition, equally they excel in some areas while struggling in others.

My child's past experiences studying your subject are...

My child find's the following aspects of your subject most difficult...

My child's favourite or strongest part of your subject are...

We try and focus on my child's strengths and use them as a way to make other things interesting and easier. Ways we could tie your child's interests in to your subject are...

OTHER

Other useful information about my child...