

SCHOOL HANDBOOK FOR  
**TEACHERS**



Autism Spectrum  
Information Advice  
and Meeting Point

# Forward

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read our Teacher's Guide to School.

As a young person with Aspergers Syndrome, I know the many diverse challenges school can present for people with autism, their families and teachers. Since we have set up AsIAM.ie, and travelled the country we have met many committed teachers who want to learn more about Autism and how they can support students with autism in the classroom.

We hope by reading this guidebook you will be able to get a good grasp of the various challenges autism presents for students and the importance of a person-centred, cooperative support system for students on the spectrum.

This guidebook does not claim to be an exhaustive list of approaches you can take nor is it a magic wand of solutions but we hope it is a useful tool in your work and something which will generate dialogue and discussion with parents, students and your wider school community.

The release of these guidebooks, in time for the commencement of the academic year, is the first element of our schools programme. We look forward to a busy academic year as we prepare to launch schools workshops which will aim to challenge students across Ireland to consider how they can make their school better for people with autism.

The issues affecting people with autism will only be addressed through creating a supportive, understanding and inclusive society where we see an individual before a label, and personal potential, before 'disability'. We hope to bring this message to students, teachers, parents and policymakers alike this academic year.

Please do support us by visiting our website, [AsIAM.ie](http://AsIAM.ie), and getting involved in our work and discussions.

Happy reading and best wishes for the year ahead.

Kind regards,

Adam Harris

**FOUNDER, CEO** [AsIAM.ie](http://AsIAM.ie)



# 1. What is Autism?

This is a question on which many thousands of books and PhDs have been written, it is a complex question with many definitions, opinions and answers. Below we try and give you an easy but insightful answer.

## The Scientific Answer

Autism is defined as “a mental health condition, present from early childhood, characterised by great difficulty in communicating and forming relationships with other people and in using language and abstract concepts”.

The autism spectrum is a wide one, with every person affected in different ways, to varying degrees. That said the problems autism presents are often grouped under 4 main categories – the “triad of impairments” and sensory processing problems:

- Social Communication
- Social Imagination
- Social Interaction
- Sensory Processing

There remains much debate as to “the cause” of autism and that is certainly not an issue we are going to try and get to the bottom of here. We do know that the number of people affected by the condition is growing and, though there are no national statistics available, it is estimated around 1 in 100 people are on the Spectrum in Ireland – so it is certainly not a rare condition! Knowing a little theory helps but how does Autism present itself in real life? Read OUR answer to what it is like to live with autism below.

## What is Autism? – The AsIAm Answer

Imagine being placed on a space ship today and blasted many thousands of galaxies away, arriving on a strange alien planet – a planet not built for you.

You are instantly taken aback by the strong smells, loud noises and odd textures of the planet. While local inhabitants don't seem to have any problem coping – you just cannot focus on anything else you are so distracted and uncomfortable by the environment all around you. You can find it quite upsetting and not knowing where you will meet this environment on the planet or how you can get away from them leaves you highly anxious.

You meet your first alien and he means you no harm, he is warm and welcoming, however you cannot understand his language or read his body language or facial expression. You don't know what he is saying to you or even if he is happy, mad or sad and you are very socially uncomfortable, maybe even a little afraid, as a result. After your long journey travelling alone and in a place very unfamiliar to you, you would love nothing more than to be able to converse with the alien but as you are so uncomfortable and seem to be getting nowhere you may feel dejected and end up just giving up – isolating yourself from the population or avoiding unnecessary or unstructured interaction with the natives.

The more you explore the planet around you the harder it seems to get. The alien society is full of social cues you don't understand and social situations, like the alien workplace or alien supermarket, that you are simply uncomfortable with or find impossible to socially navigate.

Aspects of alien society, such as relationships, seem very hard to decode and it can be very hard to understand what's the right approach to take is, or even how to learn certain concepts.

The easiest approach, you decide, is to try and rationalise the world around you, even where it is irrational or nearly impossible, by applying a 'black and white' view of the world. You demand routine and structure – the unexpected being the most difficult aspect of life on this new planet, as you cannot even prepare or attempt to cope or manage. The smallest change in routine can really throw you or leave you feeling very anxious or getting very upset.

Sometimes it just all gets too much for you and you ask why is it that I change as much as I can to adapt to this world, yet this world won't even try and adapt for me?

**Now realise the person with Autism DOES live on an alien planet called Earth everyday!**

## **Autism in Education**

Hopefully you felt the above story gave you an insight or an ability to be in the shoes of someone with autism. It might sound like a child's story but it is what we use whether talking to junior infants or business men, speaking to parents or writing in national newspapers! We now want to give you an overview of what autism is, or how challenges present themselves, in an education context.

The first thing you should realise is that autism is not an intellectual disability. Many on the spectrum have other challenges or disabilities also and a student may well have autism AND an intellectual disability, however autism itself is not an intellectual disability. You might ask – what is the challenge in the education then? Many aspects of school life, the curriculum and the school routine, structure and environment can be challenging for students with autism.

We will deal with each of these topics individually during the course of this handbook. Autism, as we mentioned, is a huge spectrum and so it is important you compliment the information about the different aspects of school which may be tough with the individualised information given to you by parents in our AsIAM 'My Child' handbook.

We hope you find the book enjoyable. AsIAM is owned by the autism community – people with the condition, their families and those working with them (that's YOU!) – so should you have any further questions or wish to contribute to the discussion please do not hesitate to visit us on AsIAM.ie, send us an article, post in the forum or leave a comment – we are here to help.

## 2. Common Traits

Autism is a condition which has many traits. Indeed the spectrum is so large some traits can be contradictory – for example a person may be organised or very disorganised! Below are some of the most common traits to give you further examples of how autism can affect students.

### Social Skills

- Struggle with eye contact.
- Inability to read or display emotions.
- Preference for own company. Spend majority of time alone.
- Inability to read social cues, find difficult to initiate, maintain or conclude conversation.
- Difficulty with turn taking in conversation – tendency to speak only about own interests, not answer questions or interrupt.
- Problems with social editing.
- Difficulty with interacting with people on a group basis. Dislike or cannot bear social gatherings such as parties.
- Tendency to socialise through interests i.e. membership of a club.
- Need for consistency in social situations i.e. games must always be played by the same rules, inability to cope with unexpected events in a social situation (person arriving who was not expected), learning some lines of conversation which can be inserted into specific social situation.

### Communications Skills

- Either non-verbal, limited verbal or highly verbal.
- Problems with word finding.
- Inappropriate use of words. Lack of understanding of vocabulary.
- Tendency to take phrases. Idioms literally.
- Tendency to have a monotone tone of voice or an unusual accent. Voice experimentation.
- Lack of facial expressions.
- Lack or basic sense of humour or has a cheesy sense of humour.
- Inability to articulate frustrations. Causes of upset.

### Behaviour

- Requires routine and certainty in day to day life. Can become distressed at breakdown in routine.
- May have 'melt-downs' if things don't go as planned or if they cannot deal with their surroundings or if they are struggling to communicate their frustrations.
- Unconventional play – collecting objects, sorting, colour coding or lining up are classic examples.
- Determination to win or come 1st in games. Habit of interrupting others turns.
- May have a special interest or obsessive topic to which they wish to study, talk about, play with all the time.
- Daydreaming or floating. Walking around without purpose.
- May be very hyperactive.
- Tendency to run, jump, move erratically or flap hands (linked to sensory processing).

### Sensory Processing

- Struggle with or cannot bear certain sounds, smells or textures. Equally may be attracted to others and may have favourite texture, sound or smell. May eat only very specific food.
- Find open spaces hard to process. Manage better in enclosed surroundings.
- May use voice experimentation.
- High pain threshold.



### 3. The 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 student 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 students.

However, it is not all bad. The mainstream classroom can provide many opportunities for a student 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 students their own age and to learn behaviours from them and, even overtime, provides opportunities to socialise with these students. It also allows students with autism the opportunity to follow the same curriculum, as far as their own personal abilities lie, as the other students and, in the case of some students with autism, 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 students with autism in the classroom, at both primary and secondary school levels.**

**CONSULT** This is an area of great importance. Before the start of term speak to the parents of the child or students with autism in your class about their own student's specific challenges and difficulties in relation to tasks like sensory processing, concentration and socialising. This will provide an opportunity not only to hear their thoughts on suggestions as to what could be done but also to maybe find out what has worked well in the past.

**WHEN MAKING GROUPS, PICK SELECTIVELY** Some students with autism will find sitting at group tables in the classroom very difficult, consider sitting them at a table with students who are slightly more mature or are very kind in nature, even for the first little while, as this will enable the child concerned 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 try 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 often when changes are explained they can be managed better.

**AVOID ROTE INSTRUCTIONS / QUICK INSTRUCTIONS** Students with Autism find it very challenging to follow lists of instruction, where possible they are much better able to follow step by step instructions, less likely to lose focus, get confused or get anxious because they fall behind. Equally because people on the spectrum often struggle with overstimulation or concentration problems and may also find some academic tasks like writing or computing information harder than others, try to allow plenty of time to complete tasks. For example, sitting at a group table where students are talking and at the same time trying to transfer notes from the board to a copy book can be very difficult so try not to rush the child with Autism as this can lead to them falling behind, not completing tasks adequately or getting very flustered or anxious.

**PROVIDE AN OPT-OUT** If a child with Autism 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, try to provide a subtle time-out or fresh air time, 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 students on the spectrum, like any other child, know boundaries and, as far as possible, integrate into the regime of the school day. Sometimes however students 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 and of course this needs to be addressed and cannot be seen to be acceptable, as it will benefit nobody in the long run. However, people with autism often respond negatively to head on confrontation and can get either extremely angry or simply very upset, even over a small correction. Therefore, as far as possible, it is best to talk to the child concerned after the event and gently explain why they cannot do certain things (like talk out of turn) or for larger meltdowns to try and disengage from the situation or have the pupil brought on sometime out and have a serious conversation, including penalties if necessary, about the behaviour after the child has calmed down. This approach will be more successful for all concerned.

### **UNDERSTAND THE AIMS, FOCUS ON THE STRENGTHS**

At the start of the year establish what the parents of the child hope to achieve from the academic year, this should be set out in an Individual Education Plan, at times these goals may focus more on life skills than academics and that should be taken seriously. It can be very frustrating the various educational challenges autism brings, recognise the personal capabilities and indeed limitations of students (though don't be afraid to gently push these!) with autism, give praise in the areas they do well in as this will increase their confidence and keep them interested in the school day.

### **BE PATIENT REGARDS ORGANISATION**

Students with autism can struggle to stay organised, to navigate from classroom to classroom, to meet deadlines and to remember everything required for class. This is a source of great anxiety for people with the condition and it is an area which will require some allowances and helpful reminders in order for the student to stay on top of.



## 4. 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 students. Some students 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 students with autism to get involved at break time and become friends with other students their own age and getting on the student's nerves and making them even more apprehensive in terms of mixing with other students.

## Here are some tips which may be useful in terms of addressing problems with socialising in school for students 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 students 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 students while others are naturally very introverted and struggle to socialise at all. It is important to look at each student 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, particularly if a student's parents are ok with you explaining autism to the other students involved. If a student in your class has autism, is finding it difficult to socialise or would be a risk in terms of getting bullied, try and identify 2 to 3 students in the class who are known for their kindness or being a little bit more mature to be a 'buddy' to the student 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 or excluded.

**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. Try to find out (it shouldn't be hard!) if the student concerned has a particular interest or passion. This could be movies, books or video games. Try to arrange for them to have socialising opportunities with other pupils with similar interests whether this be in the form of a break time or after-school club or simply once-off ice-breaker it could be very worthwhile.

**EDUCATE YOUR STUDENTS ABOUT DIVERSITY** 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. Take steps to talk about inclusion and even disabilities like autism in your class. 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. Challenge students 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.

**TRY TO MAKE PLAYTIME / LUNCH TIME COMFORTABLE** So many challenges associated with autism are exasperated by the anxiety so often felt by those with the condition. Try to make school breaks and other socialising opportunities comfortable for any students with autism in your class so as to maximise their chances of getting involved in social activities. Assure them they can opt-out if they feel uncomfortable, if their SNA is at playtime tell them they can come up to them if they feel worried or upset. Try to make the play area well-defined and to devise some supports for coping with the noises and smells.

## 5. Getting Off to The Right Start

Like many challenges, the earlier you address and put structures in place to support students with autism, during the academic year, the better. By working to get the right environment and supports, building trust with parents and being a friendly, supportive face for the child with autism, you will build trust and trust is the most important currency when dealing with children with autism, especially when they are finding something difficult or having a bad day.

### Some good tips for getting systems up and running at the start of the year are:

**COMMUNICATION** Identifying patterns in behaviour and learning how challenges are dealt with at home is very important for supporting students with autism in school. It is useful to set up a strong line of communication between school and the parents of children with autism from the beginning of the academic year. For further information see the communication section of this guidebook.

**ENVIRONMENT** As we mentioned in our “About Autism” section, people with autism can find coping with their surroundings difficult – an unsuitable environment can lead to poor concentration, overstimulation, anxiety and difficult behaviour. In order to get the best possible surroundings in place for a student with autism it is important to discuss sensory processing problems with parents and students at the beginning of the year. For example, find a seat and desk that works for the student and ensures the best possible concentration, being aware of smells and sounds that are difficult for the student and identifying tools which the student finds useful to deal with their senses – this might be a specific chair or texture or supports like weighted jackets or stress balls. Ensuring parents fill out the sensory section of the AsIAm “My Child” booklet can be helpful in this process.

**ADVICE** If you are teaching a child with autism for the first time, have a number of children with autism in your class or are anxious about the challenges that may arise, that is ok! It is understandable to have these concerns especially if you have no prior experience of the condition. It is always useful to talk to teachers who have previously taught the student or who have an array of experience in the area. Additionally, there are a number of courses for teachers who wish to learn more about autism (some of them free), and this may be a useful form of support at the beginning of the year.

**PARTNERSHIP / IEP** It is crucial that the classroom or education as a whole is not taken in isolation in supporting a person with autism – stability, continuity and targeted goals are very important in the life of a person with autism. From the outset, try to forge a joint approach with parents, resource teachers, SNAs, school management and other professionals who play an important role in the life of a student with autism – this can mean you are not left figuring out how to deal with a particular challenge alone and can achieve maximum success for the student during the course of the academic year. A joint approach is also a great way of reducing a student’s anxiety if the supportive approaches for a student are as close to the same or complimentary in all aspects of their life. An important step in this partnership process is putting in place an Individual Education Plan for students with autism. For more information about IEPs see the “IEP” section of this guidebook.

**RESOURCES** Additional resources are often required in the education of people with autism – be it the services of an SNA, the provision of resource hours, accessing assistive technology or securing additional training for yourself, it can really make the difference for all stakeholders in the student's education. Ideally these services should be in place from the start of the year. However, at times needs may change or evolve throughout the year and additional support may be required. Through your communication with the various stakeholders ensure an ongoing discussion on what supports are needed take place and that these needs are communicated to school management and the SENO (Special Needs Education Officer). Unfortunately, the resources required are not always obtained but you should always be prepared to ensure that any entitlements a student may have they are accessing, that where resources have not been secured that lobbying for them continues and that creative solutions can perhaps be found by the school for where supports are not available from the State.

**FIRST MEETING** Our last point but an important one. First impressions can be very important for students with autism. Your first meeting will help assure a student that everything will be ok for the school year ahead and that you are there if they need anything.

We know the first few days of school can be very busy and even messy, so to avoid a student with autism becoming uncomfortable or worried it is great if you can talk to them before class on the first day, even if it is just a half hour before.

This meeting will be an opportunity for you to address some of the anxieties the student may have filled out in their "What if..." cards (which AslAm provides) and discuss what will happen if things they are worried about happen. Equally it is an opportunity to avoid communication breakdown at a later stage by explaining how your class works and how they should, for example, ask a question or what to do if they are feeling worried / stressed. Finally, the meeting is a good opportunity for you to gain the trust of a student with autism which is crucial – people with autism can find it hard to understand how people operate or behave, form relationships and, at times, are often let down, so it is crucial you can gain that trust at an early stage – it will make many possible challenges a lot easier to address!

## 6. Importance of Communication

Communication is always an important part of life however it can be particularly important for students with autism, where what goes on at home, and in other parts of school, can directly impact on how a student performs and copes in your class. Also, as many students with autism may find it difficult to communicate concerns, anxieties or problems to you directly, communicating with home frequently is an important part of avoiding communication breakdown.

### Here are some useful communication approaches which may work for you:

**DIARY** This is a simple and time effective way of keeping in touch. Each evening you write a note on a student's form, performance or behaviour that day, any news from school which may be important or any concerns you have. Some days this may require a long note, others it may be a couple of sentences. Your student's parents or guardians respond to these notes each day and the diary is permanently kept in the student's schoolbag. Ask your student's parents 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 or that it is not associated with bad behaviour for example (where traditionally notes in the journal may be about this, so use a different notebook and do it out of view of other students). In secondary school, where there are several teachers it may be best that one teacher, perhaps a tutor, SNA or resource teacher, writes the note and gets input from the different teachers as they have it.

**PERIODIC MEETINGS** It may be useful to meet your student's parents more frequently than a once-off parent-teacher meeting. At the beginning of this academic year ask the parents 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 an IEP is put in place, these meeting are perhaps useful for reviewing prog-

ress and implementation of this plan. Once again, in secondary school, perhaps one teacher can oversee this process with different teachers involved as the need arises.

**INTERNAL COMMUNICATION** Internal communication is vital, particularly between a teacher and resource teacher at primary school level or between all a student's teachers at secondary school level. Something may happen in one class, that another teacher may need to be aware of, or perhaps one teacher notices a particular challenge for the student that other teachers are not aware of. Positive internal communication will reduce the risk of anxiety for a child with autism and also ensures a challenge does not go unnoticed or is dealt with insensitively due to a lack of awareness.

**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 student has with a certain smell, which could also be implemented at home or by a different teacher or maybe a stars system in school which helps a student to concentrate could also be introduced at home. Communication can lead to cooperation and cooperation can only benefit your student and all involved.

## 7. IEP – Individual Education Plan

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

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.

### **DO I NEED TO HAVE AN IEP FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM IN MY CLASS?**

The section of the EPSEN Act mandating schools to put IEPs in place for students with Special Educational Needs, has not yet been enacted by the Minister for Education & Skills.

However they are considered a standard of best practise, are highly beneficial to students with autism in terms of ensuring maximum, measurable success in school and many schools have already put them in place.

Additionally, the NCSE has very good resources and information regarding the writing of an IEP.

### **WHO SHOULD I INVOLVE IN WRITING AN IEP?**

You should discuss the writing of an IEP with your school principal. 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.

### **HOW DO I WRITE UP AND REVIEW AN IEP?**

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:



## 8. Resources, Exemptions & Assistive Technology

Many students with autism require additional supports, services or aids in school. For parents, knowing what a student 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, that you may be able to assist and advise parents with as a teacher.

### 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 student 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 student 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 student.

**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 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 or assignments, using learning tools and staying organised. There are grants available for the purchase of such technology and you should discuss this possibility with school management and parents or permit a student 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 and equipment which may work for a student 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 parents and 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 parents wish to apply for an exemption from the Irish language for their child they should approach the school principal and make the request. They will need evidence of the disability in question from a qualified psychologist and may also require a report from a medical specialist and other documentation. The school will then prepare a full report on the student 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 a student finds the study of languages difficult you should speak with school authorities and parents about this directly. However if a student 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 the student, parents and school management about applying for such an exemption.

## 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 or 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 at an early stage in secondary school. For example, if a student 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 encouraging them to apply for the Disability Access Route to Education through their CAO application. If they are successful in their application (people with autism automatically qualify) they will not only benefit from ensuring their future third level institution is aware of their diagnosis but will also enable them 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.

# 9. Language / Clear Instruction & Communicating with a Person with Autism

As students with autism can struggle with aspects of communication, interaction and imagination it is crucial the language you use in your interaction with students on the spectrum is clear, direct and easy to understand.

## Some tips for communication with students on the autistic spectrum are:

**AVOID ROTE INSTRUCTION** Rote instruction presents challenges for many with autism, who will struggle to retain and act out a long complex instruction. It is more helpful to provide step by step instructions verbally or a step by step sheet of instructions.

For example, typically you may say: "Sit down, take out your maths book, open page 12, do questions 1 to 7 and when you are finished bring it up to my desk for correction"

A better approach is:

1. Can you please take your seat (wait until that is done).
2. Take out your maths book (wait until that is done).
3. Ok, do question 1 to 7 (after they have began this).
4. Whenever you are done bring it up to my desk and I will correct it.

Alternatively, if a student is good at following written instruction may you can write it on the board for them to follow. Many teachers, who use this approach, report it helps many more students than just those with Autism!

**SAY WHAT YOU MEAN** Language is something we can be quite casual with, especially in Ireland and we use words based on our presumption that people will be able to understand what we actually mean. For people with autism, language is black and white. If you consider it, it makes sense – why do we say one thing, while meaning another. For example, if you give a colouring exercise and say you want it done "perfectly" you probably mean a good, presentable effort, but for a person with autism they might understand this as a request for a masterpiece! Always explain what you mean with words like this to avoid anxiety and stress for students with the condition.

**METAPHOR / TURNS-OF-PHRASE** Like the above point, we all have a tendency to use very complex metaphors and turns of phrase like "I am running around in circles, after you" and "you're on another planet over there". These are very much a part of our language and how we talk so it can be difficult to be even conscious of using such phrases but do be aware that students with autism may be confused by them and be prepared to explain them if you think they don't understand.

**BE DIRECT** Often we can avoid being very direct so instead of saying "everyone do this..." we might say "will everyone do this is they don't mind...". Directness is a much better approach for people with Autism and avoids breakdown in communication which might be confused with a student being disobedient or cheeky.

**BE PRECISE** It's easy to be vague, we all do it. However vagueness can be difficult for people with autism and again lead to break downs in communication. Instead of "everyone write a few words about this poem" try and say specifically how much you would like written.

**HUMOUR** As a nation, we have a very colourful sense of humour and many students revel in it – indeed many students with autism do too, however only if they can understand the basis of it. Every student with autism is different. Some struggle with humour full stop, others favour 'slap-stick' humour and others do have a very good sense of humour. Try and find this out in advance of the school year as it can avoid upset or confusion.

## **THE GOLDEN RULE - ALWAYS THINK, ALWAYS DOUBLE**

**CHECK** This is a useful rule for dealing with children with communication/comprehension problems especially children with autism. Always double-check what you have just said is understood and always think before you speak or give out – “Could there be a communication problem which has led the student to behave in a certain way?”

## **That is all information for how YOU speak to people with Autism, but what about understanding them and their communication with you?**

**LISTEN CAREFULLY** When a person with autism speaks it is important to give them the space to finish their point not to talk over them. It is also important that you listen attentively to what they are saying to ensure you clearly understand and can be seen to understand in order to develop a trusting relationship.

**TECHNOLOGY** It is important to note not everyone with autism can talk or communicate easily however there are now many great educational apps which help with communication and also established communication tools such as PECS. These may require some degree of learning from you so it is useful to find out in advance of the year if any of your students are non-verbal.

**EMOTIONS** People with autism often struggle to identify emotions, what exactly is upsetting them or even to identify with pain. They may not directly talk about these things so in conversation you may need to ask very direct questions.

**BLUNTNESSE/CHEEK** People with autism can be very blunt and matter of fact. At times this can be taken for cheek or disrespect, but it is crucial to remember that people with autism think in ‘black and white terms’ so telling a person they are “bad” at something, if in fact they are, seems reasonable to a person with the condition. Talking about social editing is a more valuable exercise than treating such bluntness as bad behaviour, because this simply will not make sense to a person with autism.

**TIMING AND SPACE** People with autism find it difficult to engage in conversation, or be asked questions if they are tired or flustered, or find it difficult if they are asked a lot of questions. It’s always important to give a person with autism space and to not overload them. Equally a person with autism may like to talk about something or ask a question but will worry about when to do so. So providing a time and place where they can ask you questions is a good idea.



# 10. 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. Often they find concentrating or remembering everything difficult. They might find the end of the day or between classes or breaktimes a stressful or difficult sensory period. Or their mind may simply be elsewhere in their thoughts. 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!

## Start of The Year

Discuss with parents the specific challenges of their child in the area of organisation, also read their account of organisation problems in the “My Child” book provided by AslAm.

Also discuss what systems they are putting in place to help make being organised easier in the academic year – maybe they are colour-coding subjects, books or equipment, maybe they will buy “extras” and leave them in the school office” or maybe they are just putting in place a good system of making sure deadlines are written down, everything is in the bag and organisation is made a key part of the “at-home” routine before school.

As a teacher, you can make organisation a little easier for students too:

**WRITING THINGS DOWN** Having things written down prevents forgetfulness. No doubt you are always telling your students to write everything down but this is especially crucial for people with autism as it enables parents to help students to stay organised.

**LOCKERS/BASKETS** Ensure students are not flustered or rushed at lockers or baskets. If they find the period at lunch or class where this is usually done stressful because of the busy surroundings and everyone around them at their locker – consider providing them an opportunity to do it at another time and, if possible, to double check with them, that they have what they need.

**WHAT IF...?** Often organisation is a problem for people with autism because they are flustered or their mind is in other places however if they realise they have forgotten something or forgotten to do something, the anxiety of this can knock them for the remainder of the day and can lead to less concentration and so even worse organisation! Discuss with parents

and students what happens or what they should do if they forget something, and fill it into the AsIAm “What if..” sheet, this will help reduce anxiety for students and give them a roadmap to fixing the problem even if they are already really stressed. If a student has difficult reading maybe you can fill this sheet out with images.

## **Maintenance**

At the start of the year you may agree approaches with parents and students which you suddenly find aren't really helping or are no longer suitable.

Be prepared, through the frequent communication with home and other teachers, to try and come up with a new approach to what can be a difficult and evolving issue.

Equally, organisation skills may be linked to stress or concentration so you may see them diminish closer to exams or a school holiday so be prepared for this arising.

## **Be Understanding**

With an invisible condition like autism, it is, at times, easy to get frustrated and ask “Why can't they just remember things like everyone else?”, However organisational skills are a genuine challenge for many with autism and so need to be treated as an area to be worked on, not a disciplinary matter.

# 11. 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 a student to reapply themselves in a less structured environment with less support than in school.

**As a teacher, you can help make what can be a very stressful aspect of home life for a student, and their family, by considering the following areas:**

**DEADLINES** Deadlines can be very difficult for people with autism – getting something completed by a given date while coping with limited concentration skills, struggling with certain aspects of the curriculum or a subject and balancing competing interests.

Naturally though, deadlines are a part of life and something people with autism need to work towards getting better at. It can be very helpful to give work at the start of the week allowing a student to have a whole week to break it up as they need to or for example, if they have good concentration on one day, getting a lot of it done then. Equally, if a student is struggling with a deadline helping them by offering extensions can be helpful – while this might seem unorthodox, if stress levels are high or an aspect of their condition is holding them back, you as a teacher can make that judgement, and offer some leeway, not based on them simply not doing the work but genuinely struggling with it.

**WORKLOAD / SETTING A LIMIT** When setting homework it is important to realise that what might take the typical student an hour could take a person with autism several hours. This might be due to an inability to concentrate or manage the work, or it could be because it needs to be “perfect” and so hours will be spent on getting a piece of work “just right”. Often parents, especially at national school level, want their child to spend a fixed time on homework and if it drags on late into the evening and begins causing stress to stop it for the night, however many students with autism (seeing the situation in black or white) feel that they are in the wrong not to finish their work and can get very upset. At the start of the year it is good to come up with a way of managing the workload for students with autism and also directly telling the student that you only want them to spend a certain time on homework each evening. In secondary school, with the demands of State exams, it can be difficult to manage workload but extra time for deadlines and opportunities to do work that is not being managed at home, in school, can be positive approaches.

**CROSS-CONSULTING** In secondary school it is crucial that teachers communicate with each other about the demands of homework or study on a student in a given week. For example if a student really struggles with maths and a difficult piece of work has been given, which will be time consuming and stressful, maybe other teachers can try and provide a lighter workload or just be a little bit more understanding or accommodating to the student that week.

**CLEAR INSTRUCTION** As we have detailed, clear communication is very important for people with autism. If homework is not very clear it can lead to confusion and stress at home. When giving homework instructions try to be clear not only in what is assigned but what is expected, how it should be presented, how long it should take and what supports are out there if they get stuck. Always ask if anyone has any questions and understands what you mean (or talk to the student directly after class or at the end of the day).

**ATTEMPT, ATTEMPT, ATTEMPT** This is the most important rule in instilling confidence in a student with autism doing homework or working independently. Encourage the student to attempt everything and focus on what they have done correctly and where they can improve, rather than highlighting what is wrong. If a copy book page has 10 ticks and one X, the X can be more upsetting for the student child with Autism than the pleasure of all the ticks as they can often view it as them “doing something wrong”.

## **Planning:**

**HELPING FIND A GOOD TIME / SPACE** A big part of the challenge for a student with autism, especially in those crucial secondary school years, is finding the time and space where a student’s concentration is at its best, where there is no distractions and where there is the freedom to move around, talk aloud or work in a way that works for them. Help the student in exploring this issue. Maybe the school can help? For example, if the big study hall for afterschool students doesn’t work, can a room in the school be offered?

# 14. 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 with Autism find focusing on one thing for a long period of time immensely challenging. This specific problem not only makes studying for exams tough for those on the Spectrum but also makes the actual exam very challenging, and often not reflective of work and knowledge, itself.

**SITTING STILL** Many on the spectrum 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 for a person with autism, who already suffers from anxiety, this causes even greater problems. This anxiety often grows as the exam wears on and if the student feels they aren't doing as well as they could due to the other difficulties. This anxiety can also be increased by the presence of all the other students who too are stressed and this can impact on the anxiety levels of someone with the condition, who may already find large rooms of people difficult to deal with.

**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, who might find it hard to restrict themselves to answering a question, and cutting back on information accordingly, within a set time.

**COMMUNICATION** Some with autism find it very challenging to articulate their knowledge or transfer what they know into a comprehensible answer. Equally they might find comprehending some question or words in the exam difficult.

**If your student, is experiencing problems with preparing for or sitting exams it is important to look for help from your school/college and explain your difficulties. 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 for a student.

**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 encouraging them to apply for the Disability Access Route to Education through their CAO application. If they are successful in your application (people with autism automatically qualify), they will not only benefit from ensuring their future third level institution is aware of their diagnosis and needs but will also enable many on the scheme to access a reduced points entry system, 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. Work with students with autism to develop an approach to the paper which suits their needs in the exam for example maybe they will decide to take a tiny break between each question to give their mind a break. Always test drive the plan and if it works, stick to it!!



## 13. Anxiety & Behaviour

Anxiety is a major challenge for many students with autism – the environment, change, atmosphere, stress levels, inability to communicate a cause of frustration, and social situations can all lead to heightened stress levels for students on the spectrum. When a person with autism is stressed it often leads to other behaviours associated with their condition becoming more pronounced such as stimming, poor concentration, introversion and negative behaviour.

It is important that anxiety levels are managed to enable a person with autism to have as happy and successful a time in school (and at home) as possible.

### Why?

As we mentioned, people with autism often need structure and routine in order to feel comfortable navigating the world. By limiting change and managing their surroundings and interaction they are able to reduce the possibility of something they are uncomfortable with or don't know how to deal with occurring.

When something does happen or they think is about to happen which they are not expecting, don't like, feel uncomfortable with or don't know how to deal with this can lead to heightened anxiety.

The start of a school year can be very difficult in terms of anxiety due to all the changes and upheaval. Equally, this could be true for the end of the year or in secondary school, at exam times or coming up to deadlines where there is increased pressure.

Other examples of such scenarios would be a smell or noise they find difficult to deal with, forgetting a book for class, a change to school routine or being put in a social situation, maybe a particular group or school game, they don't feel comfortable with. In secondary school coming up to exam time where there is increased pressure, anxiety may present itself more.

### Identifying the Signs

Sometimes the anxiety people with autism are experiencing is interiorised and you cannot pinpoint their anxiety or what is causing it.

However you may be able to notice when a person with autism is getting anxious by changes in their behaviour – maybe they are stimming (flapping their hands, jumping, running in circles etc) or, if they are usually outgoing, are quieter and more introverted. Maybe they seem very distracted for the day or are behaving in an unusual manner.

This can be different for each student with autism though. It is likely parents have some ability at identifying when their son or daughter is getting anxious. A discussion on this area at the start of the year and reading our "My Child" guide the parent has filled out may be very useful.

## **Preventing Anxiety**

It can be very difficult to eliminate anxiety completely for people with autism, due to so much change in school, in surroundings, in terms of pressure and deadlines etc. However efforts can be made at stopping anxiety coming to a head for a student with autism.

This will very much depend on each individual student with autism and on their own particular concerns and difficulties which can lead to anxiety and much depends on ongoing efforts from an early point.

For example, discussing quietly with a student upcoming change so that they can prepare for it (i.e. if you know you will be missing from school or there will be a change in seating plan), providing opt-outs for when an environment is very uncomfortable or stressful for a person with autism, giving deadlines which will allow the student plenty of time to plan and get the work done and identifying social situations which they are uncomfortable with and addressing them slowly rather than 'landing' a student into a scenario they may find daunting.

Once again, we suggest you discuss such approaches with parents and consult our "My Child" guidebook.

## **Managing Anxiety**

It is always good to empower and equip students to be able to address their challenges as far as they are capable.

It may be useful exploring options which allow students to manage their levels of anxiety. For example, students may benefit from an exercise break to calm down or ease their stress, or students may find sensory rooms useful for reducing their stress or anxiety levels.

Equally, while some students with autism find it difficult to discuss emotion approaches like "My Worries" sheets and mood charts, include them in the process of identifying sources of anxiety and coming up with ways to deal with them. Some students also benefit from having a stress ball or some other sensory outlet to ease their anxiety. This is another area that will vary greatly from student to student but it can play a big role in preventing major stress levels so we once again advise referring to our "My Child" booklet.

## **Who to talk to**

The area of anxiety is not one in which teachers can be expected to be experts in. It is always useful to talk to parents as they can perhaps fill you in on their experiences of anxiety in the home and also may introduce you to any professional counsellors / OTs etc who provide support to their son or daughter.

Your school guidance counsellor may have additional knowledge of the area or there may be opportunities for in-service or additional training. You will also find many useful autism services in Ireland who will be happy to advise you (see our useful links and contacts page).

## Behaviour

People with autism can, at times, due to high anxiety or an inability to communicate their frustration or how they feel, display very upset, angry or aggressive behaviour. The first thing to bear in mind is that it is crucial as a teacher that you are able to identify when a student's behaviour is about to reach this level and to preventative measures. However this can be difficult and should a person with autism become very upset, angry or aggressive it is important to avoid escalating the situation further. After the event, it is important to reflect on what caused the student to become upset, what can be avoided in the future and to talk through the situation with the student when they are calm. It is important also to be able to distinguish between challenging behaviour association with people on the autism spectrum and behaviour that is a matter of discipline. It is crucial that when a child experiences a very upset or angry period that they are not treated as the "bold" child but rather the focus is put on preventative measures and, where appropriate, restorative measures.

As always, do discuss this matter with parents at the start of the year in order to understand possible behaviour problems, and triggers, for that particular child and see the parent's advice in our "My Child" booklet.

The SESS offers very useful information to teachers on behaviour management and this can be found on their website QR CODE.



## 14. 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. AsIAM firmly believes that no matter how affected a child is by autism, they have talents and abilities, perhaps sometimes hidden, which can make a positive contribution to their own self-esteem and indeed to others.

A great way to make school more enjoyable, and to address areas that a student 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 a student really hates or finds difficult is to try and make them interesting.

If they love soldiers for example, perhaps 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 at 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 can they be incorporated into a game or something interesting?

These are just a few examples, the possibilities are endless. Discuss these ideas with parents, other teachers and SNAs at the beginning of the academic year. This approach enables a student 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 a student to socialise in a way they find easier.

Are there any activities which take place during lunch time, like chess or computer clubs, which are in an environment they prefer and provide an outlet for socialising, maybe even without realising it? Of course, it's unlikely a student who doesn't socialise or finds it very difficult will love it overnight but it is a slow, gradual and worthwhile process to engage with. A balance must also be found between encouraging socialising and forcing it, which can lead to a negative reinforcement against socialising all together.

Maybe a student can even 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 a student, who may at times really struggle academically, will stand out and have an opportunity to show that ability to others also.

# 15. Understanding, Disclosure & Autism Awareness in Your School

People with autism may not be very self-aware or may not wish to discuss their autism, this can make things more difficult in school at times. How can you know something is upsetting someone with autism if they can't or won't discuss it? How can you eliminate bullying and exclusion if a person with the condition doesn't realise this is happening or may be sensitive to a discussion of the topic in class? How do you make autism an issue not just for teachers but for a whole school community?

These are certainly difficult questions but finding the solutions is certainly very important.

## **Here are some approaches which have worked well in the past:**

### **UNDERSTANDING**

It can be difficult to be understanding to a person with autism when they can't or won't articulate what a particular problem is or why they are upset about something. However, it is important to try and grow the idea of 'understanding' in your classroom generally.

Autism is an invisible condition and if it is something not openly discussed by a student it can be hard for you as a teacher to identify a problem and even harder for students to empathise with a student with autism. However, everyone is different and growing an understanding atmosphere, we believe, is a key part in changing the world for people with autism – so many people remain undiagnosed and, as a person goes through life, they are unlikely to tell every person they meet they have Autism (we don't wear t-shirts!) and therefore, in education, it is crucial all students have an understanding approach towards those who are 'different' to prevent the isolation of people with autism in the next generation.

As a teacher, it is crucial that you are seen to be very openly understanding to the needs of a person with autism (or who is a little different) because where that is absent, students take from it that it's acceptable to be indifferent or perhaps even un-understanding to those with the condition.

In building awareness for those with autism it is always better to take the topic as part of a wider need to recognise and support everyone's "difference", this leads to more empathy and so just a better atmosphere for students with autism. A great way of growing understanding is setting up 'buddy systems' not just for students with autism but for the whole class, as, at some point, every student will need someone to turn to. This normalises support in a school setting.

## **DISCLOSURE**

Some parents and students are very comfortable about discussing their autism with other students, they feel it leads to more compassion and understanding and helps to create awareness. Others are less comfortable with their diagnosis and can be quite annoyed or upset about discussing it.

This can make things challenging as a teacher because you may not be able to have the conversations you need to have with a student about support, for example, and so you may need to have a more general discussion about a student's 'needs'.

Towards the end of primary school and during secondary school, especially for those with more high-functioning autism, questions may begin to come from other students about "What is up with him/her?", "Why do they have an SNA/supports/resource hours?" etc. Equally some students may decide they wish to discuss their Autism or others may wish to keep it private, and so it can be a time where a great deal of diplomacy is needed.

Should a student decide to disclose to classmates or to the class as a whole, this is something you should support them in. Reassure them about how brave they are in wanting to be so open and also stress to students that just because you now know about a person's disability, they are no different to the person you knew prior to learning it.

Should a student or parent discuss the desire for disclosure with you, you should discuss how you feel this would best be done and how you might play a part – for example, would now be a good time to have a general discussion about Autism or difference in your classroom?

## **AUTISM AWARENESS**

In cooperation with students and parents affected by autism, you may decide at some point that you should increase awareness of autism among students in your school. Of course this can be done without name-checking anyone. Autism is something every student will meet at some point in their life and need to be educated about.

AsIAM provides school workshops which challenge students, at primary and secondary schools, to understand autism but also to see those with the condition as more than a label and also to take ownership of the issue, coming up with ways to make their school more autism friendly.

Should you wish to avail of one of these workshops get in touch with us at [AsIAM.ie](http://AsIAM.ie)

Equally, many schools have ran fantastic autism awareness days and weeks as part of World Autism Awareness Month in April and we are delighted to assist in the planning and organisation of such events.

## 16. 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?

# Useful Links

There is a wealth of resources on the internet for further reading on the topics covered in this guidebook and other educational issues for people affected by autism.

If you are interested in learning more we recommend visiting the following websites:

## Irish Charitable Organisations

**ASIAM** [www.AsIAm.ie](http://www.AsIAm.ie)

**ASPIRE IRELAND** [www.AspireIreland.ie](http://www.AspireIreland.ie)

**IRISH AUTISM ACTION** [www.AutismIreland.ie](http://www.AutismIreland.ie)

**IRISH SOCIETY FOR AUTISM** [Autism.ie](http://Autism.ie)

## Statutory Services

**NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION** [www.NCSE.ie](http://www.NCSE.ie)

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS** [www.Education.ie](http://www.Education.ie)

**SESS** [www.SESS.ie](http://www.SESS.ie)

## Service Providers

**MIDDLETOWN CENTRE FOR AUTISM** [www.MiddletownAutism.com](http://www.MiddletownAutism.com)

## International Websites

**AMBITIOUS ABOUT AUTISM** [www.AmbitiousAboutAutism.org.uk](http://www.AmbitiousAboutAutism.org.uk)

**NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY** [www.Autism.org.uk](http://www.Autism.org.uk)

**WRONGPLANET** [www.WrongPlanet.net](http://www.WrongPlanet.net)