



autistic
girls network

Reasonable Adjustments for Schools



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What are Reasonable Adjustments?

Reasonable adjustments are **modifications** that schools must make if a person's disability places them at a disadvantage compared to others without disabilities.

It is important to remember that equality means ensuring everyone receives the same opportunities and resources.

However, **equity** ensures that they are provided with the right tools and support to reach an equal outcome, which means the resources will not be the same for each pupil as they all have vastly **differing needs**.

These adjustments differ from physical changes aimed at building accessibility, such as installing disabled toilets or ramps. In schools, the **Equality Act 2010** mandates that reasonable adjustments be made to support disabled students, ensuring they have equal access to the school's offerings as their non-disabled peers.

Schools must ensure that all students have **equal opportunity** to participate and in many cases in order for them to do this, adjustments will need to be made. Schools must avoid discriminating against a disabled student due to any effects of their disability, that is the law.

Schools should consider how all aspects of the school day, including attendance and behaviour policies, can be **adapted** to meet the needs of disabled students. This is one of the ways they can create sense of belonging for everyone in the school for **community** disabled and non-disabled students alike.

Section 20 of the Equality Act 2010 sets out government's duty to make reasonable adjustments. It goes beyond avoiding discrimination and requires **positive steps**, anticipating potential needs, so disabled people can access services.

For more information on this visit: The Education Hub – educationhub.blog.gov.uk



Working with School to make reasonable adjustments

Schools are legally obliged to work with the student, their family and professionals involved, to agree to the necessary support and put it in place.



There is no clear legal definition of the words Reasonable Adjustments, what is 'reasonable' will be affected by other factors

The Government recommends that these adjustments are regularly reviewed and adjusted as necessary, reviewed to ensure that they are **effectively** helping your child and to check if the child's support needs have changed. This may be done as part of SEN reviews that should be **happening regularly**.

The SEN code of practice has a clear focus on the participation of children or young people and their parents in decision-making at **individual** levels such as for reasonable adjustments.

This duty for providing reasonable adjustments is **anticipatory** – meaning it requires thought to be given in advance to what disabled children and young people might require and what adjustments might need to be made to prevent that **disadvantage**.

Children should not need to struggle first in order to receive support, we can anticipate that need and put **measures** in place first.



Going into School

Alternative entrance & start times

The child should be able to go in at a different time to avoid crowds, school could provide an alternative entrance to the one everyone is using, a quiet side door is better.

Work with school to see whether they are better being in early to help the teacher with some 'jobs' while the classroom is quiet can a positive start to the morning. Equally a child may need to go in later and have time to regulate and discuss the coming day with an adult and then enter the classroom once the initial noise of the morning has calmed down and pupils are working quietly.

Changes & transitions

Give understanding support over change and transition; going in to school from home in the morning is a big transition. Allow the child time to regulate before entering a busy, noisy classroom, this could be time in a sensory room or a sensory break in a quiet classroom with a trusted adult. Being given 'jobs' to do can often provide a sense of achievement and a legitimate reason for going in to class a little later which makes it easier for the child amongst their peers.

Communication ahead of time

Develop a pro-active relationship - schools should communicate about the school day - not just academic or behavioural information. Ensure the child knows in advance any changes to the school day that the child needs to be aware such as new staff, a change in the classroom, new policies or procedures being put in place.

Uniform

Uniform regulations should be relaxed on an individual basis for sensory reasons as a rule. However, first thing in the morning these may have to be further altered at a time when the child is already in a heightened sense of dysregulation and often in fight or flight mode. A child wearing their tie will not help them learn, in the same way it does not help us do our jobs, however being forced to wear one may dysregulate a child in a way that does in fact affect their ability to learn.

Attendance

Check attendance and behaviour policies to make sure they are inclusive of all pupils including those with SEND, a child should not be discriminated against because their disability makes it difficult to enter the school building on time.



Break Time



Meals

Provide a safe space for eating, either eat first or last or somewhere safe and quiet. C says 'my son used to go in the hall, be so overwhelmed by noises, smells and people that he could not eat at school at all. Literally went all day without eating. Now he finishes his lunch and his behaviour is better because he enjoys lunchtime now as he sits in the playground to eat.'

Socialising

Provide scaffolding for social interactions. Ask them how they would like to be supported in social situations; autistic girls will want to engage with others socially but may find this overwhelming or confusing.

Remember some young people need to be alone sometimes, they don't all find social time energising.

Activities

Think about activities the young person can engage with, if team sports or games are a struggle then think about their own interests – can you set up a breaktime reading club, Minecraft club, collectors club etc. These can be simply providing a quiet space in the playground or for older students a classroom to use.

Transitions

Transitions such as between lessons and breaks can also be deeply disconcerting for autistic people and cause a feeling of losing control, for many autistic pupils the ambiguous social rules and team sports prevalent at breaktime can be very anxiety inducing even at a very young age.



The School Day

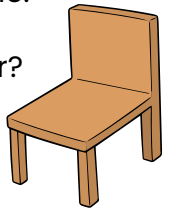
Make sure the child knows what will happen and when – no sudden surprises. A **visual timetable** is great to help with this but it is important to show the child each day and ensure they know what/where/when.



If you **promise** something, keep that promise. Many autistic children struggle with this and it can be really detrimental to their mental health and self esteem if they told something will happen and then it doesn't.

May require a **dedicated** teaching assistant who understands the child, preferably one who is autistic.

Where do they sit? Sitting at the front to see the board better or be near the teacher? Or near the back or the doorway of the classroom to enable them to take time out if needed to regulate or use the toilet. E says 'This provides me with the option to leave but it allows me to stay comfortably when I can.'



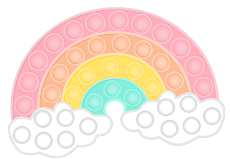
Seating that allows for movement can help pupils to concentrate, this can be cheap simple bands on their chair, wobble cushions or sitting on the floor with a clipboard instead of at a desk. If movement helps them learn then adjustments should be made.

Many autistic children have **sensory processing difficulties** which may mean they have poor internal awareness and only realise they need to go to the toilet at the last minute so easy exit from the classroom can be helpful. Yes, they could have gone at break, but they didn't know they needed to due to sensory processing difficulties so now they need to go immediately.



It is often necessary to provide a **'Timeout'** card to leave class, a few minutes of walking down the corridor can often be enough to re-engage the child or a few stretches in the corridor with a TA can be really beneficial (and it's free!)

Use **fidget toys** of course these can be restricted to those that don't make a noise. For many children having a fidget toy enables them to have tactile or visual input which supports them to self regulate, helps with concentration, relieves tension and restlessness. Staff could try this in meetings and see if it helps adults with focus, many forward-thinking companies now have fidgets for meetings as they see the benefits.



Tasks to be broken down into chunks to make retaining and understanding the task easier. Many very bright autistic pupils will need **extra time** to process information and will need it presented in different formats ie written as well as verbal.



We often have **slower processing speeds** due to the increased amount of information we take on board, this can lead to memory issues. So when a child forgets the question which was asked it is often because they were taking in so much more information from their surroundings than their neurotypical counterpart that they just could not process everything.



“Despite me doing well academically, I struggle with comprehension of tasks, I am not comfortable asking for help. Check ins have now stopped wasted time doing work that I have misunderstood and done completely wrong.” S, age 12

Autistic pupils often use **bottom up thinking** which means they use details to build concepts rather than top down thinking where others would assess the concept first then the details, so teachers (and parents) need to be aware of this different way of thinking.

Use of **voice to text** software, reader pens, scribe etc. Use of laptop instead of writing. A laptop may be preferable to writing – but listening and taking notes at the same time may not be possible so that will need to be taken into account.

Model the work and/or provide a **visual explanation** (though not all autistic children are visual learners of course)

Use of **ear-defenders** or noise-cancelling headphones and music if required, just like we see many adults and older students use.

Adapt lessons to pupil's **passionate interests**. We'd like to open your mind to the idea that there's nothing weird or out of the ordinary about these interests. They are just strong interests, and it's no more odd to be interested in, for example, flags of the world, or K-POP stars, than it is to be interested in a game which involves some players being paid very large sums of money to kick a ball around a field of grass

Vestibular input is received in the brain every single time we move our head, the greater the movement, the more vestibular input we receive. If the system is under developed this can affect sitting still, core strength, balance, handwriting etc.

Creating activities which are helpful is called a **sensory diet**. A 'sensory diet' may often be crucial to school having bearability for the child. This often needs Occupational Therapist input.



Do not force an autistic child to take part in **group work** with students they don't know, or be called on in class to speak unexpectedly. It is not beneficial.

Consider not giving neurodivergent children detentions/exclusions at all.

Certainly **no punishment** for anything caused by executive function, sensory challenges, hyper focus, repetitive behaviours or processing issues eg. forgetting equipment, being late, being unable to find the class, being slow to get changed, being slow to form a group or struggling to sit still or fidgeting.

Children should not be punished for their disabilities.

School at Home

V says "I don't like to see my school pencil case at home. They need to be separate places."



Where possible avoid **homework** or keep it to keep to key subjects. For many autistic children home is home and school is school, they are very different places. To maintain good mental health home needs to remain their safe space which school doesn't invade.

Provide homework clubs and support time in school hours for homework.

Many high schools now use PE lessons as the time neurodivergent pupils complete homework in a resource or unit.

Autistic Inertia can be a real stumbling block for many children, this can cause difficulty with organisation or they may find it difficult to get started on a task so support in school may be needed.

Consider allowing 'homework' to be done during assembly time which autistic pupils may find extremely challenging anyway so use the time for other things.





Intervention



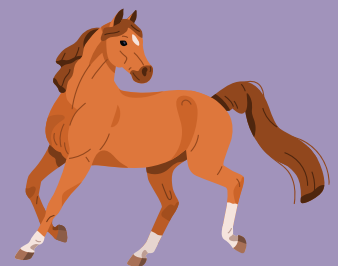
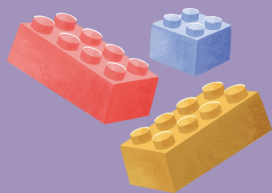
Interventions can play a key role in support our children how it is very important it is not trying to **modify** autistic behaviour so we need to think about the behaviour and make sure we are not trying to 'fix' young peoples autistic traits.

Interventions need to be **person centred** enable pupils to engage with something they love for some that might be art or Lego or reading.

They are not for punishment – they are not to make children fit in or make them less autistic, they must be to support the **health and wellbeing** of the child, not for any other reason.

Options may include:

- Play therapy
- Art therapy
- Lego therapy
- Speech and language therapy may be beneficial
- Forest school or animal based therapy such as equine therapy
- Occupational therapy for fine motor skills, every day living skills etc



Remember routine is important as is predictability so they must be taken in to account when planning.



Masking

T says “At school I look like a happy little apple, but really I’m a sad little pear, I just pretend really well. It makes me so tired and grumpy when I get home.”

Masking or camouflaging is when an autistic person **copies** someone else’s social behaviour and tries to make it their own – without fully understanding where that behaviour comes from.

This can lead to serious problems. Masking or camouflaging is mentally **exhausting** and isolating. At primary school autistic girls are often surrounded by peers who really don’t get them. They have to mask their difficulties all day and pretend to be a different version of themselves.

In many cases this leads to **meltdowns** at home as a result of an overwhelming and confusing day, with family life becoming very difficult. The **‘coke can effect’**.

This is why **understanding, regulating and managing** emotions is absolutely crucial to autistic girls’ emotional and mental wellbeing. It is key to feeling well, happy and together and to accessing opportunities.

It’s the difference between autistic girls functioning and attending school each day or being stranded at home by their **anxiety**.

H says ‘for school I hide behind the mask but when I get home and take it off I get angry and upset that it’s been so hard all day. Sometimes I can’t even keep it on until I get home’

Mental health issues are common in autistic people. One study of autistic adolescents aged 10–14 found that **71%** had **co-occurring mental health disorders** (Simonoff et al, 2008).

Rates of anxiety and depression disorders are alarmingly high with one study indicating prevalence rates of **54%** for **anxiety** conditions and **47%** for **depression**. (Hossain et al, 2020)



Exams

Access arrangements are provided to ensure an autistic student can access exams in the same way as their peers. Just as a school would provide a ramp for a wheelchair user to access a hall with stepped access, access arrangements need to be put in place for students with invisible or less visible disabilities.

Arrangements could include:

- A separate quiet room either as a small group or for an individual student dependant on need. Allow them to become familiar with the space. Avoid overstimulating rooms with harsh lighting or too much in the space.
- Show the student the room before they sit the exam, and then don't change it. Check for sensory issues before deciding on the room ie are clocks ticking, is it next to the playground and will be noisy at break etc.
- Supervised rest breaks.
- Reading aloud may be the best way for the student to process the information on the paper, this would require them having a separate individual room.
- Coloured overlays may be needed. Or paper printed on coloured paper – 'visual stress' is often a co-occurring condition for autistic students. This is different to dyslexia.

Does the student need assistive technology?

Do they need a scribe or a reader or help them understand questions which are vague or unclear or ambiguous? If information is implied but not said autistic student may need support.

Executive functions struggles make breaking down tasks difficult so wordy questions may need chunking down.

Ensure **exam language** is discussed and practised in class ie what does 'describe' actually mean in a an exam. Or 'write down your working out' if you have done the calculation in your head, it may be difficult to then write that out after you have given the answer. **Be very clear** with what these words and phrases mean in this specific context of the exam, ambiguous phrases are not helpful for autistic people and can lead to a lot of wasted time trying to decipher what the question actually means or is asking for.



Advice for schools

At AGN we have heard many, many times, tales of parents talking to class teachers and SENCOs in primary schools about **regular meltdowns** at the end of the school day once they are home; only to be told that there is no problem in school so it must be about something else. Autistic girls, but often boys and non-binary pupils too, are **professional maskers** – the fact that they have meltdowns at home indicates that the school day isn't working, and is causing them extreme distress and anxiety.

The coke can effect, the pressure comes out once they are in their safe space at home.

STOP sending the attendance letters to parents of SEND children whose disability affects their ability to attend school, it's very demoralising when they are sent home with children and is a visual suggestion the child is failing, it will not make the child want to come in more often.

PE and activities

Make PE inclusive. Social stories can help. Remember autistic pupils may need more time to process the change from classroom to playing field. Routine is important, if they think they will be doing rounders and you change it to gymnastics be aware this will often cause distress due to the unexpected change.

Breakdown the skills needed for an activity, do not overwhelm with information and expect the pupil to process it in the same way as another pupil.

Many autistic people struggle with co-occurring conditions, often undiagnosed, which affect their balance, fine motor skills etc.

Unstructured physical activity can be really tough for neurodivergent pupils.





PSHE and puberty

Provide very specific and adapted sex/relationship education which uses clear and unambiguous language and is inclusive. PHSE is often dreaded by autistic pupils and that can affect their relationship with school when they know it is coming up as a lesson. It is often better received as a lesson taught in small groups.

Autistic pupils often take longer to adjust to the possibility of changes such as puberty and find the whole conversation and thought of change quite difficult to process. Think about language used, pupils may take things literally ie the use of the words 'voice breaking' when talking about puberty may be taken literally. This cannot start too early as autistic girls have multiple vulnerabilities.



Remember,
difference not
deficit

Have a whole school understanding of neurodiversity, celebrate strengths as well as talking about support needed.

Understand and teach others about interoception, monotropism and alexithymia

Understand and teach others about communication styles and how they differ across neurotypes

For further information visit

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