Key Strategies for Supporting a Student with Autism

Below are some strategies that will help you to support a student with Autism, starting with some specific strategies and finishing with some overarching ones.

Assist Communication: Use Visual Supports

Why are Visual Supports important?

People with Autism often have difficulty with communication and find it hard to:

- Express themselves

- Understand verbal language (i.e. they may need more time to process spoken information)

- Sequence, retain and retrieve information, and solve problems – all of which are involved in communication exchanges

How do Visual Supports help?

Visual Supports allow the student with Autism to see what you mean, rather than only relying on their ability to understand what they hear.

Some Visual Supports, such as a Visual Schedule, can allow the student to see the sequence of events that takes place over a session, a day or week and predict what will happen next. This can help to reduce anxiety and increase independence for the student as they are less likely to have to rely on verbal prompts. See p55 for a Visual Schedule example and template.

What types of Visual Supports are there?

The types of Visual Supports you can use range from the easiest to understand to the most complex, including:

- Objects or part objects (e.g. a real apple or toy apple)

- Photographs of the actual objects to be used (e.g. a photo of the specific type of apple to be eaten)

- Photos of generic object (e.g. a photo of any apple)

- Pictures (e.g. line drawings or picture symbols)

- Written words

It is important to remember that all Visual Supports need to be 'individualised' or tailored to the student's own level of ability, understanding, needs and preferences, as well as the purpose and environment.

Example Visual Supports

The Autism Association has some Visual Support templates available for download on our resource page (https://www.autism.org.au/our-services/school-aged/online-resources/for-teachers-and-educators/) that you can adapt for your student, including a:

- First/Then Board – shows a short sequence of activities, including a 'must-do' task in the 'first' half and a reward in the 'then' half

- Reward Chart – gives a tangible visual representation of your student's progress towards a preferred reward, such a favourite activity or object that relates to one of their special interests

- Visual Schedule – displays a sequence of events that will happen within a set period of time

Provide Structure: Manage Recess and Lunch

Why is managing recess and lunch important?

Break times can be difficult for a student with Autism because there is:

- Less structure, which makes it hard for the student to predict what is going to happen and may increase their anxiety

- More sensory information, which can be overwhelming if the student experiences differences in the way they process sensory information (e.g. multiple sensations in a noisy and unpredictable environment can be difficult for some children to process)

- A set of unspoken 'social rules' that underlie free play, which the student may have difficulty understanding (and they may not have developed effective and socially appropriate play skills)

How can we help?

Organise an Educational Assistant (EA) to support the student during breaks – this can often be a much better use of EA time than having them only work alongside the student in the classroom

- Enforce a strong 'zero tolerance' approach to bullying

- Offer the student the option of engaging in quieter or preferred activities

- Encourage duty staff to stand back and observe the student during free play – this is useful for identifying components of the break time that can be modified to increase the student's opportunity to participate in play and engage with their peers

Foster Understanding: Adopt a Positive Behaviour Support Approach

Why is Positive Behaviour Support important?

The Positive Behaviour Support approach helps children with Autism to experience success with their behaviour by learning new skills in a positive way.

Positive Behaviour Support has a strong base of evidence in its effectiveness for addressing challenging behaviours in people with Autism. Rather than using punishment or negative consequences, this approach proactively focusses on strategies to prevent the challenging behaviour, teach adaptive skills, and positively reinforce the expected or ideal behaviours.

How do we adopt Positive Behaviour Support?

Modify the environment

People with Autism can find it challenging to understand the environment around them, especially in unfamiliar settings. Modifying the environment can create more structure and routine for the student and, in turn, allow them to complete tasks with less stress. Below are some suggestions:

- Provide clearly defined work areas for the classroom

- Create quiet areas with the student's preferred activities – and be aware of audio and visual sensitivity supports (e.g. choosing spaces where you have greater control over the level of noise, lighting and visual distractions)

- Make use of colour-coded groups, tables or activities to help provide structure

- Give the student an area where they can take a break when they need to

- Ensure the task demands are set to the student's particular level (i.e. not too hard or easy for them)

Increase predictability through scheduling

A key strategy in supporting people with Autism is to provide structure and routine, which can be done through scheduling. Visual Supports can be used to present the student with a new routine while also explaining what is expected. Below are some suggestions:

- Implement schedules and/or timetables to visually show what is expected

- Provide a routine specifically for dealing with change, such as:

  - Give physical, visual or verbal cues to signify transitions into different activities (e.g. a daily schedule, sand timer, spoken reminder, countdown, music or an object they could associate with the change (known as a 'Transition Object'))

  - Always provide a verbal reminder in the lead-up to a transition (e.g. "We will begin the next activity in 5 minutes")

Use positive reinforcement and rewards

Offering positive reinforcement and rewards when the student completes an expected task or behaviour is an important component of Positive Behaviour Support. Keep in mind that the rewards must also be specifically tailored to the student's interests and tastes. Below are some suggestions:

- Provide rewards that are motivating for the student (e.g. a toy car or car sticker if they are interested in cars)

- Always provide positive and descriptive praise along with the reward (e.g. "Good sharing")

- Use animated expressions and gestures to reward positive behaviour

- Use Visual Supports such as a Reward Chart to show the student what they are working towards

- Always try to make learning and activities fun!

- If possible, try to incorporate the student's interests into learning and activities

Address Challenging Behaviour: Understand the Reasons

Why is understanding the reasons for challenging behaviour important?

Some of the behavioural differences that a student with Autism may experience can prove challenging in a classroom environment. It is important to remember that behaviour always occurs for a reason – the key is to search for and understand the reason(s).

As part of a Positive Behaviour Support approach, consider that the behaviour may be occurring because:

- Your student is responding to a situation in the only way they know how

- The environment is overwhelming (e.g. the noise or busyness)

- Your student is stressed or anxious (e.g. they know they cannot complete the task in its current format)

- The student is confused about what they need to do to complete the task

Understanding the reasons for challenging behaviours will allow you to:

- Address the issue in a positive way

- Teach the student new skills to replace challenging behaviours

- Develop supportive routines to assist with the student's learning

- Modify environments to meet the student's needs

- Promote positive school-life experiences

- Encourage the student to be successful

Overarching Tips & Strategies

- Get to know your student – understanding their unique likes, dislikes and interests will help you to develop a positive and trusting relationship with them

- Tailor tasks and projects – incorporating the student's specific strengths and special interests will help to facilitate learning

- Be mindful of your student's individual communication needs and level of understanding – it is important not to overestimate or underestimate their communication abilities

- Ensure an Individual Education Plan is prepared as soon as possible – this is a document that your school can develop in collaboration with parents and consultants to tailor education goals and strategies, as well as adapt the curriculum if needed, to best suit the student's goals, strengths and abilities

- Provide structure, routine and predictability – for example, give the student a daily Visual Schedule that incorporates their communication needs and preferences or give a visual warning of upcoming changes to their routine

- Adapt the environment to support the student's sensory needs – your student may be oversensitive or under-sensitive to sounds, textures, tastes or smells so it is best to check with them, if possible, and their support network

- Facilitate ongoing learning by:

  - Using individualised Visual Supports to enable communication, understanding and independence

  - Creating a positive reinforcement or reward system that provides motivation by incorporating their special interests

  - Implementing a system of calming breaks in between activities that your student may find challenging – this will allow them to maintain a level of calmness throughout the day while supporting their participation

  - Using explicit teaching to develop new skills for your student – break down tasks into steps, provide clear information about what is required in the new skill, visually support their learning via demonstrations, written information and/or pictures, and reward or reinforce the new skill

  - Helping your student to learn what to do rather than focus on what not to do – be positive!

  - Gradually increasing the complexity of tasks

- Remember that behaviour is a form of communication – consider what your student is 'saying' with their behaviour (i.e. whether the task too difficult, they are over-stimulated or under-stimulated, or they're feeling stressed, anxious, confused or overwhelmed)

Preparation: The Key to Success

By understanding the specific challenges, strengths and areas of need for your student, as well as spending time planning and preparing a supportive environment, you and your student are more likely to experience success.

Preparation + **Planning** = **Success**
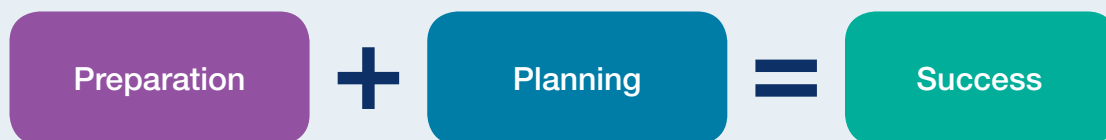
This content has been extracted from the Autism Association of WA's Autism Heroes Publication.

Designed with the Australian National Curriculum in mind, the Autism Heroes Education Pack contains lesson plans, a video and worksheets for students in Years 3–6. It also includes a range of resources that are designed to help you prepare and deliver the pack and to support understanding of Autism within your school. To find out more about this pack, or to purchase a copy visit: https://autismheroes.autism.org.au/