

# Peer information sheet: autism

All students are unique. We all have strengths, and we all have areas where we are still learning. We are all born with our own unique combination of hair, eyes, personality, and our own very unique fingerprints.

Some students are born on the autism spectrum. Just like hair, eyes or fingerprints, this is a part of them, but not who they are. When you take the time to get to know them, you'll find there are lots of things you have in common.

## What is autism?

Students on the autism spectrum may have creative or interesting ideas, or they might know lots about a specific interest. Some students on the autism spectrum might find making friends, joining in, talking to others or changing plans difficult. They might understand, hear and feel things a little differently to others, and have different, unusual or intense interests and hobbies.

## Friendship tips

Being a teenager is often a time when friendships become really important to us. We often want to spend more time with people our age who share similar interests. We might worry more about what other people think, because we want to fit in.

Feeling part of a group and feeling like you belong, is important for all students. This includes students on the autism spectrum. Sometimes students on the autism spectrum might not look like they're interested in having friends. They might make social 'mistakes' and not know what to say or how to act. This is because autism can make it difficult for students to know how to join in, or how to talk to others. They might need your help to join in.

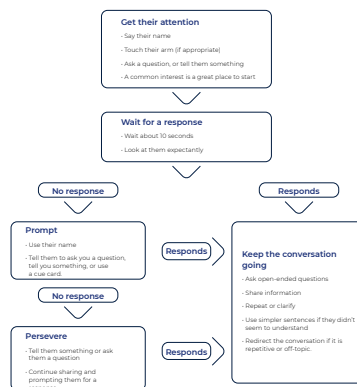
## Communication

Students on the autism spectrum may communicate in different ways to you and your friends. Some might talk lots and use lots of words. Some might not use any words, or only a few words. If they don't use words, they might have learned other ways of communicating – like picture cards or gestures.

Sometimes a student on the autism spectrum might copy what you say. This isn't to annoy you – some students on the autism spectrum learn through copying others and sometimes they might communicate through repeating.

Some students with autism might not look you in the eyes. They might not look at you when you're talking – this doesn't mean they're disinterested or not listening – they just might find eye contact difficult.

The following page has a general guide for getting to know a student on the autism spectrum:



## Get their attention

- Say their name
- Touch their arm (if appropriate)
- Ask a question, or tell them something
- A common interest is a great place to start

## Wait for a response

- Wait about 10 seconds
- Look at them expectantly

### No response

#### Prompt

- Use their name
- Tell them to ask you a question, tell you something, or use a cue card.

### No response

#### Persevere

- Tell them something or ask them a question
- Continue sharing and prompting them for a response.

### Responds

#### Keep the conversation going

- Ask open-ended questions
- Share information
- Repeat or clarify
- Use simpler sentences if they didn't seem to understand
- Redirect the conversation if it is repetitive or off-topic.

### Responds



## Strong interests

Some students on the autism spectrum have strong interests and know a lot about certain topics. They might be very enthusiastic about their interest, and very focused on it. You know how sometimes you might be really excited about something or really interested in it, and you just want to talk to everyone about it? It can be like that for students on the autism spectrum. Normally, when people lose interest in something we are talking about, we can pick up the cues from people that they're not interested, and we then try to stop talking about it and change the subject. Students on the autism spectrum often miss these cues because they might find it difficult to recognise what other people are thinking or feeling.

If a student talks for a long time about their interest, you can change the topic. You can say things like "That's pretty cool, but let's talk about something else now", and you can suggest a new topic or something else you can do together.

## Emotions

Some students on the autism spectrum might be sensitive to specific noises, smells, or textures. They might also become angry or upset when there are unexpected changes to routines or plans. Some students on the autism spectrum find it hard to manage their emotions – they might feel anger or distress intensely and some might not find it easy to manage their expression of these emotions or their behaviours. When worried or upset, they might cover their ears or face or eyes, cry or yell, they might flap their hands around, or they may spin or jump. You can support them by being considerate of what upsets them – like keeping your voices down when talking in class.

## School Learning Support Officer (SLSO)

Some students might have an SLSO in the classroom. You can still talk and work with them when the SLSO is there – the SLSO is there to support their learning, but they cannot replace the value of working and interacting with other students of the same age.

## Stop bullying

Bullying and exclusion can have a devastating impact on a student's life. This can be particularly difficult for a student with disability if they are excluded, picked on, laughed at and bullied because of their disability. If you see a student with disability being excluded or bullied, you can make a big difference in that moment. In fact, your help and support may make a difference or be remembered long after **you** have forgotten all about it!

If you see a student being bullied at school, and it is safe for you to speak out, speak up and tell those who are bullying to stop. Tell them that it isn't okay and it isn't cool. Standing up for someone else stops bullying more than half of the time! If you are still worried about exclusion or bullying, ask a teacher or trusted adult for help, or help the student seek help and support. Speaking up and reaching out can help keep them safe, and can have a lasting impact on their life.

## Just like you

Students on the autism spectrum have lots of ways in which they're just like you. They have their own interests, preferences and hopes and dreams, just like you do. They want to feel like their ideas, views and input is valued, just like you do. And they want to feel connected – like they belong – through having friends, going to parties, hanging out, and being included... just like you do.

# So remember, you probably have more things in common than you have differences!

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