

Secondary Education – Help and Advice to support pupils with Autism and Sensory Processing Differences

The duty to make reasonable adjustments

Under the Equality Act 2010, schools have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled pupils are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled pupils, and can participate in all aspects of school life. The Act considers autism to be a disability

If an autistic pupil's sensory differences mean that they are struggling to navigate the sensory world of school, for example the classroom environment, crowded corridors and the outdoor spaces, a school must make reasonable adjustments to help them not just cope, but also enjoy school and reaching their full potential. Many reasonable adjustments are inexpensive and just require creative changes in practice, rather than the provision of expensive pieces of equipment or additional staff.

Reasonable adjustments to reduce the impact of sensory differences

If a student presents with a "behaviour that challenges" it is important to remember that this is often to communicate a need or difficulty:

- Are they struggling with a peer?
- Are they sensory overwhelmed?
- Are they worried / anxious?
- Do they understand what is being asked of them?

The Rotherham Sensory Toolkit will help staff to work alongside parents / carers to identify a pupil's sensory needs and look at environmental considerations and strategies to support a pupil's needs.

A one page Sensory Passport can then be put together which needs to be available to all staff supporting a pupil (in every classroom that young person is taught in).

Using strategies that work for a young person will help staff to build up a good relationship with the student. Developing trust that staff can recognise when help is needed will help to reduce behaviours that challenge.

- Predictability and a consistent routine helps to make young people feel safe, knowing where and what they are to do on a daily basis.
- Allowing an autistic pupil to wear a slightly different piece of uniform. The duty to make reasonable adjustments also applies to school policies, including a school's uniform policy.
- Staggering the start/end of the school day allowing the pupil to come into the school building earlier, or later, than other pupils to avoid the busy times of the day, and the school bell, which can often result in sensory overload and/or refusal to enter the building.

- Allow pupils to leave classrooms early when changing lessons, to avoid crowds and the hustle and bustle of corridors. This can be very overwhelming for a student and they may feel very unsafe on busy stairwells.
- Switching hand dryers off and providing paper towels instead.
- Allowing the use of ear buds or headphones to block out noises such as school bells, or the use of sunglasses or close blinds.
- Ask the student where they would feel more comfortable sitting in a classroom. A classroom environment and other peers can be sensory overwhelming.
- Avoid changing seating plans without student's prior knowledge as this can cause significant anxiety.
- Creating a safe place where a pupil can feel calm, for example a screened off workstation or area in the classroom; a quiet room in the school; being in the company of a trusted member of staff.
- Allowing the use of a 'fiddle' toy. This will not be a distraction to a pupil who needs one to help them self-regulate and to be able to listen and stay on task.
- Time out/stress alert card – a pass, which gives the pupil permission to leave the room when feeling overwhelmed. A pre-arranged space to go to or an area to walk gives some structure and timing.
- Toilet pass – essential for pupil's who struggle with sensory overwhelm during busy times and will tend to avoid, which can result in medical implications. Pupils who struggle with their interoception (internal body sense) and often do not recognise that they need the toilet until the very last minute or are very sensitive to needing the toilet will need a toilet pass to limit accidents and lower anxiety around waiting/asking to leave the classroom.
- Different arrangements for breaks and lunchtimes, for example setting up a quiet lunchtime club or allowing a pupil to go into the dining hall before others.
In contrast to their peers, children and young people on the autism spectrum may not enjoy break and lunch times. This could be because they:
 - Find the lack the structure and routine that they need difficult
 - Are daunted by noisy, busy and unpredictable environments, such as the dining hall
 - May lack the fast processing of conversation and social interaction skills that are needed
 - May be fearful of bullying, including social isolation.
 This you can do to support pupils maybe:
 - Organise structured lunchtime clubs, focusing on shared interests.
 - Provide social learning.
 - Use a buddy system or have a buddy bench
- Allowing the pupil to 'stim' (self-stimulatory behaviour - rocking, spinning, hand/finger flapping).

- Encouraging physical activity exercises or breaks, to help alleviate stress as well as meet sensory needs.
- Effectively incorporating brain breaks into the learning experience is essential to improving learning outcomes. A distracted or unengaged student is not likely to be a successful learner.

Examples of quick and simple brain breaks for the classroom can include:

1: Stretching exercises

Stretching is a simple yet effective way to take a break. It is fairly quick and easy to do even if you do not have much available space. Stretching can reduce anxiety and exhaustion while stabilising your mood.

Allow students to create their own individual stretching routine as the year goes on and they discover what works best for them.

Start slow and just do hand/fingers, neck, and arm stretches until students get more comfortable with the idea of stretching in class.

2: Listening to music

Listening to music can be a powerful way to relax and take a mental break. It can lift your mood and provide a quick escape from stress.

Use a music streaming service like Spotify, or something similar, to create a handful of playlists to use.

Use calming instrumental music to relax if you feel the class is dealing with a lot of stress and pressure or if you just finished an intense activity.

Use upbeat, fast-paced music if students are dragging and need a little energy boost.

Encourage students to create playlists for you to use during the year to avoid redundancy in the music selection.

Let students choose to listen to their own music using headphones as a way to promote autonomy and choice.

3: Quick walks

A brief walk outside or even around the school can refresh the mind and body (self-regulation). It helps in getting some fresh air and changing the environment, which can boost creativity and energy levels. Even if it is just to get a temporary change of scenery, a short walk can act as a reset for our focus.

- Keep it short, around 5-10 minutes.
- Have students look for something they have never noticed about the campus while they walk.
- Or walk with a friend to make it a social activity by giving them a specific topic to discuss.

4: Creative doodling

Doodling can help in unwinding and sparking creativity. It's a fun way to let your mind wander and relax. The structure and typical requirements in school utilise specific parts of the brain so unstructured doodling is a great way to rest while activating creative thoughts.

Ask students to dedicate a section of their notebook for doodling or have a separate sketchpad.

5: Mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation can be a powerful tool for helping students centre their thoughts and reduce anxiety. It can significantly improve mental clarity and focus, making it an excellent brain break during the school day. The best part of this brain break activity is hearing about students using it outside of class on their own because they find it so effective.

Create a calm environment by dimming or turning off the lights and reducing any noise.

Explain the purpose of the activity and discuss some of the benefits of mindfulness such as improved focus and reduced stress.

Instruct students to eliminate judgment from the activity whether it is of themselves or classmates.

Allow students to not participate if they do not feel comfortable. It may take a few attempts before they feel comfortable to join in.

Use a mindfulness app like Calm or Headspace to help you guide students if you do not have experience in this area.

6: Get hydrated

Sometimes all you need is a simple hydration break. Drinking water can help in maintaining energy levels and cognitive function. Dehydration is linked to both cognitive and behavioural issues.

Encourage students to use a drinking fountain or bring a water bottle to school.

Allow water infusion drops to add a little flavour or flavoured water for those pupils who dislike water alone, to prevent dehydration and possible medical implications.