

AutismONTARIO

Let's Talk About Autism:

Promoting Inclusion and Belonging in Elementary Classrooms

Created by educators,
for educators.

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Developed in collaboration with Ontario educators whose insights and expertise shaped its development, making it a resource designed by educators, for educators.

Introduction

Let's work together to promote inclusion and acceptance in your classroom. As educators, you can create spaces where all students feel valued and supported. This toolkit raises awareness of autism and the different ways that people think, learn, and experience the world. It promotes understanding and acceptance, to help create inclusive, supportive classrooms that foster equity and well-being.

This toolkit provides practical resources and activities to help you and your students embrace differences and celebrate strengths. It's designed to:

- **Empower educators** with actionable tools and strategies.
- **Support classroom inclusion** with clear, practical activities.
- **Foster collaboration** and shared learning experiences.

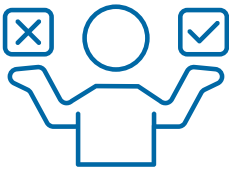
Key principles covered in this toolkit include:



Language Matters:

Respectful, thoughtful language shapes perception and builds a culture of acceptance. Some individuals prefer identity-first language ("autistic person"), while others prefer person-first language ("person with autism").

Flexibility and respect for preferences is encouraged.



Strengths-Based Focus:

Highlight abilities, talents, and unique perspectives rather than challenges.

As teachers, you are cheerleaders for your autistic students, inspiring them to shine and enrich the classroom.



Individuality within Autism:

Autism is a spectrum, and no two individuals are alike. As the saying goes, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism."

This toolkit helps you honour differences and adapt to each student's unique learning style.

Considerations for Autistic Students

- **Autistic individuals are the experts on their own experiences.** They may have valuable insights to share, so engaging them in discussions about the content in this toolkit can be helpful and empowering.
- **Be mindful that some students may or may not know about their diagnosis.** Respect their privacy and consider reframing the activities when necessary. Recognize that some students may resonate with characteristics of autism even without a formal diagnosis.
- **Collaborate with parents or caregivers** to proactively ensure everyone involved feels informed and supported.
- **Work in partnership with the child's community.** Service providers and agencies often have information on how to best support the student's needs, promote their participation, and encourage learning.

Universal Design Principles for Inclusive Classrooms

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that ensures all students can access and engage with classroom content. By promoting inclusivity, UDL benefits everyone, not just autistic students. This toolkit includes strategies and activities aligned with UDL principles, such as:

- Offering multiple ways for students to participate and show their learning.
- Creating flexible activities that can be adapted to individual needs.
- Encouraging peer collaboration to build a supportive classroom community.

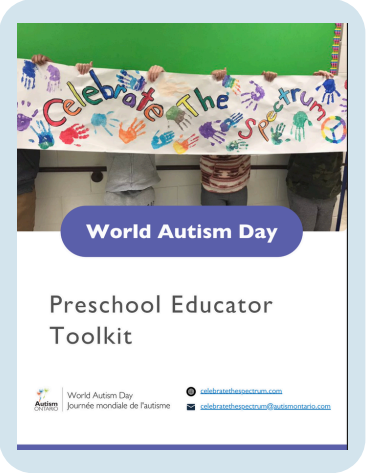
By implementing UDL, you provide opportunities for every student to succeed, fostering a classroom where differences are embraced and strengths are celebrated. UDL strategies not only support autistic students but also enhance learning experiences for the entire class.

Before You Get Started

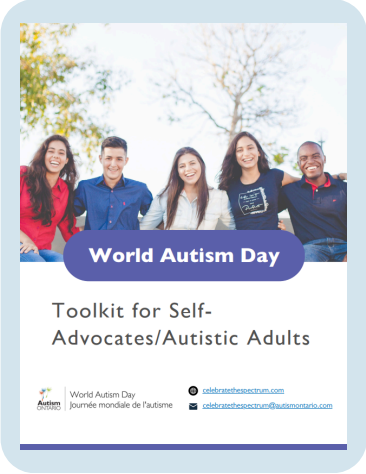
- Within each activity, there are options for various learning preferences. It is important to remember that all your students access information in different ways.
- The activities will often ask you to choose materials to work with. Choose something that is easily accessible and which you think will most suit your students' interests. You know your classroom best!

Tip: Prior to showing activities in a classroom setting, preview them with students, caregivers, school personnel and/or your parent council, as appropriate.

If you are a preschool or high-school educator and are looking for more age-appropriate activities, you can access other toolkits through Celebrate the Spectrum.







Activity Information

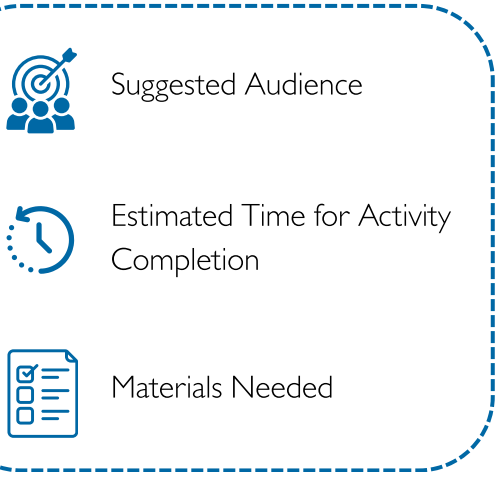
As you work through the activities, you will notice consistent titles and sections used:

Background Information for Educators

- Topic summary: Brief overview of the topic, including key concepts.
- Connections to the curriculum: How the activity aligns with the Ontario curriculum.
- Learning objectives for students: Clear goals outlining what students should learn or achieve during the activity.

Activity Information for Educators

- Suggested audience: Recommended grades and/or ages for the activity.
- Estimated time for activity completion: Estimated duration for completing the activity.
- Materials needed: List of all materials required to complete the activity.
- Activity breakdown
  - Minds On: Introduction to key concepts.
  - Action: Activity to further explore and reinforce key concepts.
- Discussion Guide: Questions and prompts to guide classroom discussions.



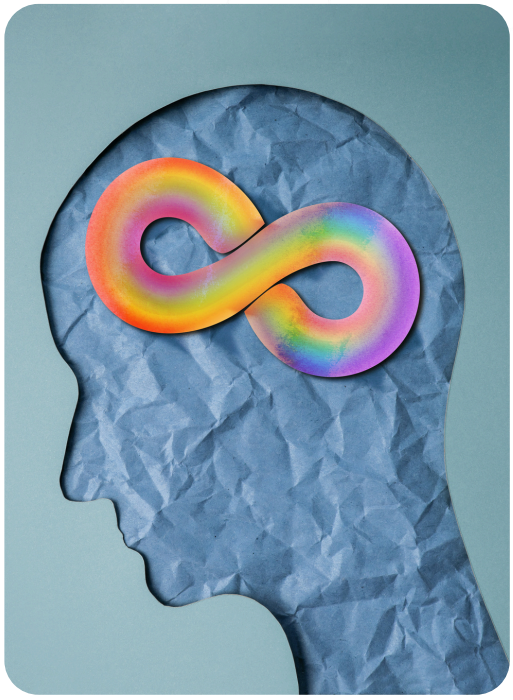
Other Learning Resources

- Additional resources, including options to "read it", "watch it", "hear it", and/or "practice it", where applicable.

Key Take-Away Message: Child-friendly statement that captures the core lesson or concept that students should retain.

Disclaimer: Opinions reflected in the videos and literature presented are those of the creators, and do not necessarily reflect Autism Ontario's views.

What is Autism and Neurodiversity?



Autism is a broad spectrum that affects individuals in various ways and to varying degrees. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental condition that is characterized by challenges in social communication and restrictive and repetitive behaviours.[1]

Autistic individuals often experience: [1]

- Feelings of anxiety or stress during transitions or when daily routines are changed.
- Differences in responsiveness to sensory input.
- Differences in verbal and nonverbal social communication, such as speaking with limited words and lack of body language and facial expressions, as well as difficulty initiating interactions and responding to others.

As a result of these differences, autistic individuals may be more likely to experience bullying, social exclusion, and isolation at school. [1]

Recently, there has been a shift from the medical model of disability to the social model of disability. [2] The medical model focuses on treatments for autism such as therapy or medication. The social model considers the individual experience of disability in a social context, focusing on adapting environments to the individual rather than the other way around.

The autism community is now talking about autism as a type of neurodiversity, which suggests that autism should not be considered a disorder, but rather a natural difference in brain functioning.[2] Neurodiversity is a social movement used to advocate for the rights and well-being of individuals with neurological differences, including autism and Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The neurodiversity approach emphasizes that all individuals, regardless of brain functioning, deserve respect and that the diversity of minds should be accepted and valued.[2] This strength-based view of autism advocates for a focus on inclusion, accommodation, and tailored, individualized support.[4]

> The neurodiversity movement promotes the use of individually preferred language. The research shows that autistic people generally prefer identity-first language (i.e., "autistic person"), but is always best to ask the person what they prefer! [5]

About Autism

"If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism."
- Dr Stephen Shore

1 in 50 Canadian children and youth are diagnosed with autism. [1]





Autism exists in all cultures, ethnicities, races, gender identities, and socioeconomic statuses.



Autism affects how a person communicates, which may include speaking, using pictures, or using technology to interact with others.



Autistic people have varying and complex needs from 24-hour care to simply needing clearer communication and a little longer to do things. [2]

Autism is a type of neurodiversity. This means that an autistic person's brain may process information differently than non-autistic or neurotypical people.



Autistic people may have differences in how they process sensations like sound, taste, light, touch, pain, smell, and more.





Autism is experienced and expressed in various ways, and the support needed can vary depending on the context.



Every autistic person is unique, with support needs that can range from occasional help to full-time care.

It's best to ask the person how they like to be identified. They might prefer person-first language (person with autism) or they might prefer identity first language (autistic person).



Although the diagnosis is autism spectrum disorder, many autistic people prefer the term "difference" when describing autism, as it aims to remove negative stigma.



References

1. Public Health Agency of Canada. (2022). Autism spectrum disorder: Highlights from the 2019 Canadian health survey on children and youth. Public Health Agency of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/autism-spectrum-disorder-canadian-health-survey-children-youth-2019.html
2. The National Autistic Society. (2025). What is autism? https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism

How Can Educators Support Autistic Students? Strategies and Best Practices



Collaborate with the individual and their family. Involve families and their interprofessional team in the development of individualized learning plans. You can also provide opportunities for autistic students to contribute their perspectives and knowledge on supports and strategies.



Be flexible. Adjust expectations and demands to accommodate different learning styles.[6] Offer extra support, break tasks into smaller steps, and incorporate sensory integration activities.[2] Use visual supports such as visual schedules to provide structure for learning.



Have fun. Tailor instructions and activities to the interests of autistic students. Characters representing special interests can promote motivation and engagement.



Encourage social interactions and play. Incorporate structured group activities that promote social interactions with peers. Role-plays of social scenarios can be used to teach social responses and practice in social skills such as turn-taking, verbal interaction and cooperation.



Consider the environment. Learn about sensory distractions for your student and arrange the physical space to encourage interaction among peers.[6] Where appropriate, you can include autistic students in decisions on where they sit, who they sit with, and any other environmental considerations.



Avoid assumptions. Assume the capability in autistic students and take the time to understand their learning style, special interests, and cognitive abilities.



Learn more. Gain knowledge and understanding of autistic characteristics, including individual strengths and needs, and autism's impact on your student's learning and behaviour.

Connections to the Curriculum [9]

Subject Area	Applicable Grades	Strand	Summary
Health and Physical Education	1–8	Social-Emotional Learning Skills	Educators can introduce topics of autism and neurodiversity as part of understanding personal identity and supporting an inclusive and respectful learning environment.
Social Studies	1–6	People and Environments	Educators can help students explore diversity within their community.
Language	1–8	Oral Communication	Educators can promote respectful discussion about diversity and promote understanding and empathy.

Learning Objectives for Students

- **Understand that autism and neurodiversity reflect differences in how people think, communicate, and interact:** Students will be able to describe autism and neurodiversity as variations in the way people experience the world.

- **Recognize and appreciate individual strengths, interests, and problem-solving approaches:** Students will identify that everyone, including autistic individuals, has unique strengths, challenges, and ways of solving problems, fostering a greater appreciation for diversity.

Activity Breakdown

Minds On

As a class discuss what you already know about autism.

Action

Watch the age-appropriate video outlined below as a class.



Suggested Audience: K–8



Estimated Time for Activity Completion: 20 minutes



Materials Needed

- Age-appropriate video
- Projector or smart board

Kindergarten: This Sesame Street clip introduces Julia to the cast of characters and begins to introduce what autism is and can look like. The cast of Sesame Street talks about their emerging friendship with Julia and how they communicate with her. They highlight some of Julia's strengths, as well as things she may need help with.

Watch the video

Grades 1–3: Meet six-year-old Fancy Nancy and follow her adventures as she finds the extraordinary in the ordinary. This Fancy Nancy clip introduces Nancy to her friend Lionel's cousin, Sean, who has autism. Nancy wants to understand how to be a better friend to Sean by understanding more about him.

Watch the video

Grades 4–8: "What It's Like" is a show for young people whose voices, stories and perspectives aren't often seen or heard. It's a chance for them to share their experiences in their own words — both good and challenging. In this episode, the audience hears what it's like for autistic children and youth living in Australia.

*Watch the video

**Disclaimer: This video was made in Australia, and the statistics included are not accurate for Canadian populations. In Canada, 1 in 50 children and youth are autistic. For more information on autism in Canada, visit Autism Ontario's About Autism.*

Discussion Guide

After your class watches the video, discuss the following questions about the people in the videos:

- What are some of the person or persons' strengths?
- What are some things that the person or persons' like?
- What are some things that the person or persons may need help with?
- What is one thing you learned about autism from this video?

It can be helpful to have students answer the questions about themselves as well:

- What are you good at?
- What do you like to do?
- What do you need help with?

Activity Breakdown

Minds On

Discuss unique differences in the way people's brains work. Consider using a book or read-aloud to teach this information to your class: Children's Book Gift Guide.



Suggested Audience: K–8



Estimated Time for Activity Completion: 20 minutes



Materials Needed

- Age-appropriate puzzles

Action

1. Before the activity, mix some of the puzzle pieces from each box with pieces from other puzzles.
2. Break class into groups.
3. Give each group a puzzle box and ask them to complete the puzzle.
4. Allow for 5–10 minutes of problem solving.

Discussion Guide

After your class has spent some time problem solving, discuss the following questions:

- Raise your hand if you tried to put the puzzle together?
- Raise your hand if you were someone in the group that went looking for the pieces?
- Raise your hand if you started asking questions?
- Did anyone do something else to solve the problem?
- What did you notice about how everyone solved problems?



Tip: If your students are older and able, you can discuss how each team member's different strategies helped get the team closer to completion.

Read It	Read It	Practice It
Check out our Children's Book Gift Guide for books about autism.	Learn more about this in A Guide to Neurodiversity in the Early Years.	Build a Strengths Link as a class to highlight everyone's unique strengths.



Key Take-Away Message: Everyone's brain works in its own special way, and that's what makes each person unique! Some people, like those with autism, might see and do things differently, and that's okay. We can all learn to notice what makes each person amazing and work together in ways that help everyone shine.

What is the Importance of Friendships and Other Relationships?

Friendships and relationships are important to a child's school experience. Children spend a significant amount of time at school where there are opportunities to connect with peers and build relationships based on shared interests, trust, and mutual support.[11] Being connected to others has many benefits, including learning social skills and developing empathy and acceptance of individual differences.[12]

Peers and educators are both critically important in the social success of children with autism.[13] Knowing the important role peers play and understanding the areas of extra need and support will allow educators to help foster these relationships and enhance the school experience for autistic children.

Friendships and Other Relationships in Autistic Children and Youth

Some autistic children and youth understand what it means to be a friend and want to develop meaningful relationships.[11] Unfortunately, research has shown that autistic children report more loneliness and difficulties with friendships, compared to their peers.[14, 15]

Autistic children often struggle with communication and social skills. They may experience challenges with both verbal and nonverbal skills, as well as understanding social cues and empathy. They may also have repetitive behaviours that are distracting to others. This may explain why they are often poorly accepted by their peers and have limited opportunities for peer engagement.[13] In an effort to overcome these differences and fit in, many autistic children and youth mask their autistic traits.[11] Research shows that masking can negatively impact the mental health of autistic youth.[16] Specifically, masking is related to symptoms of anxiety, depression, distress, and suicidality.



Tip: Finding helpful peers in the classroom and school community can greatly benefit not only the autistic children in your classrooms, but the school community.[13] Helping facilitate relationships between children with differences can be a great learning opportunity for all.

How Can Educators Support Autistic Students in Developing and Maintaining Friendships and Other Relationships? Strategies and Best Practices



Encourage independence. Give students free time to explore and interact with peers. Create a supportive space for open-ended play and social interactions, and step in when guidance is needed.[19]



Foster connections. When guidance is needed, support students in playing with their peers. You can offer encouragement to join in and to stay engaged for longer in parallel activities.[19, 20]



Model social interactions by showing students how to engage with others if they don't know how. Teachers can demonstrate back-and-forth conversations and how to express themselves in different classroom roles.[20]



Be flexible when helping students interact with their peers. Provide opportunities for students to make choices in their interactions, such as deciding what to play, where to sit during group activities, or selecting a peer to join them for breaks. These choices can encourage their interest in forming connections and building friendships.[20]



Respect their experience. Autistic children may have a different understanding of friendship than non-autistic children, and that's ok![19] For example, their understanding may focus on certain aspects of friendship, like spending time together, rather than deeper connections based on emotional closeness.[11]



Make it fun. Try to make the process of making friends fun and playful by using friendship stories, social stories, puppets to role-play activities or interactions. Include and use the student's special interest whenever possible.[19]

The double empathy problem. Just as neurotypical people may not understand autistic people, autistic people may have difficulty understanding neurotypical people. This happens because each group thinks, feels, and communicates in different ways, which can make it hard for them to connect. Studies have shown that autistic people often interact more effectively with other autistic people because they may share similar ways of thinking and communicating, which makes understanding and connecting easier.[17, 18]

Connections to the Curriculum[9]

Subject Area	Applicable Grades	Strand	Summary
Health and Physical Education	1–8	Healthy Relationships	Educators can support students in understanding respectful relationships and friendships between neurodivergent students and their peers.
Social Studies	1–6	People and Environments	Educators can help students explore how diversity supports communities and promotes respect for individual differences.
Language	1–8	Oral Communication and Writing	Educators can help students learn to communicate with empathy and active listening to promote understanding and acceptance.

Learning Objectives for Students

- **Identify qualities of being a good friend and ally.** Students will be able to describe actions that demonstrate kindness, respect, and inclusivity when building friendships with peers who may think, communicate, or play differently.

- **Develop strategies to foster inclusive and meaningful interactions with peers.** Students will learn and practice strategies such as getting a peer's attention appropriately, being patient, respecting differences, and engaging in activities based on shared or special interests.

Activity Breakdown

Minds On

As a class, discuss what it means to be a good friend.

Share the relevant "How to Be a Friend" poster for your classroom and post it in your classroom to lead the discussion.

Suggested Audience: K–8

Estimated Time for Activity Completion: 15 minutes

Materials Needed

- "How to Be a Friend" poster

Tip: Encourage your students to be open to playing in ways that may feel different for them. Not everyone plays the same or has the same interests. It's important to respect someone else's choices, especially when they are trying something new.



How to Be a Friend

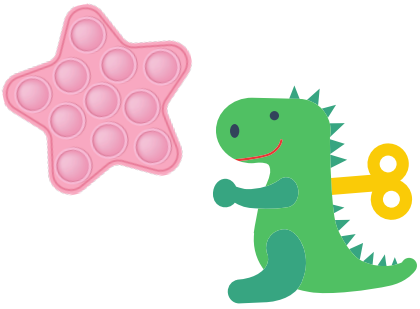
Let's Play Together!



1 **Get Their Attention**
Say their name or show them a toy!



2 **Give a Choice**
Ask, "Do you want cars or blocks?" (Show the toys!)



3 **Try Something New**
Pick a different toy if they stop playing.



4 **Show How to Play**
Make car sounds or stack blocks to show what to do!



5 **Take Turns**
Share the toys and let them have a turn!

6 **Be Kind**
Say, "Good job!" or "I like your tower!"

How to Be a Friend

1 **Get Their Attention**
Call your friend's name, make sure they can see you, or show them something they might be interested in. Ask them to join in games or conversations- but if they say no, that's okay. Just knowing they're welcome matters.





2 **Listen and learn.**
Get curious! You can ask the person what they like to do. For example, "do you want to play soccer or draw with me?" or "what do you like to do on the weekend?"

3 **Be clear.**
If you want them to play a game, you can show them how to play it or what to do. Use kind and clear language. Sometimes sarcasm or jokes can be confusing- try being direct and thoughtful with your words.





4 **Be patient.**
This might mean giving more time when taking turns, or it might mean waiting to see if the person wants to respond by speaking or showing you something. It's ok to give them space and time!

5 **Be kind and encouraging.**
Let your friend know you're having fun together by saying nice things like "I love your drawing!" or "good kick".



Action

Teacher Says: "We're going to play a game to practice being a friend!"



1. Get Ready!
Stand in a circle with your classmates.

2. Act It Out!
I will say an action.
Act it out with the friend beside you.
When I say "FREEZE", stop and listen.

3. Think About It!
After each freeze, I will ask a question.
Think about how friends might do things in different ways.

Act It Out!	**Think About It!**
Wave hello to a friend.	What if your friend waves in a different way or doesn't wave back?
Pretend to ask a friend to play.	What if they say yes with pictures or a device? How can you include them?
Show you're happy to see a friend.	Some friends show happiness or excitement in different ways. How can you tell they're happy?
Use your body to show you're listening.	How does listening carefully help us understand friends who talk differently?
Pretend to wait for your turn.	Why is patience important when a friend needs more time?

Tip: Create your own actions to show someone you want to be friendly or include them. It can be a wave, a smile, sharing a toy, or saying "hi." These actions help build connections and make everyone feel welcome.

Discussion Guide

After your class talks about the poster and plays the game, discuss the following questions about friendship:

- Can you think of a friend who does things differently than you? What do they like or dislike that's different from you?
- Can you think of a friend who communicates differently than you? This might mean that they play or talk differently. Is it always easy to understand each other?
- How can you better understand your friend? Could asking questions or learning how they like to communicate help?
- Why is it important to be patient if someone takes more time to respond or plays differently?
- How do you feel when someone doesn't fully understand you?
- How might an autistic person feel if others don't understand their way of communicating or playing?

Read It	Hear It	Practice It
Check out our Children's Book Gift Guide for books about autism.	Listen to the Little Kids, Big Hearts podcast episode What Makes a Good Friend	Read Growing Friendships: A Comic for Autistic Children and complete the connected activity pages.



Key Take-Away Message: Being a friend means being kind, patient, and respectful to others, even when they think, talk, or play differently than you. By listening, including others, and finding fun things to do together, we can build friendships that make everyone feel happy and welcome.

To understand the communication differences that many autistic students face, it is important to recognize that speech, language, and communication are different abilities that work together.

What are speech skills?

Speech is the ability to produce sounds to form words and phrases.[21] Speech also involves controlling volume (quiet vs loud), pitch (low vs high), and rhythm. These skills help the listener identify statements versus questions, recognize the urgency of the situation, and understand the meaning of what is being said.



Research shows that approximately 25-40% of autistic individuals will not be able to use speech reliably, independently, or functionally.[22, 23] Some students will use fewer than 10 words, and some will not speak at all.[24]

What are language skills?

Language is using words and phrases to communicate meaning.[21] Grammar shapes language by conveying additional information such as past/present/future tense, singular vs plural, and pronoun use.



Some students with autism may have significant challenges with language skills while others will have strong oral language.[25]

What are communication skills?

Communication is the use of language (either spoken or an alternative method) for social purposes including:



- Asking and answering questions.
- Providing information.
- Having back-and-forth conversations.

Communication involves:

- Listening to another person to understand what they are saying.
- Using language in a meaningful and purposeful way.
- Non-verbal communication, such as facial expression, gestures (e.g., nods, hand signals, shrugs), eye contact, or gaze.
- Pre-verbal communication skills, such as standing next to something to request it, grabbing someone and taking them to the desired place or object, or even earlier forms of communication (e.g., screaming, crying).
- Specialized skills, such as taking another's point of view and self-reflection.

Differences with communication are common in autistic students and are part of the diagnostic criteria for autism. For some students, pre-verbal communication skills may be used to try to communicate a need or a want. It is important for educators to recognize that these pre-verbal communication behaviours may be a student's way of trying to connect or engage with someone else.

For other students, their difficulties may be more with complex communication skills, such as understanding and using idioms, puns, sarcasm, and humour. The autistic student may not understand things from another person's perspective, which can make social interactions more challenging.[25]

How Can Educators Support Autistic Students with Communication? Strategies and Best Practices



Although speech, language, and communication skills are often best supported by external professionals, including speech and language pathologists and behaviour analysts, there are several strategies and supports that educators can use to facilitate an inclusive environment for autistic students.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

- **Explore the use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).** AAC systems help individuals communicate their needs and wants in different ways. There are numerous types of AAC.
  - Picture-based systems such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).
  - Sign language.
  - Speech generating devices (SGDs) such as Proloquo2Go, the PECS app, Touch Chat, Linggo, and others.
- **Involve your school's interprofessional team** in the assessment of the student's needs and in determining which system might be most appropriate. It may also be helpful to reach out to any external professionals currently working with the individual to see if they are exploring the use of AAC for home and community use.

Language of Instruction

- **Use language in the classroom that matches the abilities of the learner.** For example, using clear, simple language that is appropriate for the student's age can help facilitate understanding.
- **Avoid terms that are ambiguous.** Phrases such as "in a while" can be replaced with something more specific, such as "in five minutes". Similarly, instead of "Would you like to help clean up your area?", use direct, concrete language: "Put away the toys you are using."
- **Be mindful of how much information or direction you give at once.** Instead of saying "Before we get ready to go outside, clean up your play area", try giving one-step instructions in the order needed to complete them: "Put away the toys" and then, once that is done, "Put on your outdoor shoes and jacket." [26]

Using evidence-based programs like Direct Instruction (DI) can be very effective for autistic children. DI programs use clear, step-by-step teaching, structured lessons, and small learning steps to help students develop language and academic skills. These programs are led by teachers and follow a highly organized approach. To get the best results, teachers and staff should be trained in how to use DI effectively. Examples of DI programs include:

- Language for Learning
- Language for Thinking

Visual Supports

- **Consider different types of visual supports** including objects, pictures, choice boards, and visual schedules. Some students may use these supports to communicate needs and wants. For example, pointing to an item on a choice board. Other students may be able to use more complex visual supports. For example, using a tablet app to understand the schedule for their day and to check off activities that are completed.
- **Use visual supports WITH spoken instruction.** For example, if you use a picture of the playground to support the transition to going outside, you can also say "It's time to go outside to the playground." Multi-modal communication (i.e., spoken, gestures, and visual supports) may provide better information for the student than a single mode.



Tip: Using visual supports, cues, and prompts can facilitate understanding; however, there are pre-requisite skills for using these types of materials. For example, the student needs to understand that a picture or symbol represents a real item or place.

Connections to the Curriculum[9]

Subject Area	Applicable Grades	Strand	Summary
The Arts	1–8	Drama	Educators can help students explore body language, facial expressions, and how to promote empathy for various communication styles.
Language	1–8	Oral Communication	Educators can highlight the importance of different communication styles, including speaking, signing, and AAC communication methods.

Learning Objectives for Students

- **Identify and explore the different ways people communicate:** Students will recognize that communication can occur through spoken words, gestures, pictures, or written instructions, and that individuals may prefer or rely on different methods of communication.

- **Demonstrate an understanding of how clarity can support inclusion:** Students will be able to identify strategies, such as using clear instructions or multiple forms of communication, to better understand and support diverse communication styles in their classroom community.

Activity Breakdown

Minds On

Play the video: Plain Language- The importance of clear communication.

Talk about what it was like to watch the video.

- What did you notice about the drawings the children did?
- How did they do the first time? What did their pictures look like?
- What did their pictures look like the second time?
- What language or words helped them draw the picture the second time?

Suggested Audience: K–8

Estimated Time for Activity Completion: 20 minutes

Materials Needed

- Video
- Paper and writing tools

Action

1. Separate your class into pairs or small groups.
2. Place a divider between the students so they can hear each other but cannot see each other or each other's drawings.
3. Student 1 draws a simple image (e.g., a person, flower, tree) without showing it to the other student(s).
4. Without saying what the image is, Student 1 gives clear instructions to help Student 2 recreate the drawing. They can describe the shapes (e.g., circles, lines, triangles), sizes, directions, and positions (e.g., "draw a small circle at the top of the page").
5. Student 2 listens carefully and tries to draw what is being described.
6. After completing the drawing, have students compare their images. Then, switch roles so everyone has a chance to describe and draw.

Tip: Student 1 should not name or give clues about what the drawing is. The goal is to practice clear communication using descriptive language only.

Discussion Guide

Once everyone has had an opportunity to complete each role, spend time as a group discussing the following:

- Was it easy or hard to explain your drawing to your partner or group?
- What would have made it easier to communicate with your partner or group?
- What did you learn?
- How can we work together to support the diverse communication styles in our classroom?



Read It	Watch It	Practice It
To learn about specific communication strategies for non-speaking students, you can access the Supporting Individuals with Limited Speech AIDE toolkit.	To learn more about how the IEP can be used to support communication, watch Aligning IEP Communication Goals for Academic Success.	For an example of how visuals can support clear communication, watch VLOCKNAR: The importance of clear communication.



Key Take-Away Message: People communicate in lots of different ways like talking, using gestures, with pictures, or through technology and that's okay! When we use clear and simple ways to share ideas, we can help everyone feel included and understood.

What is Sensory Processing?

Sensory processing is the way that our nervous system takes information from our senses and responds, preferably in ways that make sense for the situation.[27] Sensory information includes sight (vision), sound (auditory), taste (gustatory), touch (tactile), scent (olfactory), and the location of the body in space (proprioception and vestibular). Individuals can process information from their environment in different ways.

Some individuals respond more (hyper-) or less (hypo-) to sensory stimuli than their peers. These differences in response can cause stress, anxiety, and sometimes physical pain.[28]

Hypersensitivity: This is when a child's responses to sensory information is more intense, happens more quickly, and sometimes last longer.[3, 27]



What you may see:

- Covering ears, eyes, or nose.
- Irritation with clothing.
- Displeasure with bright lights/loud noises.
- Intolerance to food textures.
- Intolerance to "mucky" or "sticky" hands.
- Upset in transitions or changes to routine.

Hyposensitivity: This is when a child's responses to sensations are lower. Sometimes it takes them longer to respond or react, or the sensation may need to be more intense and long-lasting for them to respond at all. [3, 27]



What you may see:

- Lethargy.
- Underreaction to bright lights or loud noises.
- High threshold for sensation or pain.
- May not notice if someone touches them.
- May be passive, withdrawn, want to play solitary games.

Sensory seeking or craving: As a result of being under-responsive to sensory stimuli, some children crave sensory input. Children who are sensory craving have a strong need for sensory input and often look for ways to meet that need. Others may not understand or accept these differences.[27]

What you may see:

- Crashing, bashing, bumping, or jumping.
- Excessive risk-taking during play; climbs high into trees, jumps off tall furniture.
- Music and television at extremely high volume.
- Licking, sucking, or chewing on non-food items such as hair, pencils, clothing.
- Anger (sometimes explosive) when required to sit still or stop their activity.
- Prone to create situations others perceive as "bad" or "dangerous."
- Excessive affection.



Sensory Processing Differences in Autistic Children and Youth

Research shows that most autistic children have differences in how they process sensory information, with hyper-sensitivities being more common than hypo-sensitivities.[29, 30] These differences can have a significant impact on various aspects of daily living[31]:

- **Eating:** Autistic children may have a heightened sensitivity to taste and smell, leading to mealtime anxiety and/or rigid behaviours.
- **Sleeping:** Many autistic children struggle with sleep, particularly falling asleep.

Sensory processing differences may lead to difficult externalized behaviours (such as aggression or school avoidance); they can also lead to difficulties with internalized behaviours: emotional dysregulation, anxiety, and depression.[31, 32] How and why this happens is not yet fully understood.[31]

How Can Educators Support Autistic Students with Sensory Processing Differences? Strategies and Best Practices



Consider equipment needs. For example, ensure that their seating is a good fit for them. You can consider seating with movement (e.g., wobble stools or rocking chairs) or standing options for children who seek movement throughout their day.



Try alternative lighting. Sometimes fluorescent lighting can be triggering. Consider turning off or dimming the overhead lights or covering them with fabric.



Offer noise-cancelling headphones or a quiet and calm area. Headphones can help dampen the sounds of a classroom, while a calming or quiet room can lower the amount of sensory stimulation and help the student to self-regulate.



Provide sensory or movement breaks. By offering frequent sensory/movement breaks, you help the student expel "excess" energy they might feel or simply refocus their energy. Scheduled movement breaks may help build students' ability to self-regulate.



Offer fidget tools. Often fidget tools will help a student as they are accessing sensory input in a way that fulfills their needs but isn't disruptive to other students.



Provide regular breaks when students are calm. This can help them stay regulated and support a positive learning environment.



Use a visual schedule or first/then board. This will help to maintain a consistent classroom routine. It also helps to build structure and predictability in the student's day.



Get to know the student. Observe and note the student's likes and dislikes.



Connect with additional school supports. If there are additional supports available in your school board (e.g., speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, social workers) access their expertise.

Connections to the Curriculum[9]

Subject Area	Applicable Grades	Strand	Summary
Health and Physical Education	1–8	Social-Emotional Learning Skills	Educators encourage an awareness of personal sensory needs and how to respect those of others.
Science and Technology	1	Understanding Life Systems	Educators help students explore how humans experience the world through their different senses.
The Arts	1–8	Visual Arts and Music	Sensory exploration allows students to experience different sensory inputs and helps them understand sensory processing differences.

Learning Objectives for Students

- **Understand individual differences in sensory preferences**: Students will be able to identify that people have different reactions to sensory experiences (e.g., sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and textures) and demonstrate respect for those differences.

- **Identify strategies to manage sensory discomfort in a respectful and supportive way:** Students will be able to brainstorm and suggest tools or actions that can help themselves or others manage sensory experiences they find uncomfortable.

Activity Breakdown

Minds On

Ask your class, "What are your five senses?"
Let's point to where our senses are:

- Hearing (point to ears)
- Seeing (point to eyes)
- Tasting (point to mouth)
- Smelling (point to nose)
- Touching (point to hands)

Suggested Audience: K–3

Estimated Time for Activity Completion: 20 minutes

Materials Needed
- None

Action

1. Show pictures or real objects and ask your class to go to one side of the room if they "like it" and the other side if they "don't like it"

- Who likes the smell of cookies baking? Who likes the smell of broccoli? Who likes the smell of pizza? Who likes the smell of garbage?
- Who likes the sound of shoes walking down the hallway? Who likes the sound of dogs barking? Who likes the sound of balloons popping?
- Who likes to eat ice cream? Who likes to eat spicy food? Who likes to eat avocados? Who likes to eat crackers? Who likes to eat peas?
- Who likes to look at leaves? Who likes to look at the TV? Who likes to look at injuries/blood? Who likes to look at scary movies?
- Who likes the feeling of pajamas? Who likes the feeling of jeans? Who likes the feeling of their tags? Who likes getting their hair cut? Who likes the feeling of slime? Who likes hugs?

2. Sometimes, there are tools we can use if there is a sensation we don't like. Let's brainstorm some of these together:

- What could you do if you need to sit on a bus with someone who is very loud?
- What could you do if you taste a sandwich your mom made, and you don't like it?
- What could you do if you have a tag on your shirt that is itchy?
- What could you do if your parent's friends always try and hug you and you don't like to touch people you don't know well?
- What can you do if someone put on a scary movie you don't want to watch?



Tip: If you have tools available in your classroom, such as noise-cancelling headphones or rocking chairs, it can be helpful to demonstrate how they might be helpful.

Discussion Guide

After discussing everyone's sensory preferences and exploring supportive strategies, discuss these questions as a class:

- What did you notice about what people like and don't like?
- If you notice someone might not like something they feel, see, hear, taste, or smell, how can you help? (For example, tell a teacher what you notice, offer something else.)

Read It	Watch It	Practice It
Check out Children's Book Gift Guide for books about sensory processing	To better understand the sensory needs of autistic people, check out The Autistic Sensory Experience.	Complete the Sensory Scavenger Hunt for more practice identifying sensations.



Key Take-Away Message: Everyone experiences the world through their senses differently. Some people might love bright lights or loud sounds, while others might not. By understanding and respecting these differences, we can find ways to help everyone feel comfortable and safe.

This topic should be discussed with students after all other activities in this toolkit have been used. It brings together how differences in thinking, communicating, and processing sensory information can sometimes cause stress for autistic people.



Tip: This lesson will help students understanding how stress can build up and present differently in different people.

What is Stress and Emotional Regulation?

Stress includes feelings, thoughts, or actions that cause some someone to feel overwhelmed or have trouble coping with something that has happened, is happening, or will happen in the future.[33] People react to stress in diverse ways, and present with different stress responses [34] These responses are often described as "fight, flight, or freeze." This means a person's body reacts to stress by becoming more intense physically, emotionally, or behaviourally, by avoiding it or by shutting down.[35] Over time, stress can affect people's physical and mental health and overall quality of life.[36]

How we learn to manage stress and cope with the associated feelings, thoughts, and behaviours is commonly known as regulation. Self-regulation is when an individual independently manages their emotions, attention, and behaviour.[37] These skills are critical to development because they are connected to academic achievement, resilience, and the ability to form social relationships with peers. [38]

Stress and Emotional Regulation for Autistic Children and Youth

Young children need to be taught the skills of self-regulation. First, they need to experience co-regulation, where a caring adult consistently meets a child's emotional needs and helps calm their child's bodily reaction to stress.[39] While typically developing peers may learn to self-regulate around age four or five, autistic children may need more time and support, due to differences in cognitive development and communication skills.[38, 40] Autistic children may also struggle to recognize emotions in themselves and others. They can benefit from being taught how to name emotions and identify how emotions feel in the body.[41]

As autistic children get older, they may continue to respond to stress differently than their neurotypical peers. Their nervous systems may respond more or less than expected when experiencing stress, and even during times of rest.[38, 42, 43] Their unique nervous system activity may mean that they take longer to calm down and transition back to learning.[44]

How Can Educators Support Autistic Students with Stress and Emotional Regulation? Strategies and Best Practices



Avoid assumptions. When autistic people present with sensory or movement differences, assumptions are often made about these differences being "problematic" or "challenging" or that a person has a co-occurring intellectual disability.[45]

> "Too often autistic children are raised to believe they are broken and need to be fixed." [45]



Be patient and calm. As a trusted adult, your calm may impact the child's or youth's ability to regulate their emotions. Offer extra time for autistic students to regulate and process experiences.



Notice the underlying need. Stress responses are the body's way of communicating an unmet need. This could be biological (e.g., hunger or thirst), social (e.g., not understanding how to participate in a game with peers), emotional (e.g., feeling sad or scared), sensory (e.g., a classroom being too loud or too hot), or something else that might not be obvious to observers.

> "Try to understand all the attitudes and behaviors of our children, their hearts and their feelings." [46]



Teach about emotions. Talk to your students about what emotions are, read books about how to recognize emotions, and name what these emotions look and feel like in the body.



Offer opportunities for choice and control. When students can make a choice about the order of activities, or the materials used, it can reduce their stress levels and associated responses.[47]



Recognize strengths-based approaches. Focus on what your students are good at or what they are interested in to build competency and confidence in managing stress.[48]



Learn more. Research on supporting emotional regulation in autistic people is always evolving. Continue to access educational opportunities to add more tools to your toolbox.

Connections to the Curriculum[9]

Subject Area	Applicable Grades	Strand	Summary
Health and Physical Education	1–8	Social-Emotional Learning Skills	Educators provide guidance on managing stress and practicing self-regulation strategies.
Science and Technology	5	Human Development and Health	Educators provide guidance on managing stress and practicing self-regulation strategies.

Learning Objectives for Students

- **Identify and communicate personal stressors and calming strategies:** Students will be able to recognize situations, events, or experiences that cause them stress and identify at least one strategy or activity that helps them feel calm or regulated.

- **Build awareness of diverse stressors and coping mechanisms, including those experienced by autistic individuals:** Students will demonstrate an understanding that stressors can be different for each person and that self-regulation strategies may vary based on personal needs.

Activity Breakdown

Minds On

Ask your class to talk about times when they have felt different feelings. They can raise their hands and identify situations, or they can be prompted (E.g., "Raise your hand and tell me about a time you were feeling…"

It can be helpful to spend time introducing feelings first so that everyone understands what it means to be sad, angry, worried, scared, happy, excited, calm, etc.



Suggested Audience: K–3



Estimated Time for Activity Completion: 20 minutes



Materials Needed

- Backpack or another bag
- Neutral heavy items (e.g., solid blocks) that can be used to represent stressors



Tip: For ideas on how to talk about emotions, you can read children's books that can be found in the Children's Book Gift Guide.

Action

1. Have each student identify something that stresses them out. This can be something that makes them sad, angry, worried, or scared.

2. Have each student place an item in the backpack to represent their stressor.



Tip: For very young children, it can be helpful to have them draw the stressor on a sticky note and stick it to the object they are putting in the bag.

3. As the activity progresses the bag will get visibly full. Ask the students, "how do you think it would feel to carry this backpack now that it's full of all of these stressful things?"

4. Have each student identify something that makes them feel better. This can be something that makes them happy or calm.

5. Discuss these examples:

- Does anybody go for walks?
- Does anybody take a drink of a water?
- Does anybody like to take a break in a quiet place?
- Does anybody snuggle a favourite toy?

6. For each example provided have the student remove an item from the backpack until the backpack is empty.

Discussion Guide

Once everyone has had an opportunity to contribute to the activity, discuss these questions as a class:

- What are some examples of students' stressors? Are any of these stressors "invisible" or ones that other students wouldn't notice?
- Have you ever had a big feeling or response due to stressors like this?
- After learning about autism, are there stressors that you think autistic people might experience? Discuss ideas related to communication, friendships and relationships, and sensory processing.

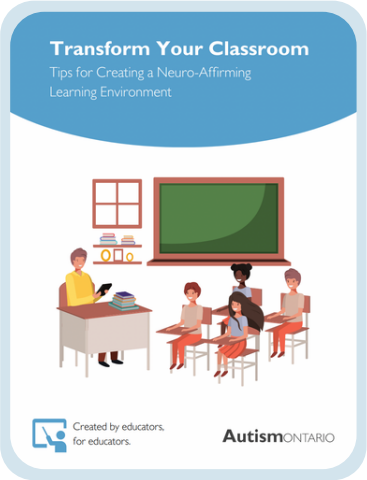
Note to students: Today we talked about a lot of stressors and the methods that people use to empty their stress backpack. If you notice that you or a friend are feeling overwhelmed or stressed, you can talk to your teacher or another adult in your classroom. It's important to remember to keep yourself safe, and one way we do that is talking to your teacher.

Practice It	Hear It	Watch It
To help build your students' coping skills, have them build a Feel Better Box.	Explore guided meditations for children and youth through the Sick Kids Mental Health Learning Hub.	For a more in-depth discussion on autistic children's mental health, watch the Mental Health Matters series.



Key Take-Away Message: Everyone feels stressed sometimes, but what stresses us out and what helps us feel calm can be different for each person. By learning what works for us and respecting what helps others, we can all take care of ourselves and support one another.

Autism Ontario provides a range of learning resources to support educators in promoting autism acceptance. These include accessible documents and webinars in both English and French, covering various topics for educators, caregivers, and advocates. The materials are available to access anytime, and we encourage you to use them to enhance your classroom and create a more supportive environment.



Transform Your Classroom Tips for Creating a Neuro-Affirming Learning Environment: Resource

Resource written by educators for educators that provides information on how to create a neuro-affirming classroom where every student is a valued member of the community. No student is seen as "broken" or needing to be fixed. By thoughtfully designing your space, instruction, assessment, and routines, you can create an environment that supports and benefits all learners.



Navigating Special Education: On-Demand Webinar

A panel of experts provides valuable insights and practical tips to effectively navigate special education, especially for children entering the school system for the first time or who have been recently diagnosed with autism. The panel sheds light on the crucial aspects of communication, relationship building, and child education rights.



What is Stimming: Resource

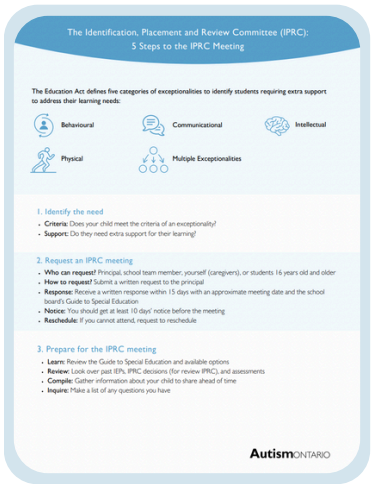
This resource explains stimming behaviours, their different functions, and when intervention may be needed. It highlights the importance of understanding self-stimulatory behaviours in autistic individuals and provides guidance on appropriate responses.

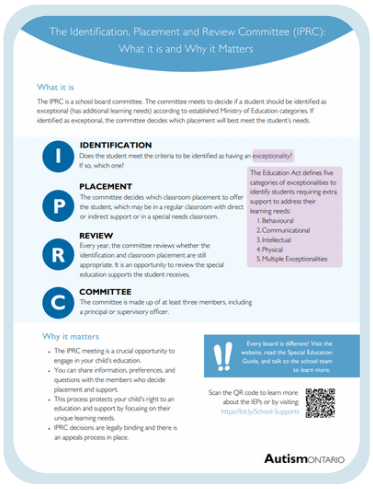
Special Education: Resources

This series of tip sheets was written to provide parents and caregivers with an introduction to the different supports available for their autistic child at school.

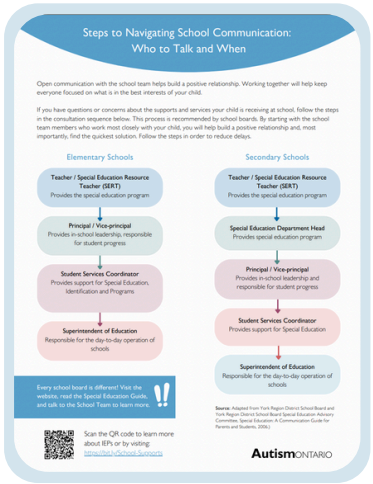
- The Individual Education Plan (IEP): A Plan for Student Success
- The Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC): 5 Steps to the IPRC Meeting
- The Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC): What is it and Why it Matters
- Tips for Better School Communication and Collaboration
- Steps to Navigating School Communication: Who to Talk to and When













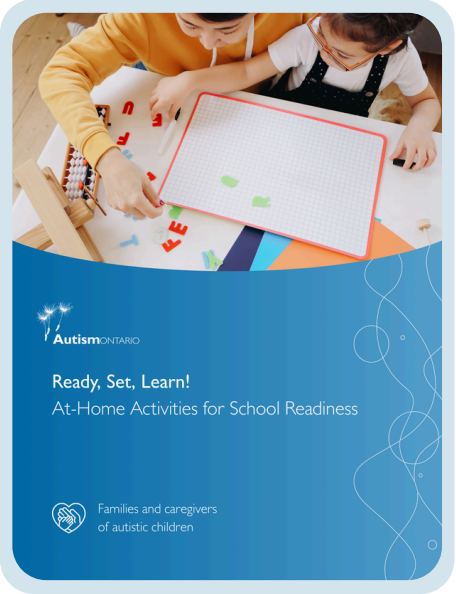
[Collaborating with Your School: Video]

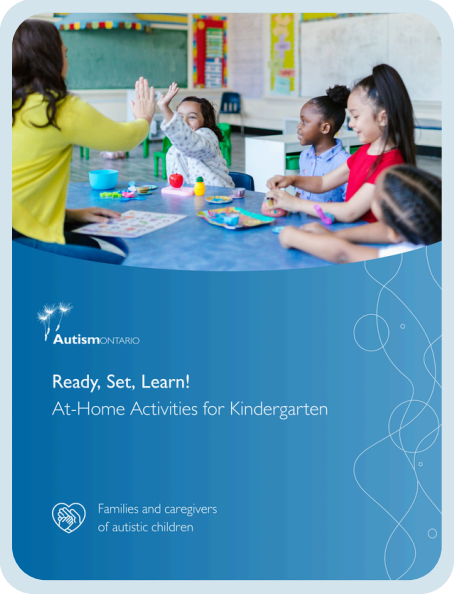
Learn four essential tips to enhance communication and collaboration between schools and parents/caregivers. Whether you're a teacher or caregiver, these practical strategies empower you to build stronger relationships and foster a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

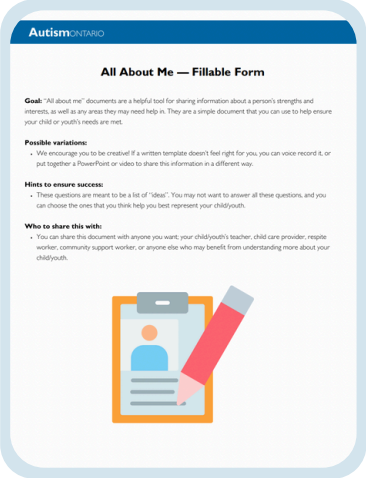
Ready, Set, Learn: Activity Books

Preparing for and starting school can be overwhelming, but this workbook series can be shared with parents and caregivers to support students' key school-readiness and kindergarten skills through play-based activities. They provide practical, engaging strategies that parents can use at home to enhance various developmental areas, including fine and gross motor skills, play, and communication.

Ready, Set, Learn: At-Home Activities for School Readiness
Ready, Set, Learn: At-Home Activities for Kindergarten







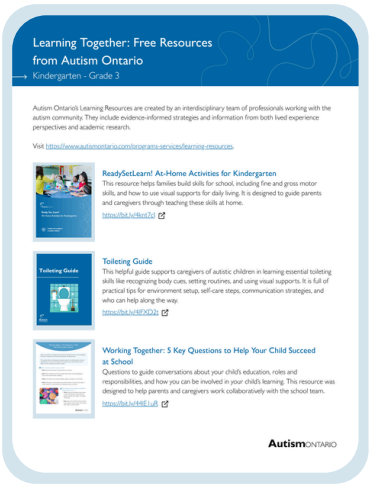
All About Me: Fillable Form

"All about me" documents are a helpful tool for sharing information about a person's strengths and interests, as well as any areas they may need help in. This is a simple document that you can share with families to help them collect information on how to best support their child or youth.



Navigating a New Diagnosis: Landing Page

This page guides parents and caregivers through a variety of different supports and resources they can access as they navigate the autism community after their child or youth is diagnosed. Resources include live trainings, videos, information on support groups, and written resources.



Learning Together: Free Resources from Autism Ontario

Autism Ontario's Learning Resources are created by an interdisciplinary team of professionals working with the autism community. They include evidence-informed strategies and information from both lived experience perspectives and academic research.

Kindergarten - Grade 3

Engaging with your wider school community about autism and neurodiversity can foster a culture of inclusion and acceptance. When students take part in these efforts, they feel empowered, build empathy, and learn that they can help make their school a welcoming place for everyone. Creating opportunities for collaboration helps foster a stronger, more connected school community.

Tip: Involve both your autistic and neurotypical students in school-wide and community initiatives that promote inclusion and belonging.

Activity: Announcements

Your morning announcements are a great opportunity to celebrate and educate about autism while fostering a more supportive and inclusive school environment. Here are two different types of announcements you can use in your school:

Option 1- Classroom Engagement

"Good morning, everyone! Did you know that our school is working hard to be a place where everyone feels like they belong? That means celebrating all the ways we're alike and all the ways we're unique!

Today, we have a fun challenge for you. Take a moment to think about these questions:

- What are some ways we can show understanding and kindness to one another?
- How can we make sure everyone feels included?



We'd love to hear your amazing ideas! Share your answers with your teacher, and we'll share some of them tomorrow during the announcements. Let's work together to make our school an even more awesome place!"

Classrooms can be encouraged to collect, record, and submit answers to be presented the following day.

Option 2- Introduction to World Autism Day

*** This option can be used for the months of March and April each year.*

"This year, our school is excited to participate in Autism Ontario's Celebrate the Spectrum campaign for World Autism Day! World Autism Day is an important day across Canada, as it helps us learn about the challenges and successes of autistic people. It's also a chance to come together—families, schools, communities, and leaders—to make Ontario a more welcoming and inclusive place for everyone. Let's work together to celebrate diversity, support one another, and help everyone feel like they belong!"

Activity: Bulletin Boards

Bulletin boards are a great way to connect your school with the wider community, whether in a classroom, hallway, or even a digital space like a communication app—wherever it's most accessible for families! Design a bulletin board that's engaging, colourful, and informative. Here are some ideas for what you can include:

- Interesting information about autism and autistic people
- Helpful resources for families
- Information about World Autism Day

For inspiration and materials, explore Autism Ontario's learning resources.





Activity: Host a Fundraiser

Organize a fundraising event at your school to support Autism Ontario and spread awareness! You could host fun activities like bake sales, raffles, silent auctions, dress-down days, or even a trivia night.

Activity: Social Media Engagement

Leverage the power of social media to highlight how your school is fostering inclusion and acceptance while supporting Autism Ontario. Use #CelebrateTheSpectrum, #WorldAutismDay, and #AutismOntario to amplify the impact!

Tip: Check with your school about any policies related to photo releases before posting pictures of students.







Here are some ideas for content you might want to post or share:

Student Voices Video: Record short clips of students answering, "What does inclusion mean to you?" or "How can we support each other at school?" Combine their answers into a heartwarming montage to show the power of kindness and belonging.

Carousel Post: Create a series of slides with stories about autism. Consider connecting with the autistic students in your school and their peers or family members to ask them what they would like to share about their experiences. Students can submit pictures, testimonials, etc. End with a slide encouraging inclusion.

Tip: To keep everyone safe, ensure you have permission before posting.



Activity Showcase: Post photos or videos of students participating in an autism awareness activity, such as the ones presented in this toolkit. Include captions explaining the significance of the activity.

Tip: Consider a caption for your post. "Students took part in [activity name], building awareness and fostering a sense of belonging. Moments like this help create a more inclusive school for everyone."

Celebrate Belonging Post: Post a graphic or video celebrating when students show acts of inclusion, acceptance, and belonging in their school community. #CelebrateTheSpectrum #WorldAutismDay #AutismOntario"



Tip: Consider a caption for your post. "This week we want to celebrate belonging at our school. Here are some moments we noticed. Small actions make a big impact. #CelebrateTheSpectrum #WorldAutismDay #AutismOntario"

Family Engagement Post: Share tips or resources for families to learn about autism at home, such as links to videos, books, or Autism Ontario's materials.

Inclusion Spotlight: Feature a short series of posts highlighting how different members of the school community- students, teachers, and staff- are fostering inclusion. Each post can include a quote, a photo, or a short video of someone sharing what inclusion means to them or how they actively promote it.



Tip: Consider a caption for your post. "Meet the students, teachers, and staff making schools/our school a more inclusive place. Stay tuned as we highlight their stories and ideas on fostering belonging. #CelebrateTheSpectrum #WorldAutismDay #AutismOntario"

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