

Equipping Autistic Students for Secondary School Life

Autistic students often need explicit teaching to navigate the transition to secondary school successfully. Without structured guidance, they may struggle with organisation, communication, and self-advocacy, leading to increased anxiety and disengagement. This guide provides practical strategies for equipping students with essential skills for independence and success.

1. Self-Awareness & Advocacy

Why It's Important:

Many autistic students struggle to express their needs or ask for help, leading to unnecessary distress or disengagement.

How to Teach It:

- **Help Students Identify Strengths & Challenges** – Encourage self-reflection on what helps them learn best and what they find difficult.
- **Teach Self-Advocacy Scripts** – Provide simple, practical phrases for asking for help or requesting adjustments.
- **Identify Trusted Adults** – Help students choose a go-to staff member for support and practice ways to approach them.

2. Understanding School Rules & Teacher Expectations

Why It's Important:

Unspoken rules and expectations can be confusing, leading to misunderstandings or unintentional rule-breaking.

How to Teach It:

- **Make Rules Explicit** – Instead of assuming students 'pick up' expectations, provide clear, visual guides on what is expected in class, corridors, and social spaces.
- **Use Social Stories** – Develop simple, personalised narratives showing how to handle common school scenarios (e.g., asking for help, responding to feedback).
- **Role-Play Situations** – Run low-pressure practice sessions where students navigate expected behaviours with teacher support.

3. Time Management & Organisation

Why It's Important:

Executive function challenges can make it difficult to prioritise tasks, track deadlines, and manage materials.

How to Teach It:

- **Use a Planner System** – Show students how to use homework planners, checklists, or digital reminders to track assignments.
- **Break Tasks into Steps** – Teach chunking strategies (e.g., breaking homework into smaller tasks with clear deadlines).
- **Teach Time Estimation** – Use visual timers or estimate how long a task should take to improve pacing skills.

4. Navigating the School

Why It's Important:

Unfamiliar spaces and changing schedules can be overwhelming, making it harder for students to feel in control.

How to Teach It:

- **Use Visual Timetables** – Provide colour-coded, simple schedules that highlight key transitions (e.g., break times, subject changes).
- **Pre-Practice Routines** – Arrange guided school tours where students practice moving between classes before term starts.
- **Create a 'Where to Go' Guide** – Include maps with quiet spaces, key staff, and safe routes around school.

5. Study Skills

Why It's Important:

Many autistic students struggle with structuring and processing information, which can affect learning and progress.

How to Teach It:

- **Use Structured Note-Taking Methods** – Teach students to use bullet points, mind maps, or colour coding.
- **Support Task Initiation** – Help students get started on assignments by providing prompts and structured steps.
- **Model Organisation** – Demonstrate how to pack a school bag the night before, using a checklist for essential items.

6. Communication

Why It's Important:

Understanding and responding to verbal and non-verbal cues can be challenging, leading to misunderstandings.

How to Teach It:

- **Provide Scripts for Common Situations** – Help students practise responses for asking for help, joining conversations, or managing misunderstandings.
- **Use Visual Communication Tools** – Provide cue cards or structured templates to support communication when verbal expression is difficult.
- **Encourage Alternative Communication Methods** – Allow students to use email, written notes, or apps if verbal communication is difficult.

7. Conflict Resolution

Why It's Important:

Misunderstandings and social challenges can lead to conflict or frustration, making school harder to navigate.

How to Teach It:

- **Teach Emotional Regulation Strategies** – Support students in recognising and managing their emotions before conflicts escalate.
- **Use Structured Problem-Solving Approaches** – Help students understand how to navigate disagreements step by step.
- **Teach When & How to Seek Help** – Ensure students know who to go to for support in different situations.

Quick Wins for Staff

1. Provide written & visual instructions for all routines.
2. Encourage 'pre-visits' and early access to key spaces.
3. Model help-seeking behaviours and normalise asking for support.
4. Use structured templates to support organisation and planning.
5. Check in regularly and adjust support as needed.

By explicitly teaching these key skills, schools can reduce anxiety, build confidence, and create a smoother transition for autistic students. Small, structured supports make a big difference in helping students thrive in secondary school.

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