

Autism
Friendly

Hi I'm Alex,
colour in the
background the
way you like!

2021
edition

Bridge Back to School

An Autism-Friendly Learning Resource for 2021

AS I AM .IE

SuperValu



Foreword

Dear Reader,

COVID-19 has created unprecedented challenges for individuals, families and communities across Ireland. The lack of routine, predictability and support has taken a toll on many and for the autism community it has presented unique challenges. Many young, autistic people have found it difficult to adapt to a home based routine or have greatly missed vital supports accessed through school or the community. Returning to a “new normal” will present further challenges, especially for young people who are transitioning from one stage of their education to another.

AsIAm and SuperValu are committed to building autism-friendly communities - from our in-store quiet shopping times to the towns we are supporting on the autism inclusion journey, our partnership works to make a real and powerful difference in the lives of 1 in 65 people in Ireland who are on the autism spectrum, and their families.

During the COVID-19 pandemic we have worked together to find new ways to support the autism community - this has included putting our Community Support Seminars online and generating COVID-19 specific resources. As Ireland re-opens, we know that the autism community needs support now, more than ever.

The return to school provides a vital lifeline of support for autistic students and families. It is an exciting opportunity to re-connect socially, acquire and re-learn key skills and continue on the educational journey. However, it is also tough to return to a busy classroom environment, with competing demands and new routines, after such a period away. This is an opportunity to prepare for this transition and to work on strategies which will help support an autistic student in accessing learning and managing in school.

The aim of this resource is to support a facilitator (parent, SNA, teacher or home support worker) in working with a student to prepare for the return to school. The document explains key skills and strategies to the facilitator whilst our friend, Alex is on hand to support students in learning key concepts and engaging in activities.

The superb team behind this resource has worked to create an inclusive, cross-sectoral, evidence based tool to support your child in 2021 and beyond.

These 50 pages cover key topics from social skills to “my first day back in school” and are augmented by an online bank of further information and activity sheets. As with everything we do, autistic experience and voice has been central to our approach.

We hope you find this resource useful - we wish you every success in using it and a happy educational experience for the student you are supporting!

Every good wish,

Adam Harris

Adam Harris,
CEO AsIAm



Ian Allen,
Managing Director, SuperValu



Voices from the community



'I am nervous about going back to school and no one will know me after being off school for a very long time. I am looking forward to the sensory and playrooms.'

Luke, age 9

'I am looking forward to my daughter seeing her friends again. I am worried about her settling back in after so long off and then she has to transition to another school in September which will be hard for us all.'

Debbie, Parent

'I am worried about going back to school and having a new teacher. I am excited to see my resource teacher and tell her about my new puppy!'

Leonard, age 11



'I am looking forward to my son having more routine and structure during the week, meeting his friends and socialising again. I am worried it will take him much longer to settle back to school after being away so long and I am worried he will have regressed.'

Fiona, Parent



'I am really looking forward to seeing my friends again and playing with them again. I haven't met them for months and I feel lonely without them. I'm nervous in case we spread the virus to each other. I am going to ask my class to pray for my Grandad who died from the virus.'

Sarah, age 10

'I like the thought of going back to school for the fun stuff and to gain more knowledge, learn more. I find it weird thinking of going back to meet friends and teachers in school. I haven't seen them in what feels like ten months. I'm not looking forward to where I just have to do what I'm told and what everyone else is doing, it will be like blah blah blah all over again!'

Shane, age 9

'I didn't like the part that we were not allowed to go outside with friends and have had to stay in our house. I hated doing school at home it was really depressing and stressful. I'm worried that I will get bad grades again. I wish it would be back to normal.'

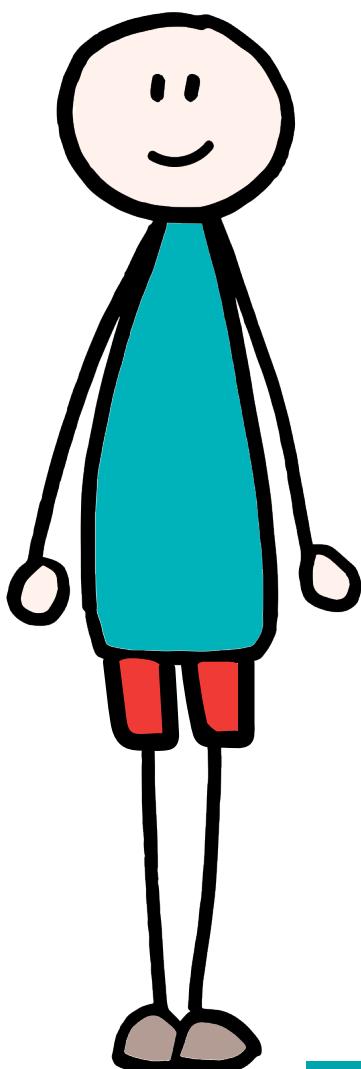
Sinead, age 14

Online Portal for the Bridge Back to School

In addition to all the activities and explainers featured in this resources we have developed a portal with the additional material that was created while putting this book together. We invite you to scan the QR codes on your phones to take you directly to the online portal for all Bridge Back to School material.

SuperValu and AsIAm would like to thank the following people for their contributions to this wonderful resource for helping students adjust back to school.

Adam Harris, AsIAm, Anne Jones, Post-primary Teacher, Billy Redmond, Principal, Post-Primary, Dr Lisha O'Sullivan, Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies, Mary Immaculate College, Dr Margaret Egan, Lecturer in Inclusive Education, Mary Immaculate College, Fiona Ferris, AsIAm, Hannah O'Dwyer, AsIAm, Maria Dervan, Primary Teacher and PhD Student, Mary Immaculate College, Niamh Moore, Primary Teacher and DECPsy Student, Mary Immaculate College, Prof Emer Ring, Dean of Early Childhood and Teacher Education, Mary Immaculate College.



Hi I am Alex, are you as excited as I am about going back to school?

I am a little bit nervous and anxious too. Hopefully the activities in this book will help us.

For more information and activities scan the QR codes on a phone and it will take you to the AsIAm back to school portal!

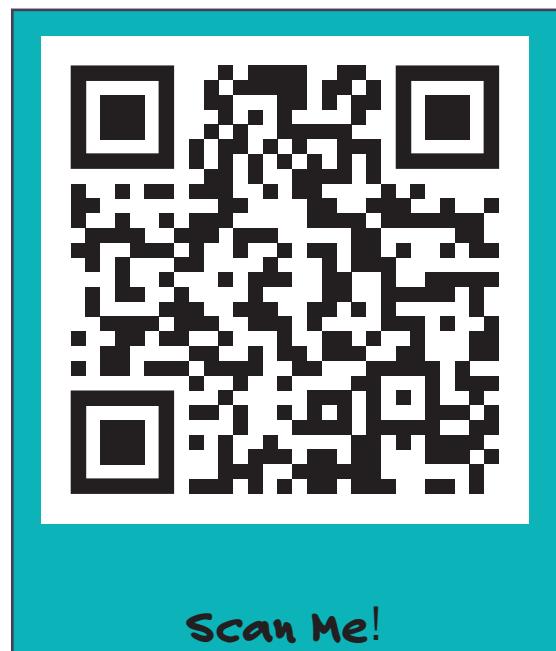


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Introduction for Parents and Facilitators

A Mosaic Approach

We are committed to promoting a research-informed approach to its role in supporting autistic individuals and families. Autism is described as being associated with differences in social interaction, patterns of communication, flexibility of thought and behaviour and sensory responsiveness. However, while these characteristics are useful, they fail to inform us as to why autistic individuals exhibit these behaviours and how they experience the world. The greater availability of knowledge stemming from ongoing research in the field of autism is positive and encouraging. However, this knowledge has also led to rival claims for therapeutic and educational interventions, which can lead to confusion for parents, autistic individuals and those who support autistic students.

The complexities in conducting autism research related to research methodology decisions, the different profiles of autistic individuals and isolating causation from social factors have been well-documented. This has led to suggestions that rather than searching for a unifying theoretical approach, research in autism should be conceptualised within a "mosaic" framework, allowing for a series of smaller scale findings. In adopting a "mosaic" approach that considers the findings from a range of systematic, rigorous and robust research, the potential of enabling autistic students to realise their full potential increases. In this booklet AsIAm utilises this mosaic approach and focuses primarily on the promising research findings emerging from the areas below:

- Joint Attention
- Self Care Skills
- Communication and Social Skills
- Motor-Skill Development
- Self-Regulation
- Executive Functioning
- Perspectives of Autistic Individuals

For too long, our understanding of autism has been predominantly informed by experts from the outside looking in rather than from the perspectives of autistic individuals themselves. At the centre of the mosaic of theoretical approaches in this booklet there are the perspectives of autistic individuals.

Autism Specific Lens

We know that autistic students experience the world in a fundamentally different way than those who do not have autism. We know also that each autistic student, just like every student, has their own unique learning profile and disposition. It is important to always remember that when you have experience of working with one autistic student, that experience cannot be equated to working with every autistic student. In the recently published 'Autism from the Inside Out: A Handbook for Parents, Early Childhood, Primary and Post-Primary Settings', researchers at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick reject the association of the word "disorder" with autism, suggesting instead that autism is best understood in terms of "difference". This publication also adopts this position, in believing and accepting that autistic students experience differences in social interaction, patterns of communication, flexibility of thought and behaviour and sensory reactions.

In supporting autistic students, adopting an autism specific focus is therefore pivotal to ensuring students feel safe, secure, competent and can flourish. Autistic individuals such as Temple Grandin, Greta Gerlind, Wendy Lawson, Luke Jackson, Donna Williams, Clara Claiborne Park and Jessica Park describe the variety of lenses through which we can understand how autistic students experience the world, while also reminding us that for each autistic student, these lenses have their own unique combinations and characteristics.

Staying Tuned-In: Why Listening to Autistic Students is SO Important

Research in education continues to highlight the importance of listening to students so that students' views can be included in the learning and teaching process. When we include students' views, students are more likely to be interested and to participate. Through prioritising students' participation, students' confidence, independence, social-competence, self-esteem, resilience and overall learning and development are enhanced. From a rights and social justice perspective, students' right to have their opinions taken into account and their views respected in decision-making that affects them is enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) ratified by Ireland in 1992.

Introduction for Parents and Facilitators

We know from the minute we are born, that as human beings, we have an innate desire to communicate and be listened and responded to. Think about how young babies are constantly trying to communicate with us, and the joy we can see on their faces, when we engage with them, and respond to their communicative eye-contact, movements or babbling. All students, therefore, irrespective of age or capacity have views and it is our responsibility to capture and include those views. Through listening to students, we become better educators, parents and carers. Listening however cannot be equated with hearing, listening involves consistently observing how the student is communicating with us and being in a state of constant alert to ensure we are always adopting a listening disposition.

Top Tips for becoming a good listener

- Be respectful and always show an interest in what the child is communicating.
- Give the child time and resist interrupting, finishing the child's sentences or filling silences.
- Avoid 'why' questions as they can sound accusatory and closed questions that lead to Yes/No 'Do you like playing with sand?' v 'Tell me/show me what you like to play with?'
- Make sure you are at the child's level while also giving the child adequate space.
- When the child is finished, summaries what the child has communicated to check that you have got it right.
- Ensure that you include the child's views, thoughts, ideas and preferences in activities.

Research also tells us that listening is a much-underestimated task and one that as adults we find challenging. We have to make a conscious decision to listen and recognise that listening is an ongoing, active and focused process of receiving, understanding and responding to communication from the student. It is also important to remember that spoken language is only one of the many ways in which students

communicate their thoughts, ideas, feelings and information. Students express themselves also through gestures, body-language, physical movement, sounds, humming, singing, smiling, laughing, crying and expressing preferences for particular activities, places and people. Becoming an effective listener therefore is about staying tuned-in to what, and how students are communicating with us.

Including ALL Students: Applying the Principles of Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a way of thinking about what we do to ensure that all students are meaningfully included in the learning and teaching experiences we create for them. This way of thinking in education is based on research related to how students learn best. The idea of UDL emerged from the architectural model of universal design (UD), which according to the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) at the National Disability Authority (NDA) focuses on creating an accessible built environment that is "*understood and used, to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability*". By applying these principles to learning and teaching, we can succeed in including all students and supporting them in realising their full potential.

For autistic students, employing the principles of UDL, benefits students' learning and development through providing them with a lot of different opportunities to meaningfully engage in activities. We know that when you meet one autistic student, you have met just one autistic student and that each student is unique, with different abilities and needs. We also know that all students have the same need to feel safe, secure and competent. By making learning goals, methods and materials, as well as assessment accessible to the maximum number of learners possible, we are using UDL. Three principles related to multiple means of engagement; multiple means of representation and multiples means of action and expression are associated with UDL. Through thinking about how best to engage students' interest, effort and persistence (multiple means of engagement), presenting learning activities to learners in different ways (multiple means of representation) and providing learners with a variety of ways to respond and display their learning (multiple means of action and expression), we are

Introduction for Parents and Facilitators

incorporating these principles in students' experiences. The three principles of UDL underpin and inform this booklet in providing guidance for all who are facilitating transitions for autistic students at this time. Taking time to get to know the student's interests, likes, dislikes and learning and teaching preferences is central to UDL.

Top Tips for applying the principles of universal design for learning

- Give directions, ask questions, share expectations and provide learning opportunities in different ways, and at different levels of complexity (multiple means of representation).
- Allow for different ways of communicating expressing ideas, preferences and feelings and give children choices in selecting their own activities (multiple means of expression).
- Provide a variety of activities designed to attract students' attention, excite their curiosity, stimulate their interest, motivate them to participate and include their preferences (multiple means of engagement).

Joint Attention: What is it and How Can We Teach It?

Joint attention is the ability to share attention between oneself, another, and an object/event in the environment. This may sound simple, however, using joint attention skills is in fact quite complex. In order to use joint attention skills, students must be able to gain, shift, and maintain their attention, in addition to processing both the visual attention of others and the objects/ event.

These skills typically develop during student and caregiver interactions in the development period of 6-18 months. However, research has found that autistic students have difficulty learning joint attention skills and require more explicit teaching.

Types of Joint Attention

Joint attention involves the use of certain behaviours such as eye gaze, pointing, following a point, and showing. There are two different types of joint attention skills: response to joint attention (RJA) and initiation of joint attention (IJA).

Teaching Joint Attention

When teaching joint attention skills, it is important to remember that the primary function of joint attention is social sharing. Although many non-verbal skills such as pointing are involved in joint attention, teaching these skills in isolation, using hand over hand, is not sufficient. It is important that social motivation is fostered in the context of joint attention interactions with parents and teachers.

Suggestions for Teaching Joint Attention

- Create motivating learning contexts: Capitalise on the student's interests. Use a student's specific interests as a pivot to teach joint attention behaviours.
- Use visually motivating toys and activities. Research has found that joint attention is best fostered when using these type of toys. Examples of these toys are wind-up, light-up or noisy toys. Continuously pairing yourself with such motivating objects and activities may help foster student's social motivation and willingness to engage in joint attention.
- Model joint attention skills during interactions. Praise all attempts made by the student.
- *Attention Autism* is a social-communication intervention that targets joint attention skills. Middletown Centre for Autism provide continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers in this intervention annually.
- Use non-verbal gestures such as pointing during interactions with students. Ensure that pointing is not taught exclusively for requesting purposes. Teach and praise students for using non-verbal skills to share experiences with you.
- Use turn-taking games to support students in practicing sharing their attention.
- Create an appropriate interactional environment.
- Create an appropriate physical environment.
- Ensure the student understands the sequence of activities.

A Strengths-Based Approach

A strengths-based approach chooses to focus on students' strengths and capacities, as opposed to focusing on the challenges presented. The strengths-based approach presumes competence and acknowledges the uniqueness of each autistic student. Following a strengths-based approach for autistic students builds confidence, social engagement, life skills and encourages personal expression and development.

Top Tips to help identify autistic students' strengths

- Begin with students' interests – list all the interests and topics that the students like to engage with e.g. sport, computer activities, puzzles, reading, Lego, dancing, singing, caring for pets, art, movies.**
- Interaction- observe how the student interacts with others, family members, in the playground, and as they begin to move out socially. See what elements of this the student is comfortable with. It could be for example, sharing or taking turns or waiting.**
- Commitment - Take note of the times that the student engages or completes tasks and instructions independently. In younger students, this might be putting toys away and some self-care routines. In older students it might be cooking, cleaning up after themselves, personal hygiene routines. Remember that these are all important personal strengths.**
- Special Interests – Most of us have interests that motivate us, and autistic students are no different. Special interests are very often a feature in the lives of autistic students and can change regularly or be consistent. These special interests can be seen as strengths and used as an opportunity for engagement, communication, improving confidence, social skills and joint attention. They are often personal to the student and can be very motivating.**

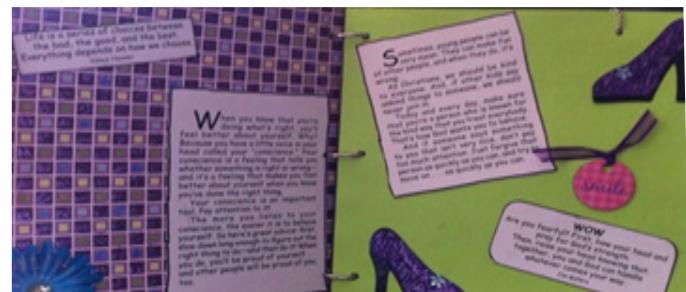
Strategies to Help Support Strengths-based Learning

All About Me Strengths Book

A strengths book helps identify areas and characteristics that can be considered strengths. The autistic student can identify these with the guide, which builds the student's self-esteem and supports the student's interest and engagement.

Self-esteem Scrapbook

The student can complete a self-esteem scrapbook using objects, pictures, photographs, stories, line drawings and/or notes. This scrapbook captures information about students' different strengths and the times and situations where they use them. Students may add to this over time to show how their strengths are developing, and remind them of all the positive attributes they have to offer. It can be a good activity to help them as they return to school after distance learning.



Strengths Cards

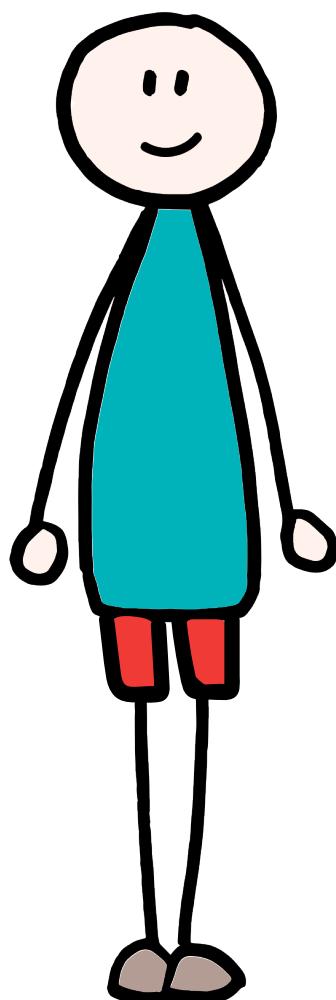
Strengths cards and self-esteem cards use visuals to support understanding and identifying different strengths for the student. There are two different ways to make them.

1. Take photographs of the students' strengths - being brave, listening, helping, dancing, singing, brushing their teeth. Images from the internet, magazines or newspapers can also be used. Students may also enjoy drawing these images themselves or creating models with play-dough. Place each image on a piece of card with matching statements personal to the student - I am strong, I am kind, I am helpful, I am funny. If the student is using an app or a communication device, these statements can be recorded. These can be used as a reward system by randomly choosing one a week with the student,

A Strengths-Based Approach

rewarding them and highlighting this strength every time you see it.

2. The strengths cards can be used in a game where the student and family identify cards and describe the times they used this strength. Spend time talking about the strengths with the student. Identify the positive strengths they have displayed in the time since they have been away from school. Highlight their resilience and response to the pandemic.

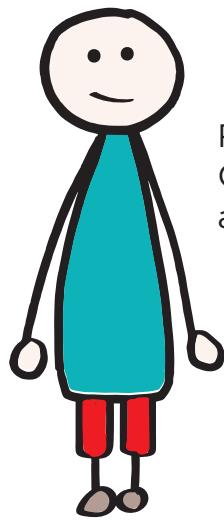


Scan the code for
more activities and
information on a
strengths-based
approach



Strengths

Things I'm good at



Read all the boxes and if there are any that need to be explained, just ask. Circle the ones that best describe you, and what you like. Add in others that are not here.

Try some of Alex's activities:

- 1: Make a poster or series of titles of your best skills.
- 2: Make a video of you doing the different skills.
- 3: Write an advice note to anyone who wants to get better at a skill

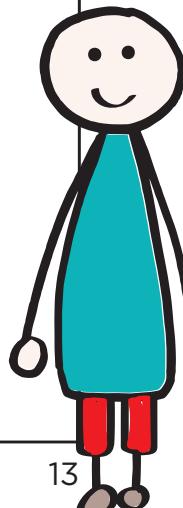
Funny	Maths	Video games	Gardening
Making up stories	Making things	Being a friend	Working with Horses
Kind	Fix things	Cooking	Sports
Directions	Problem solving	Calming friends down	Talking
Dancing	Concentrating	Helping at home	Art - Drawing
Handwriting	Singing	Following a team	Timekeeping
Board Games	Standing up for friends	Fit and sporty	Playing football
Staying calm	Asking for help	Tidy	Science
Languages	Managing money	Saying thank you	Acting
Running	Explaining things to others	Music	Minding younger family
Shopping	Playing cards	Asking questions	Arguing a point
Using the computer	Using the Internet	Woodwork	Sharing with friends
Saving money	Good humoured	Planning activities	Caring for animals

Strengths

Thinking about how I learn

Alex finds it helpful to write down thoughts. Try fill in the below squares:

In class / online it really helps when the teacher....	I find it difficult to learn in class / online when....
I have a great class / lesson when....	It is really difficult for me to behave well when....



Strengths

All about me!

My name is _____

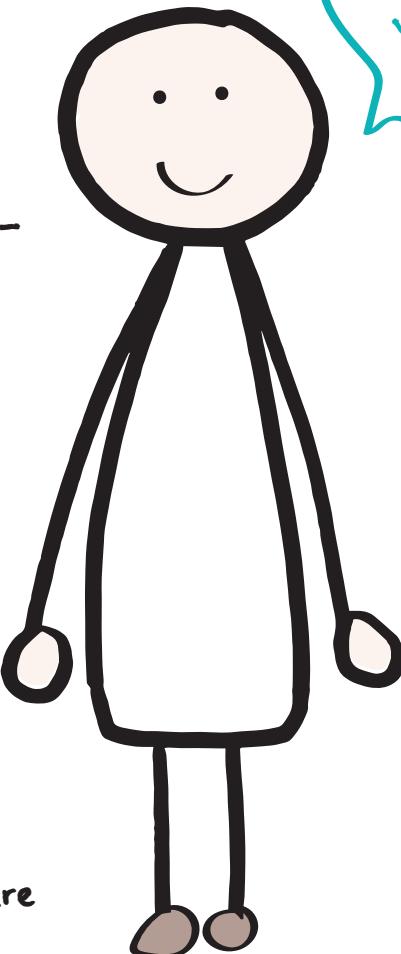
I am _____



My favourite book is _____

Draw Yourself!

years old _____



My favourite activities are _____



My favourite food is _____

My favourite games are _____



My favourite places to go are _____

Transitioning Back to School

Transitions typically present a challenge for all students including autistic students. We sometimes forget the number of transitions we expect autistic students to negotiate during a regular day. Remember that transition can involve change from one activity to another, from an element of this activity to another element of the same activity, or change from one setting to another throughout the day or after a period of time.

Providing transition strategies and activities can help alleviate some of the anxiety that autistic students may experience with returning to school following distance learning. These strategies can prepare students before the transition occurs and during the transition settling period. The time it takes for an autistic student to master the transition will be unique to each individual and may feature heavily in their return to school plans. The students should therefore be provided with the supports and strategies for as long as it takes to establish this transition.



Strategies to Support Transition

Transition strategies attempt to increase predictability for the student and can be presented verbally, aurally, or visually. These strategies may include some of the following.

Visual Schedule – implement a visual or written schedule at home and school with the student to provide a routine for the day and help with predictability.

Reduce the Level of Transition – structure the student's day to limit the number of transitions – remember from the time students wake to getting into their classroom they may have experienced an average of 40 transitions!

Consistency – adopt the same routine for an extended period as the student deals with a transition, this will limit stressors. Change can be introduced once the transition experience is familiar.

Time - planning and preparation are key to helping the student with advance warning, processing time and a more positive experience. If the guides around the autistic student are under pressure for time, the student may well pick up on this too and create anxiety for the student..

Movement Break – build in short breaks throughout the students' day and add them into their schedule. It is recommended to include students' sensory needs into these breaks to help them remain regulated and comfortable.

Transition Object – having a familiar item can often help a student with anxiety, this can be a toy, a fidget, a cue card or an object you have observed that reduces the student' anxiety

Social Script - can also be a helpful strategy to explain transitions. Sample return to school scripts are available on AsIAm's website.



Transitioning Back to School

Practical Preparation for the First Day

Some helpful activities to support transition:

- Schedule/timetable – prepare the student in advance if they must use this independently.
- Lunch box checklist.
- School-bag checklist.
- Uniform – shoes, straps, buttons, zips, sensory tolerance, practice developing independence or tolerance.
- Practice the morning routine in advance to include dressing, feeding, getting ready for the bus etc



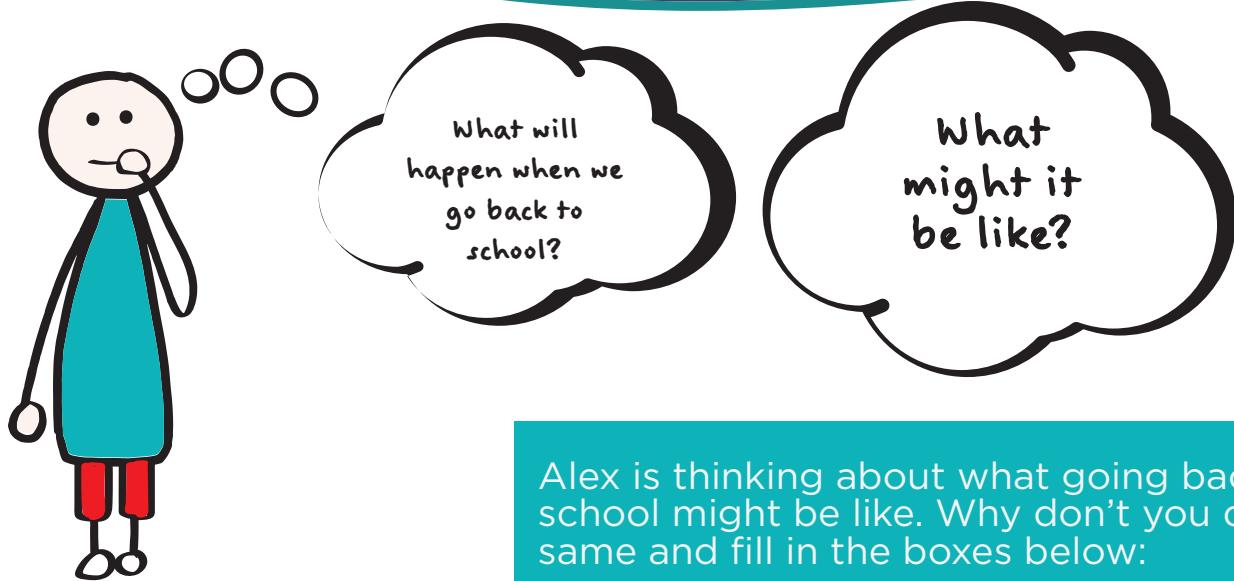
Scan the code for
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information on
transitioning back
to school

Top Tips for Preparing for First Day Back to School

- Contact schools or check websites for a guide to the building and ask for some photographs of classrooms. Some schools may provide autistic students with relevant photographs or videos to help familiarise themselves in advance.
- Prepare the student for people they are likely to meet -visuals of the teachers, principal, inclusion support assistants/special needs assistants (SNAs) secretary, caretaker, bus driver can be helpful.
- Identify the autistic students' fears, worries and aspirations in advance and discuss these. There are some helpful templates attached that can provide a structure for this.
- Build the autistic students' confidence in advance by highlighting their strengths and what they have to offer in school.
- Work with the student on organisation, self-care and communication skills highlighted throughout the booklet that will help them engage with the demands of the transition back to school.

Transitions

Student expectations



Alex is thinking about what going back to school might be like. Why don't you do the same and fill in the boxes below:

IN CLASS

.....
.....
.....

ON THE CORRIDOR

.....
.....
.....

AT BREAK TIMES

.....
.....
.....

Transitions

What if...

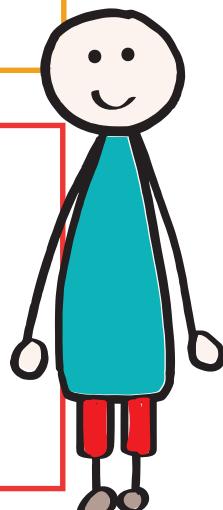
Alex finds it helpful to write down worries. Try fill in the below squares:

When I go back to school what if...?	I think the best thing to do will be...
If I am not sure what can I do...?	If that does not work I will ...

I will be happy when...

My step By Step Plan is

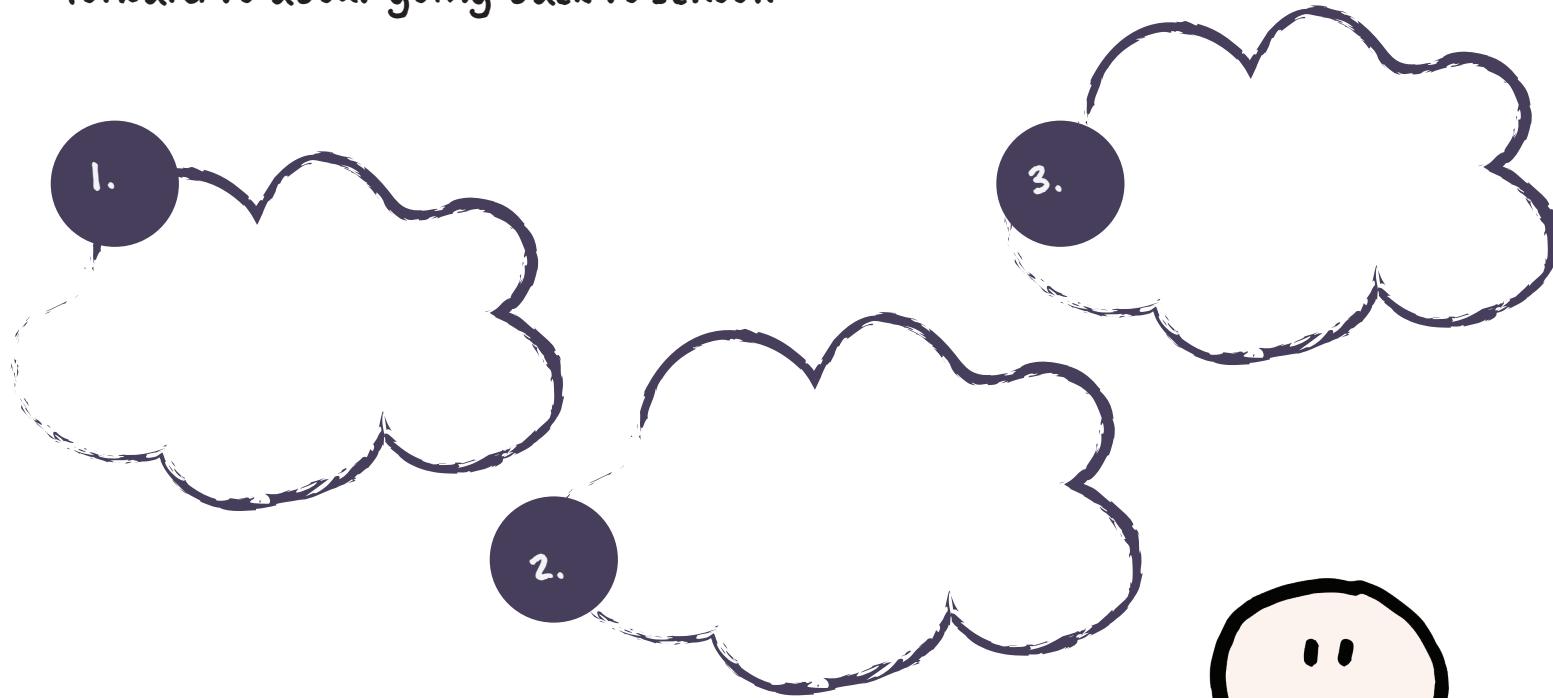
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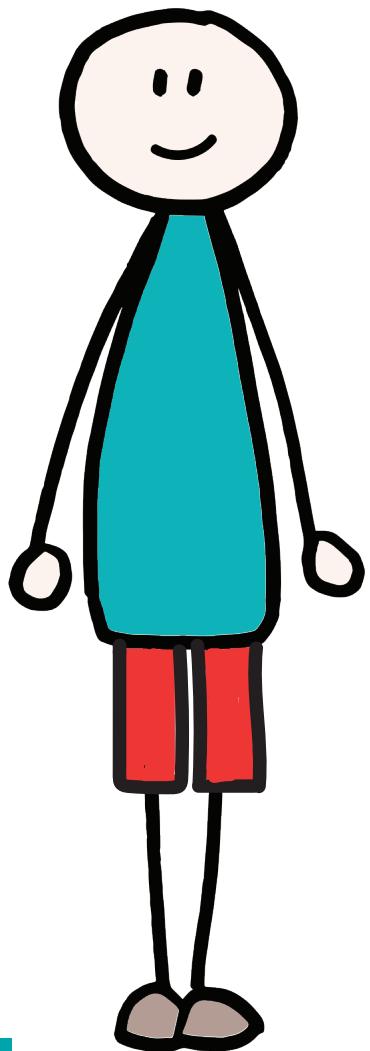
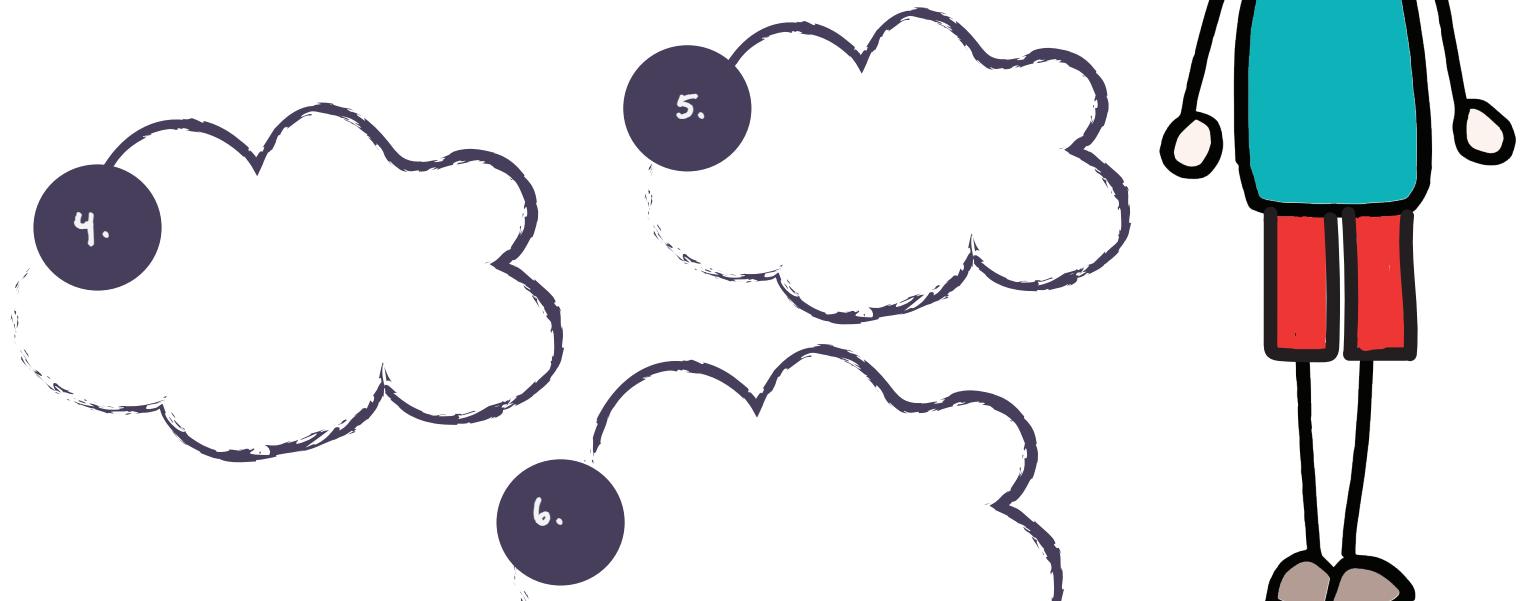
Transitions

What I look forward to

The following are 3 things I am looking forward to about going back to school.



The following are the 3 things I am worried about when I think of going back to school. What strengths do I have to help me manage these worries?



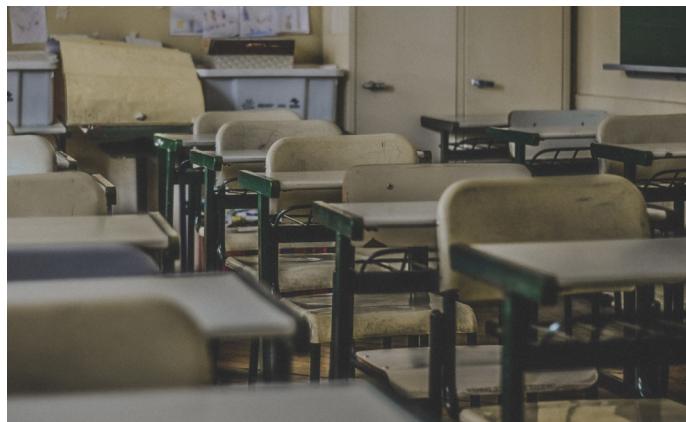
Executive Functioning

Executive Functioning (EF) can be defined as the ability to problem-solve in order to understand and/or achieve a particular goal. Executive functioning occurs in the frontal lobes of the brain, which is the 'project management office'. Such functioning is responsible for key, school-related tasks and behaviours, such as paying attention, planning, organisation, adapting to change and overall self-regulation. It is also associated with working memory, which is constantly called upon in all learning and teaching.

Characteristically, many autistic students have difficulties with EF. They may know they have difficulty, starting, finishing, or changing an activity and know they need help, but many have difficulty effectively communicating wants and needs to others. This causes anxiety for the student, which serves to intensify the challenges experienced. Structuring the environment and activities is critical to support challenges with executive functioning for all students, including those with autism. When asking yourself the question, how I can support a student with EF, research recommends a focus on characteristic strengths.

Autistic students like rules and sequences. They frequently think visually and often in a precise and detailed manner. They are honest, literal, and direct and have the ability to focus when tasks are of interest. Difficulties with EF

means that autistic students can find new surroundings confusing and unpredictable. It may be difficult for them to stop one activity and transition to another. They may have difficulties coping with change, which makes them hold on tighter to fixed routines and repetitive activities. They can find tasks set by teachers confusing, if not sequenced clearly. Sequencing tasks using visuals has been found to be very helpful. Research reminds the guide of the importance of clear, direct instruction, so that the student understands what to do and when to do, a particular task.



Structure and routine are critical in developing a safe environment where engagement is guided, using visual supports. This external support can be faded as the task becomes part of the student's routine. There should be no rush to fade supports, which should be used until the student clearly communicates that they are no longer needed. Research emphasises the importance of guiding the student towards more self-regulated engagement, thus reducing anxiety for the student overall. This can be achieved through role-play practice, talking through each step sequentially.

It has been suggested in recent literature that such focused development of EF, in relation to self-regulation, can motivate social interaction and communication with the guide, which has implications for engaging the student in activities that are social, of interest to the students, appropriately challenging and clearly sequenced to prompt, support and indicate task completion. This point emphasises the importance of learning and teaching as a social act, so get others involved as much as possible.



Executive Functioning

Top Tips

- Executive Functioning (EF) is the ability to problem-solve in order to understand and/or achieve a particular goal.
- EF is responsible for key, school related tasks and behaviours, such as paying attention, planning, organisation, working memory, adapting to change and overall self-regulation.
- Characteristically, many autistic students have difficulties with EF.
- Structuring the environment and activities is critical to support challenges with EF, for all students, including those on the autism spectrum.
- EF can be developed by calling on characteristic strengths of the autistic students.
- Many autistic students like rules and sequences. They think visually, in a precise and detailed manner. They are honest, literal and direct and have the ability to focus when tasks are of interest.
- Teaching approaches, such as, Visual Task Analysis involves breaking down each task into workable steps in order to present tasks in a structured, visual sequence.
- Direct instruction, modelling, role-play for rehearsal and practice, in varying settings, is effective in teaching new skills in a sequential, systematic order that is context sensitive.
- Functional skills, such as setting the table, making a sandwich, involve such sequencing of steps which can teach organisation and time management skills in a very concrete manner, which suits the autistic learner.
- Social Stories™ can also illustrate steps the autistic student can apply to cope with change in routine and/or activity.

Planning - Visual Schedule

There are many benefits to using a visual schedule at home, or in the classroom, with autistic students. They can be a powerful tool for helping the student stay organised, provide them with predictability, promote independence, and reduce anxiety. Depending on the preference and ability of the student the schedule can have objects, pictures, photographs, drawings, words or combine all of these possibilities. Schedules can take different formats depending on how many items need to be included. Schedules should be individualised and should be at a level easily understood by each autistic student. Schedules are best developed in consultation with the student. To do so you must consider the amount of information best to include in the schedule and the associated format which can be - first/then, part day, whole day.

See examples below.

A **first-then structure** helps the student see what they will do FIRST and THEN what happens next. This gives the sense of predictability.



Extended schedules may provide half day or full day routines laid out to suit the needs of the student.

The **whole class visual schedule** - lays out the whole day for the class to follow and is placed where all students can see.

Students may have a **personalised visual schedule** that they use in class as well as access to the whole class schedule. The individual schedule should be matched to the autistic student's level of ability and age.

Strategies that have been successful in improving schedule use include ensuring the schedule is easily understood by the students, even during their most difficult moments; including the student in creating the schedule and using the schedule consistently. Practice using the schedule and have a finished option where items

Executive Functioning

can be removed or crossed off to show progression through the schedule. This can be a good practice activity to help with the transition back to school and classroom learning.

Organisation

Organisation helps students keep track of things physically and mentally so that they remember to pack items, bring things from home to school and vice versa. It can even impact on how they hold their train of thought. Organisation may need to be taught to an autistic student explicitly and this can be done effectively through routines and schedules. Following the same pattern for everyday activities helps build familiarity and success and students can become better at the tasks. Helping the student work on these skills before they return to school will be beneficial for them.

My Morning Routine- set up a familiar routine with the student for each morning. Using visual supports or a checklist can be very helpful. Practice dressing, self-care and breakfast routine. Break down each of these tasks into their component parts and introduce each piece bit by bit. Follow the same pattern and build the student's confidence and familiarity with the routine in advance of returning to school. It can be helpful to prepare the student for school morning routine times in advance, especially if sleep patterns have been impacted with the absence from school. Remember reward and praise success.

A possible example of morning routine might be;



Reminder strips can also provide prompts for the student as they become familiar with parts of their routine.

My School Bag - practice packing and organising the school bag with the student in advance of

school return - use a checklist with each item identified that they can tick off. Visuals of what the contents of the bag should be can be very helpful. Let the student practice this over time. Remember reward and praise success.

Other strategies that can be used to communicate what is involved in various tasks to the student include- organisational apps, checklists, planners. Importantly remember that different strategies and techniques work for different students. Find what works to help your student organise themselves and persist with the approach.

Task Initiation and Analysis - Fostering independence

Task initiation helps a student take action and get started on an activity. Task analysis involves breaking down a task into manageable steps for the student to complete. Some autistic students may have difficulty with task initiation skills and may freeze up in an activity or situation. Students can be taught the specific steps involved through task analysis. The best way to create a task analysis is to simply do the task yourself and write down what you do to complete it. When teaching your student to complete the task independently, begin with just one step. Provide written or visual supports of each stage. Help your student build competence and reward success over time.

Use the following steps as a guide:

Choose a skill or task:

1. Identify the sequence or steps needed to complete a task
2. Teach basic skills, beginning with the easiest one
3. Provide reinforcement for more independence
4. Repeat

Tip for Task Analysis

- Use task analysis to break down everyday routines into manageable parts and to help prepare students for tasks to come as they return to school such as transport to school, packing bags and preparing lunch boxes.

Executive Functioning

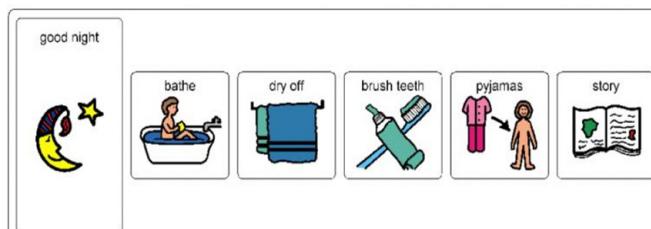
Daily Living Skills

Applying some of the strategies outlined can also help improve autistic students daily living skills such as sleep and toileting.

Many autistic students struggle to settle themselves to sleep and their usual pattern and routines may have been impacted with the absence from school. It can be helpful to work on this in advance of returning to school.

Bedtime Routines:

Routine is very important at bedtime. Once a routine has been established it is important to keep this consistent. Break down the bedtime routine with a simple schedule so the student can almost countdown to bed and help them to become familiar with the order of events.



Explaining Sleep:

Some autistic students can have difficulty understanding the concept of sleep and the need for it. A social story could be used to explain this and help them settle. If you are a parent that stays with a child until they go to sleep, you may need to distance yourself gradually to enable them to settle alone. There is a strategy, called the 'Disappearing Chair,' which you can try and a link to this is available on Middletown Centre for Autism site.

Top Tips and things to remember

- It is important to teach strategies and provide some props to help an autistic student learn skills for organising, planning, and predicting their day.
- Spend the time getting your student used to routines and familiar activities in advance of returning to school.
- Build in EF skills into everyday routines and plan supports in advance.
- Have the autistic student participate in learning to plan, predict, and set up organisational structures from the beginning as this promotes success.

What we did: Personal Experience from Saint Macartan's College, Mullamurphy, Co. Monaghan

Organisation – colour coded timetables and corresponding colour coded copies. There are folders and shelves to keep student's desk organised.

Daily routine – written on the board each day and changes are highlighted.

Workstations – JC students have their own work station with sensory materials appropriate to age and need.

Portable digital clock – some students receive a portable digital clock to take with them during the school day.

SNAs check in with the students regularly in their mainstream classes.

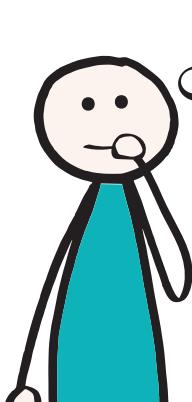
Mainstream teacher support – all teachers have access to a Google Slide presentation with practical support and advice on how to support autistic students in each class.



Scan
Me!

Executive functions

Being organised in school



Think about each
of the items on
the list.

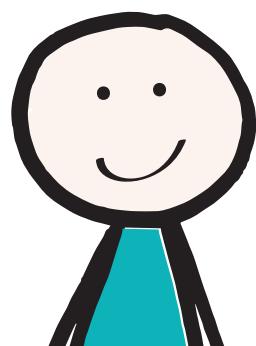
What might
your routine be
like?

Stuff	First Plan	Second Plan
Journal		
Pens, ruler, pencil case etc.		
Copies		
Books		
Lunch & breaks		
school bag		
Uniform		

Executive functions

What is in my school bag

Draw what you will need in your school bag on
your first day back to school

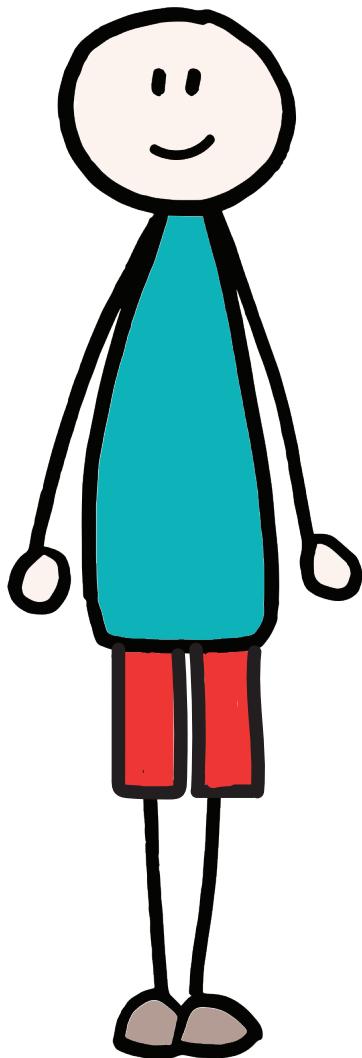


'I MUST
REMEMBER MY
LUNCH!'

Executive functions

Preparing for school - what do I need?

'I make a checklist to follow each evening. This helps me be organised for the next day and I do one for every day of the week!'



Evening

Morning

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Communication and Social Skills

This booklet has already illustrated the many characteristic strengths of autistic students. It also acknowledges challenges for students with learning and teaching environments, which by their nature, are and should be social. Autistic students can be creative and there are wonderful examples of this globally. Research and lived experience of autistic students reveal that a great number have a different social imagination to many others. Social imagination allows us to understand and predict the behaviour of other people. It helps us to make sense of abstract ideas, and to imagine contexts, situations, and scenarios outside our immediate daily routine. Autistic students can find it difficult to put themselves inside another person's head, and/or, mind read. This ability to adapt and understand others is known as social imagination. Autistic individuals may experience differences in this area and may become anxious with change because that flexible tool, called social imagination, can make it difficult to imagine things happening another way. It must be understood that an autistic student may find it difficult to predict what will come next in any social situation. Social Stories™ can forecast and describe such scenarios and in doing, can reduce anxiety for the student.

To be social involves more than one person. Very often, students encounter challenges in relation to social communication. We all communicate in varying ways using verbal and non-verbal modes. Social communication differences affect a whole skill range. These differences may present as showing no communicative intent, not understanding other people's communication, or, not having a verbal means to communicate, through to subtle differences, which may manifest in literal interpretation of language, including idioms. Autistic students often have difficulty with complex, abstract language and may misinterpret metaphors, slang terms, and colloquialisms. It is increasingly recognised that the language of learning and teaching is quite often idiomatic, which contributes to the student's confusion in the social context of school, thus raising anxiety levels, with associated high levels of disengagement. The implication for learning and teaching, at all levels, is that the guide needs to present instructions clearly, avoiding any unnecessary complicated instruction and to consistently check for understanding. There are very useful apps to facilitate two-way

communication. The earlier section on supporting EF highlighted that task analysis, breaking instruction, and tasks into small steps, is critical. Visual supports to scaffold each step can provide a valuable overview of the task at hand. The visual below outlines some strategies evidenced in the research to support students' social communication.

Top Tips for Social Imagination and Social Communication

- Autistic students like all of us have a creative dimension to our thinking. There are many examples globally of autistic individuals, who similar, to those who are not autistic, excel creatively.
- Research and lived experience of autistic students reveal that a great number have a different social imagination to many others.
- Social imagination allows us to understand and predict the behaviour of others, it helps us to make sense of abstract ideas, to imagine contexts, situations, and scenarios outside our immediate daily routine.
- Lack of social imagination is why many autistic students become anxious with change because that flexible tool does not allow them to imagine things happening any other way.
- Social Stories™ can forecast and describe change visually.
- Autistic students have difficulty with social communication.
- There are very useful apps to facilitate two-way communication.
- Autistic individuals report that they think literally and therefore have difficulty with complex, abstract language and may misinterpret metaphors, slang terms, and colloquialisms. For example think about the image conjured up by someone saying 'it's raining cats and dogs'!

Communication and Social Skills

- Research indicates that supporting instruction and teaching clearly and using visuals can contribute to students' engagement and understanding.
- Breaking instruction and tasks into small steps and supporting this with visual supports can successfully scaffold each step of the task at hand for the student .

Social Imagination and Social Communication

Autistic students may have difficulty in different areas of social communication and social interaction. We all need joint attention skills to engage effectively in social communication and social interaction. As discussed previously, autistic students require explicit teaching of joint attention skills.

To help encourage attention and listening skills, make sure to keep these ideas in mind:

- This doesn't need to be a bullet point and can be joined onto the previous paragraph
- Use the student's name and allow the child time to respond.
- Keep language and instructions short and simple.
- Break down longer tasks into smaller instructions, using schedules and checklists can be helpful.
- Use visuals to support language.
- Give the student cue cards and prompts to support communication.

Social imagination

As discussed above, autistic students often need support in social imagination. Students need social imagination to interpret other people's thinking and behaviour and imagine situations when they are not present. Play is an invaluable tool to develop students' social imagination. Through engaging in play, students can learn social skills such as sharing, turn taking, cooperation, which in turn develops students' social language, relationships, and motor skills.

Play can take many different forms and autistic students, like all students, have personal preferences regarding the type of play they wish to engage in. Sometimes play for autistic students may be different and they may need

support in different areas and to experience different types of play.

These may include;

- Exploratory play- where the student investigates objects.
- Functional play - where students mimic an object use such as driving a toy car.
- Imaginative or pretend play - where a student engages in make believe and role plays.
- Social play- where students engage in group activities.
- Body play and movement- is play where students develop a spatial understanding of themselves and world around them.
- Sensory play- which involves the students using their senses in play- playing in water, sand.

There are also many different ways that students can play including unoccupied play, solitary play, onlooker, parallel and cooperative.

Top Tip

- To support autistic students to develop play skills, it is recommended to use their special interests and motivators to help engage joint attention. From here, an adult or peer can model and coach the different play skills. It is important to provide supports to help students to encourage the development of play skills. Play is not just for our younger students, play is for all students.
- Go to Let's Play Ireland website for some ideas that may be helpful: www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/lets-play-ireland/

Social Interaction

Social Interaction involves interpreting other people's emotions and feelings as well as one's own. Autistic students can be supported to develop social interaction through different strategies. Social Stories™ are written scripts, often with visuals, that offer a student important information to help them understand what is happening and what should be expected in situations. The stories are personalised to help

Communication and Social Skills

the student imagine the situation and often provide the student with cues for what to do if... or how to respond. The student can use the stories in advance to practice social skills and the stories thus provide a source of predictability and guidance.

Visual Communication

The use of visual strategies and schedules for autistic students is an invaluable tool for developing communication and helping with understanding. Pictures, drawings or photographs can be used to represent objects and actions. Students who are at the pre-verbal stage of communication or communicate non-verbally may use an Alternative Augmentative Communication (AAC) system such as Picture Exchange Communication System(PECS)[®], and/or an electronic communication device, such as 'Proloquo2Go,' which is an app that uses visuals to support the development of students' communication. Both are reliant on joint attention.

Strategies to help Support Social Communication

There is a range of strategies recommended for helping autistic students develop social communication. These include;

- Modelling the skills for the student – either through an adult or peer.
- Role play- engaging in role plays of imaginary or real situations to practice language and interactive exchanges.
- Video modelling- whereby the student is provided with a video of themselves and/or others engaging in social interactions. This can help the student imagine and practice the language and gestures involved.
- Communication scripts, which can be used to teach both the dialogue and actions involved in an exchange.
- Cartooning or comic strip conversationsTM , which use simple figures or symbols in a cartoon format to explain a social concept for a student.

Social communication may need to be taught directly to a student. There are recommended steps that are helpful to follow when teaching new social skills. Directly teaching social communication may happen in isolation of the actual social experience such as using a script to prepare a student for playing a game.

Top Tips on social communication

- Make sure you engage the student's attention.
- Describe the items and social situation around you to give the student the language.
- Engage with the student at their level so that the student can clearly see your face and gestures.
- Keep the language simple and coach rather than question.
- Make sure you give the student lots of time to respond or engage in conversation.
- Use the student's special interest or topic they selects for discussion.
- Model and repeat language often.
- Be sure to listen!

It is very important that social experiences and learning also happen in the natural setting such as playing with someone new so that autistic students can use the skills they are learning in a real situation. There should be a balance between the real life setting and the contrived setting. Playing and interacting with peers is very important for social development and many students will not have had the chance to work on these skills in the absence of school or social interactions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

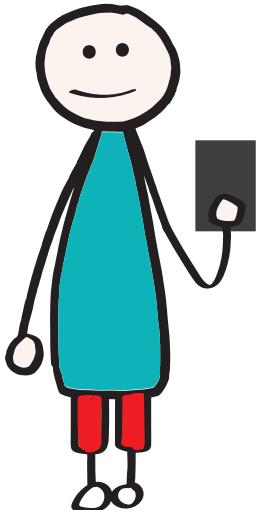
Other strategies that help develop social communication include ;

- Shared reading experiences
- Music and daMing
- Learning rhymes
- Board games- scrabble, twister, catch, card games, Puzzles, Lego, Jenga



Social Communication

Hi again



Your school has developed an “Hi again App” which is to help the teachers and the students get to know each other again.

As you haven’t been in school for a while it might be a good idea to write up some of the information you would like your Year head/ Teachers to know about you and how the Covid 19 school closure affected you.

Some of the things you could include are:

My name is...

My birthday is...

Where I live...

I like to eat...

My family...

My favourite sport is...

My pets...

My hopes/dreams are...

How I get to school...

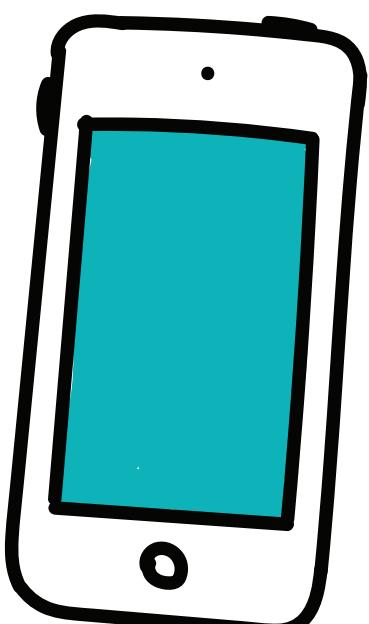
My favourite music/Youtuber/influencer is...

My favourite subjects are...

When I leave school I would like to...

I felt like this during lock down?...

I learn best when...



Social Communication

Student Profile

Name:

Class:

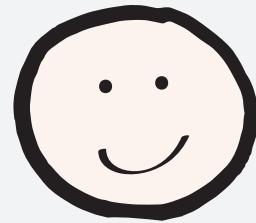
Age:

People who know me say I am:

Things I like:

Things I don't like:

Things I find hard:



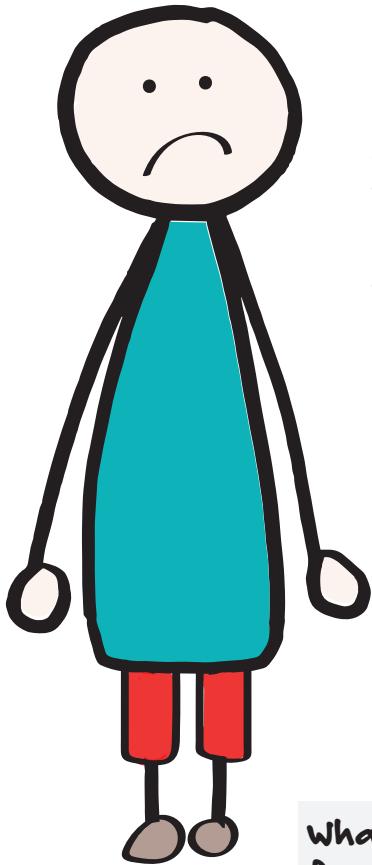
Insert your photo
here!

I am good at:

How people can help
me:

Social Communication

Can you help Alex?



Alex finds it difficult to listen in class and is always in trouble for talking out of turn. Alex just can't resist the need to talk. Alex gets caught when other students talk to Alex in class. Alex tries but just keeps getting in trouble. Now Alex is on report and it is very hard to stay out of trouble.

How does Alex feel?

What is the challenge for Alex?

How would Alex feel and behave if this problem was gone?

How would Alex know that this was no longer a problem? What would be different?

What 3 things can Alex do now to make things easier?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Self-Regulation – Sensory and Emotional

What is Self-Regulation?

Self-regulation is a person's ability to control their behaviour when responding to a stimulus. It requires intentional decisions and active processes to maintain. For autistic students, self-regulation comprises of two strands – sensory regulation and emotional regulation.

Sensory Regulation

Autism affects a person's ability to process their 5 senses – sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. This sensory processing difference also affects a person's vestibular sense, which affects their balance, and their sense of proprioception, affecting body control and spatial awareness. People who are diagnosed with autism may find certain senses uncomfortable or even painful – this is known as hypersensitivity. Conversely, an autistic person may need more stimulation from a certain sense in order to understand it – this is known as hypo-sensitivity.

Sensory sensitivity can often lead the student to experience stress, anxiety and/or physical pain, which may lead to them not being able to control their behavioural response. Sensory regulation is the ability to notice a sensory trigger in the surrounding environment and employ a strategy to cope with it. This is an important life skill for an autistic student to practise and develop. It is helpful for the student to be aware of their sensory triggers, so that they can predict times when they may be exposed to such a trigger and plan for how they will cope.

Emotional Regulation

Autism can also affect a student's emotional well-being, which involves good self-esteem, coping with challenges, maintaining healthy relationships with themselves and others, having a sense of purpose and feeling valued. Emotional well-being creates the foundation for healthy behaviours. Emotional regulation is the ability to present a levelled emotional response when exposed to highly stimulating situations. This skill is essential for maintaining emotional well-being.

Strategies to Support Teaching Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation can be effectively taught using colour coded visual supports, which

autistic students often relate to. The **Zones Of Regulation** uses scales to help students to pinpoint their emotional state or level as their emotions change. An Emotions' Thermometer provides a visual to show a student's increasing or decreasing emotional state. The strategies that support each student at the different stages can be documented. These supports provide a communication tool for a student to show how they are feeling in relation to the colours and visuals. It is useful to help a student measure their emotions through the thermometer or the zones. The colour coding strategies can be used to teach a wide variety of skills including emotions' management, impulses, sensory needs, voice control, social anxiety and to improve a student's ability to problem solve conflicts. The flexible scales and visuals can be personalised for the individual student and use both colours and/or numbers to represent levels of feelings or behaviours that are being learned. Students will ultimately become less reliant on adult prompts and take on personal responsibility for their own regulation.

With all the strategies, it is important to help autistic students learn the language and to recognise the emotions in real life. To do this you could listen to their feelings, provide language for them to use and a strategy to help them deal with the emotion '*right now I can see you are angry that play time is over, it is okay to feel angry, let's get your squishy ball and take 10 breaths to help make you feel calm again*'.

Sensory Input

We experience life through our senses and each of us has unique levels of tolerance to the impact of sound, movement, images, smells, taste, texture, and touch in our daily lives. This tolerance is determined by the brain and the natural high and low thresholds that we possess. Many autistic students may have difficulty processing some of this everyday sensory information. This means they may be over or under sensitive to noise, touch, smell, or bright light for example. Such sensitivity can directly impact their emotional and behavioural capabilities, so it is important to be sensory aware and recognise that each student's sensory processing is unique to them.

Strategies to Help

We can provide some helpful strategies and

Self-Regulation – Sensory and Emotional

accommodations to assist autistic students with sensory processing. These can often be small changes to the environment, which can have a positive impact in the student's life. It is often helpful to begin by creating a sensory profile of the student to find the triggers and make changes. When building a sensory profile for an autistic student it can be helpful to include the following;

Information- Look at the environment where the student is to see if it is creating difficulties. Can you change anything? - seating, temperature, lights, smells, noise, visual distractions.

Imagination- observe the type of sensory sensation that the student is seeking and find ways that they can be accommodated if appropriate- e.g. wear headphones when it is noisy, sunglasses for glare, change the room arrangement so that it provides less stimulation, provide visuals, schedules to structure the day, signs and labels can also provide clear information that students can access without needing others. Think of some positive sensory experiences.

Preparation- prepare the autistic student in advance, where possible, regarding some of the sensory stimuli they may experience in different environments. This can be very reassuring for the student. Social Stories™ can provide a framework of information.

A sensory audit can also be conducted in an environment to help identify factors that can trigger a student's sensory system. Your student can conduct this audit with you.

Personal Strategies

In order to help autistic students process sensory stimulation throughout the day, it can help to provide them with activities to feed the sensory system. This is sometimes referred to as a 'sensory diet' and is unique to each student. Occupational Therapists (OTs) often prescribe some of these activities, but it can also help to adjust the sensory input during the day in relation to a student's observed and identified needs. This may be done with some movement breaks but remember to be mindful of safety first. In relation to activities those that have quick and fast movements tend to be alerting, and activities with slow movements tend to be calming.

Sample Movement break activities

- Set up a box of movement break activity card.
- Allow a student access to a box of sensory objects that have been selected in consultation with the student.
- Use visuals of yoga poses and help the student learn the movements.
- Trampolines can be used for rolling, jumping, bouncing, stretching.
- Use movement circuits – markings on the floor, footprint paths, spaces to stretch that a student can engage with as they move from place to place.



Learning to calm one's physical body is a vital aspect of regulating emotions and sensory stimulation. It is important for each student to learn calming and relaxing strategies to help them when feeling overwhelmed. These will depend on the sensory input and how the student is processing information or an experience. Sometimes students may become over stimulated and need calming activities and at times they may feel under stimulated and require alerting activities.

Calming activities may include;

- Deep pressure massage
- Student giving themselves a hug
- Squeezing a fidget toy
- Squeezing and relaxing hands
- Perform a heavy lifting task e.g. carrying books
- Wall presses
- Long walk
- Listening to calming music

Alerting strategies may include;

- Dancing to movement songs
- The student being timed through a movement circuit or obstacle course

Self-Regulation – Sensory and Emotional

- Drinking a cold drink
- Active, energising movements for a short period e.g. jogging on spot, jumping on a trampoline, skipping
- Clapping hands or singing

Top Tip

- Remember to use visuals to prepare autistic students for activities and to help them follow instructions.
- Use a relaxation box with familiar visuals and fidgets that help the student regulate when distressed.
- Provide a choice board or menu of sensory strategies students can use and pick from.
- Create a sensory friendly calm space for the student to regulate and relax. This may have some sensory toys, tent, swing, beanbag, chair, blanket, music, lights that help the autistic student feel calm, secure, and relaxed.

What we did: Personal Experience from Galway E.T.S.S, Merlin Park, Co. Galway

Voice level chart - all students were trained as to what each voice level means and how noise can affect other students learning.

Charts are displayed as a reminder in their journal and in all classrooms. Students can indicate (by opening that page in their journal) that voice levels are too high by referring to the chart.

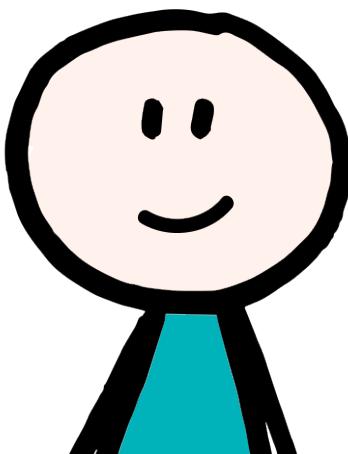
During lessons teachers will give indications as to what voice levels should be used for certain activities and tasks, especially important around group work to help reduce levels of frustration.

Sensory Break Cards - Sensory break/brain break cards are given to out to students who need to take sensory break or movement break during the school day.

We allocate a certain amount of these cards to students and explain that they can use these to take a break from class when they feel overwhelmed or need to take a brain break.

The teachers then take the cards and put them into a box to be returned to the student at the end of the day or in the morning.

Some students do not want others to know that they have these cards so to keep them discreet we laminated a small square of white paper with the letter "S" on it.



Scan the QR
code for more
information and
activities on self
regulation

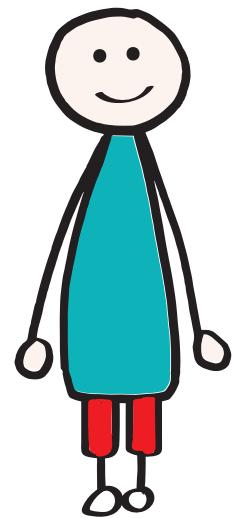


Social and emotional health

Student Sensory Profile

Name:

Draw or write some of your sensory triggers in the boxes:



Strategies that can help:

Social and emotional health

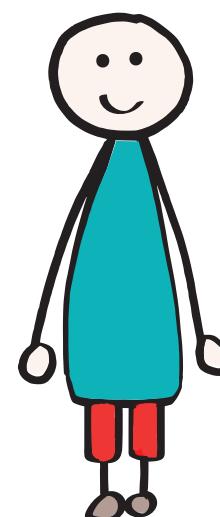
Emotional health

Being able to express your emotions and how you feel is a large part of your overall wellbeing. It ensures that your mental health is positive and also that you have the skills to respond to situations that may overwhelm you throughout your life.

Developing your emotional literacy from a young age will enable you to interpret your feelings and the feelings of others. Developing your emotional intelligence is key to interacting, socialising and working with people.

Identify strategies that will help you to cope if you are feeling sad, stressed, lonely, etc.

Feeling	Why might I or others feel like this when I think about returning to school?	What advice could I give to someone who needs some help or support to manage this feeling?
Sad		
Happy		
Anxious		
Stressed		
Excited		
Annoyed		
Confused		



What other feelings might I or other students have?

Feelings	Activities	What I do to feel better
What other feeling might we be feeling	Why might I or others feel like this when I think about returning to school?	What advice could I give to someone who needs some help or support to manage this feeling?

If Alex is feeling any of the above returning to school what advice as a friend would you give Alex.

Draw or write or tell someone at home what you would think will help.

A large, solid light gray rectangular box that occupies most of the page below the question. It is intended for the student to draw or write their response.

Social and emotional health

Emotional Thermometer

Label the thermometer 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5,

1 being calm and 5 being furious / distressed / overwhelmed.

Think of an action for each number that you could do to feel better.

Use this emotional thermometer to check in with your feelings regularly.



Motor Skills

What are Motor Skills?

Motor skills involve controlled movement of part(s) of the body to achieve some goal (putting on our coat, for example). As we develop and grow, motor skills are used in increasingly complex and coordinated ways, to complete tasks. Motor skills are generally described as involving gross motor and fine motor skills. Gross motor skills involve the use and coordination of the larger muscles in the body to engage in tasks such as balancing and walking. Fine motor skills involve the movement and coordination of smaller muscles in the body, such as those in the hands and fingers, to perform specific movements such as drawing and writing.

There is a relationship between the development of gross and fine motor skills. Students, for example, will need good control of the neck, shoulders and arms to engage in tasks requiring fine motor skills such as drawing and writing.

Why are Motor Skills Important?

Most daily routines and activities involve the use of a range of important motor skills. Motor skills are important for self-care activities (such as getting dressed, brushing teeth and hair, using a knife and fork, drawing and writing; engaging in play and recreation activities such as constructing and making, physical play, active games and sports. Motor skills, therefore, are important for self-esteem as they allow students to undertake these activities confidently and competently. As motor skills allow students to engage and interact with others through play, games and sports they also contribute to engagement and social interaction.

In addition to being important for these activities, the research suggests that motor skills are linked with other areas of development such as EFs, problem-solving, communication and language. Learning to walk, for example has been linked to increases in vocabulary.

Strategies that can help improve motor skills

A plan for motor skill development should include a range of activities specifically designed to help improve motor control and is designed based on the individual student's needs. An autistic student may be competent in their gross motor skills but present with significant differences in fine motor ability or vice versa.

Some students may need support for both gross and fine motor skill development. The most common approach used breaks fine or gross motor tasks into smaller more manageable pieces and builds upon a student's success in small steps.

Gross Motor Skills- involve using the core stabilising muscles of the body and learning how one skill impacts on the next. These skills develop from babies learning to sit up right through to adults improving different movement skills and it is important to note that skills in these areas can be improved and developed no matter what stage the student is at.

Gross motor activities

- Catching bubbles
- Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes song
- Dancing
- Jumping on a trampoline
- Climbing
- Crawling through tunnels
- Kicking a ball
- Cycling
- Imitating animal movements (gallop, waddle, hop) (see animal cards link below)
- Balancing on one leg
- Rolling on mats, grass

Top Tip

- **Simon Says** is a great game that can be adapted to suit the students' level. It involves listening, following directions and gross motor body movements. Match the activity to the students' ability and increase the level of difficulty of the movements over time.

Crossing the Mid-line

The mid-line of our bodies refers to an imaginary line from the head down which in effect divides the body in half. Crossing the mid-line means to move a limb (leg, arm) from one side across the middle to the other and vice versa, or twist the body across the line or to lean the upper or lower parts of the body over the mid-line point. Difficulty completing crossing the mid-line movements is a gross motor challenge which

Motor Skills

can also impact on fine motor skills. Crossing the mid-line is a very important skill that autistic students may have difficulty with and need to practice this movement.

Activities to improve crossing the mid-line;

- Stacking blocks
- Playing tennis
- Sweeping and dusting
- Throwing a ball from one hand to the other
- Walking along a traced figure eight on the ground
- Washing windows
- Dancing
- Yoga poses
- Washing the car

Fine Motor Activities

Fine motor skills require a student to have hand eye coordination, pincer grasp, motor control and motor planning among others. Activities can promote these skills:

- Play Doh™, Theraputty™
- Finger play songs and rhymes
- Finger paint
- Pegboards and felt boards
- Lacing
- Beading string
- Chalk and chalk boards or footpath
- Puzzles
- Colouring, drawing, scribbling, writing
- Cutting paper, ripping paper or card
- Twisting lids off and on
- Buttons, zippers and buckles (begin with Velcro)
- Using a hole punch

Top Tip

- **Hiding small pieces of Lego or small pegs in play doh™ or theraputty™ is good to develop pincer grip and fine motor control. Board games can help build fine motor skills while addressing social skills and communication.**

Learning through Play

Play is vital for the development of an autistic student's gross and fine motor skills. Play provides an opportunity for students to practice

and perfect control and coordination of gross motor movements, as well as small fine motor movements with hands and fingers. It is important to give autistic students ample opportunities to play with a variety of interesting materials to develop in different ways. Play activities can improve motor skills, language, and social skills as it is a natural way for students to learn new skills.

What we did: Personal Experience from Catherine's Infant School, Cabra, Dublin 7.

Gross Motor Skills:

Obstacle Course: Set up an obstacle course with what resources you have. Effective obstacle courses ensure that the child engages in a many different types of movement such as walking/running, balancing, crawling, and jumping. Set up chairs in a row to crawl under, put cushions on the floor and jump from one to next and put a scarf along the group to walk along (balancing). If you have an outdoor area to use, get some chalk and draw an obstacle course. You can find great ideas by googling "Ultimate Hopscotch".

Bowling: Fill 10 plastic bottles with water to the same level and put in some food colouring too. Mark a point on the ground to stand behind and roll a ball from this point to knock down the bowling pins. Good for hand/eye coordination, throwing skills and building arm strength. Use the leftover bottles to make sensory bottles. A fun easy recipe I like uses PVA glue, warm water, and glitter. Mix 20% PVA glue with 80% warm water and some glitter. Mix well and transfer into a bottle. After your game of bowling you can relax and watch the gentle movement of the glitter.

Fine Motor Skills:

- Thread penne pasta on string/ wool.
- Squeeze pegs and put them on an open shoe box.
- Cut thin holes in a shoe box and put lollipop sticks through the small slots.



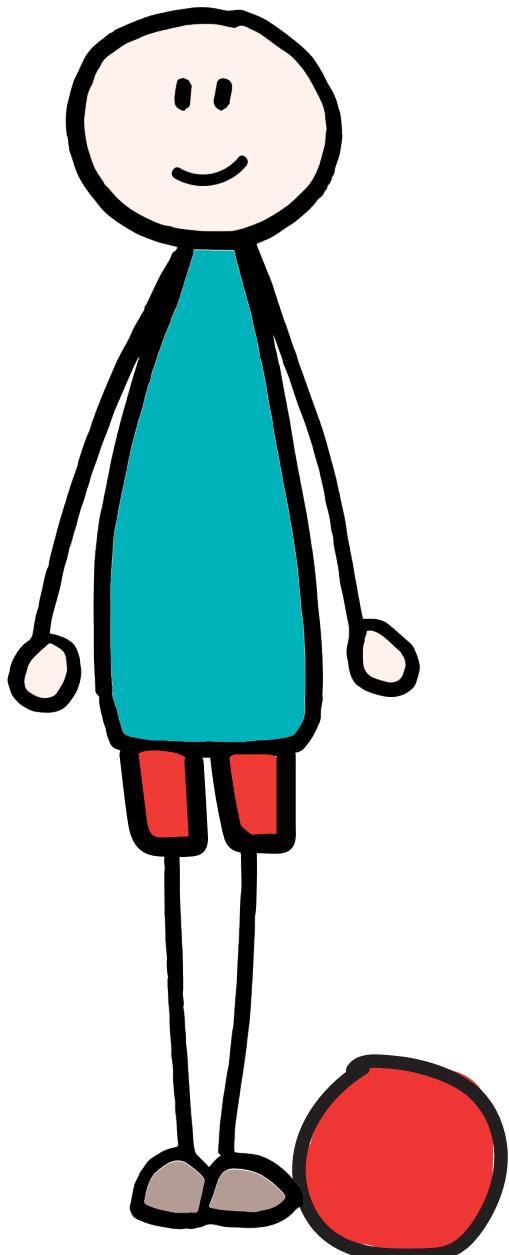
Scan the QR
code for more activities
to improve Motor Skills

Motor Skills

Some Activities

During the COVID-19 lock-down Alex has been trying some of these activities.

Why not join Alex and spend some time on these today:



Try some of these activities
with me!

Running
Hopping
Leaping
Catching
Kicking a Ball
Catching a Ball
Rolling a Ball
and
JUMPING!

Self Care

What are Self-Care Skills?

Self-care skills come under the umbrella of a broad group called adaptive living skills and they enable people to engage with daily life. These skills range from functional communication, behaviour and social skills to the self-care skills of dressing, eating, toileting, sleeping and managing personal hygiene. A student's ability to manage self-care skills has a direct impact on their ability to engage independently in the school and community. Research has indicated that autistic students may experience challenges in different areas of self-care. The development of self-care skills is influenced by a student's individual and unique profile, which needs to be considered when designing learning and teaching strategies. Key characteristics of autism may also have a direct impact on the student's development of self-care skills.

Imitation Skills- autistic students may not naturally learn new skills through imitation, observation, or typical instruction.

Communication – autistic students may find it difficult to understand and integrate information that relies on verbal instructions.

Sensory and Motor skills- autistic students may have many different sensory and motor issues which can impact on their self-care skills such as an extreme sensitivity to certain clothes, materials, foods, textures or a struggle with the fine motor skills needed for buttoning, brushing, zips. Coordination and body awareness would also have a direct impact on self-care skills.

It is important to take into consideration these core areas when designing strategies to support autistic students to learn self-care skills. As with strategies that support EF, communication, and motor skills, it can be helpful to break up self-care skills into more manageable steps and sequences. These steps should be taught with support and prompts which can be faded out as the student learns the skills.

Strategies for Teaching Self-Care Skills

There are a number of evidence-based practices which are proven effective for supporting autistic students to develop self-care skills.

Chaining and Task Analysis

This involves breaking an activity into smaller steps and sequences for the student to learn. The chain or sequence of the steps is taught with the easiest step first. Chaining and task analysis have been effectively used to teach skills such as dressing, washing, toileting and food preparation.

Prompting

This is often used to support task analysis or chaining activities. It can take three different formats: verbal, model, and physical prompting. It is important to only provide prompts when necessary and to fade the prompts when the autistic student is confident and mastering a step or sequence.

Visuals

The use of pictures, schedules, work systems, scripts and video modelling all provide visually cued instruction which may appeal to autistic students. Visuals can be used to provide prompts, sequences, reminders, or instructions which a student can refer to and use more independently.

As an individual develops self-care skills, their ability to live and function independently across multiple environments increases, and it influences the level of supports an individual will need.

Self-care and COVID-19

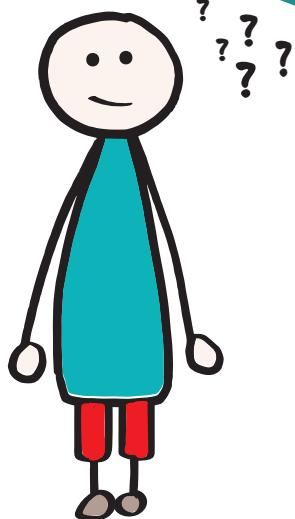
Learning key self-care skills has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic as vital for students as they return to school. Using visuals, reminder strips, task analysis and scripts are all effective ways to teach the skills. Some sample scripts and stories are available on the AsIAm website.



Self Care

Time Capsule- Covid 19

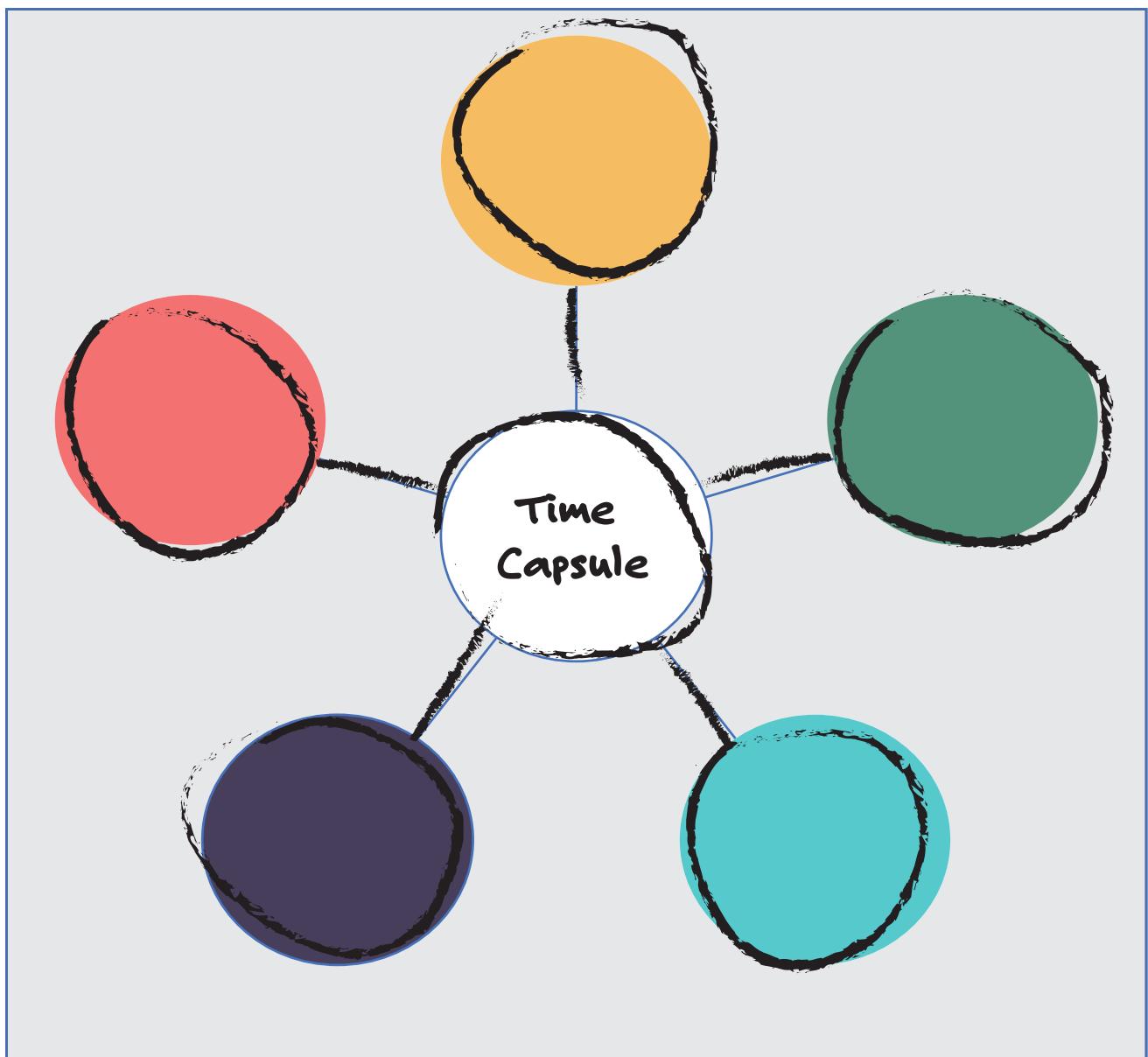
Memories & Skills



What would I put into a time capsule of my memories of the past months?

What video clips, tik toks, pictures, funny stories, interesting learning?

What skills have I developed? How am I stronger? What will I need to remind myself to do when I am back in school?



Self Care

My Wellbeing

Personal hygiene

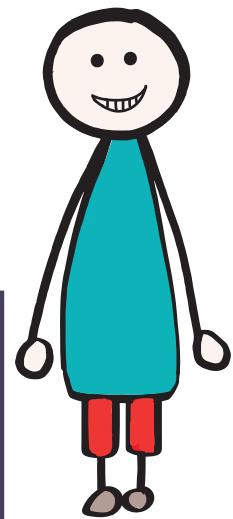
This is something we need to take care of every day, as it protects us from germs and the bacteria that can grow in sweat. When we wash ourselves regularly, we prevent the spread of bacteria and we also smell nicer. Having clean clothes and putting on clean underwear and socks as part of your daily routine are also very important.

Teeth

Our teeth enable us to eat by chewing our food and to talk by helping to form our words. We have two sets of teeth throughout our lives: baby teeth and adult teeth. Looking after your teeth from an early age is important.

Here is Alex's advice on caring for your teeth:

- 1) Brush your teeth after each meal if possible, but at least twice a day.
- 2) Use a fluoride-based toothpaste.
- 3) Gently brush from the back teeth towards the front teeth in circular motions.
- 4) Avoid eating foods that are high in sugar.
- 5) Use dental floss twice a week to clean in between your teeth.
- 6) Replace your toothbrush every three months (or sooner if you think it needs it).
- 7) Visit your dentist every six months for a check-up and cleaning.
- 8) Use mouthwash daily to prevent bacterial activity and freshen breath.

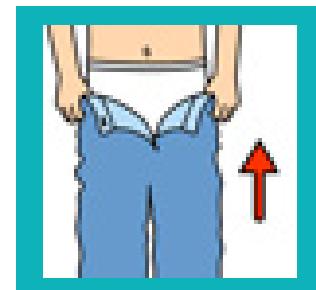


(Source : Essential Home Economics)

What could Alex do?

Alex is 12 and needs some advice on a personal hygiene routine as Alex is heading towards teenage years and knows the changes that will be taking place. What advice would you give to Alex?

From the list below order how Alex could start the day:



(Source: do2learn)

Self Care

Morning Routine

Alex is returning to school soon and because Alex has been learning at home since the schools closed, Alex needs to get back into a morning routine.

The following are the list of things Alex has to do to get to school.
Can you suggest ways that might ensure Alex achieves all of these in the morning?

Read through the list below and draw a picture in your notebook to match the activity.

Bus leaves at the end of the road at 8.15

Walking to school will take Alex 15 minutes

School starts at 8.50

Breakfast takes 10 minutes

Alex has a shower in the morning

Alex wakes at 7 am

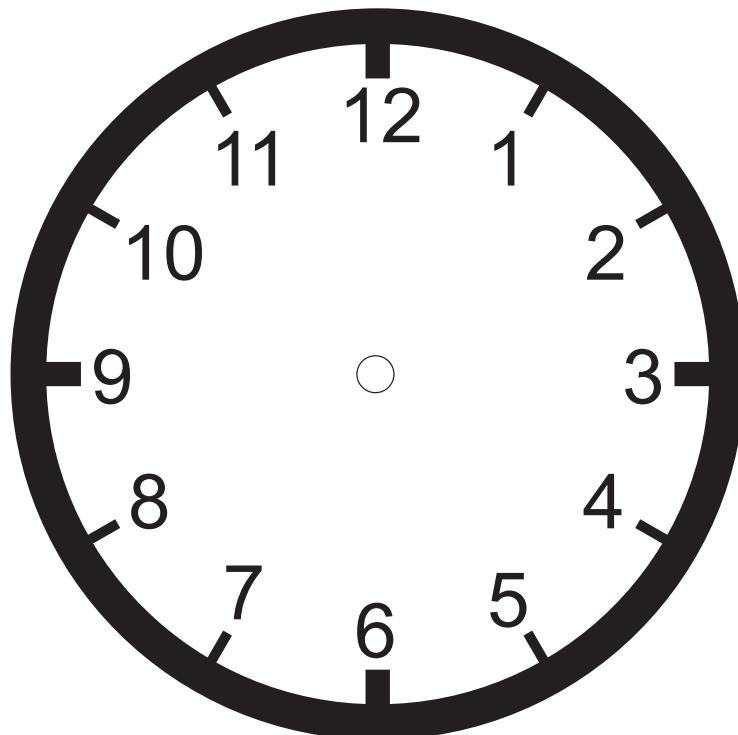
Alex brushes teeth

Alex gets dressed

Alex puts the school bag and PE bag at the front door

Alex gets his lunch from the kitchen

Draw a clock in the space below or use a paper plate and place all the activities Alex has to do before leaving the house and being on time for school:



SuperValu

At SuperValu our ambition is to build more inclusive communities across Ireland. Our work with AsIAm and Middletown Centre for Autism has opened our eyes to what we can do to ensure we use our unique position in the heart of Irish towns to make positive changes across the entire community



Autism Friendly Shopping

SuperValu offer Autism Friendly shopping across Ireland.

Stores dim the lights, cut the music, and turn off any loudspeaker announcements for the comfort of customers during these times.



Autism Friendly Communities

At SuperValu our ambition is to build more inclusive communities across Ireland.

This is a project we are very excited about and proud to be supporting and we look forward to supporting its rollout to more communities.

Autism Friendly COVID-19 Public Understanding	Autism Friendly Shopping & Social Distancing	Autism Friendly TOP 10 TIPS for the Autism Community in Managing COVID-19
FREE DOWNLOAD	FREE DOWNLOAD	FREE DOWNLOAD
Autism Friendly Self-isolation social story	Autism Friendly Lockdown Visual Guide	Autism Friendly TOP TIPS for utilizing special interests
SELF-ISOLATION SOCIAL STORY	LOCKDOWN VISUAL GUIDE	TOP TIPS FOR UTILIZING SPECIAL INTERESTS

Autism Friendly Support Tools

SuperValu know that at this time, autistic people and their families may be facing more challenges than usual.

With AsIAm we have developed a range of resources to help you familiarise yourself with the changes instore.

Visit SuperValu's Autism Friendly Hub at

supervalu.ie/real-people/autism-friendly/autism-friendly-shopping-hub

At the link you can download this book, the activities and all our Autism Friendly resources.

Additional Resources & Bibliography

Scan the QR code opposite for additional resources on:

- Executive Functions
- Organisation
- Task Analysis
- Reinforcement
- Self regulation: Emotional and Sensory
- Motor Skills
- Social Communication



Bibliography

The full bibliography developed in the creation of this book is available to view by scanning the QR code to the left.

Want to print the activities?

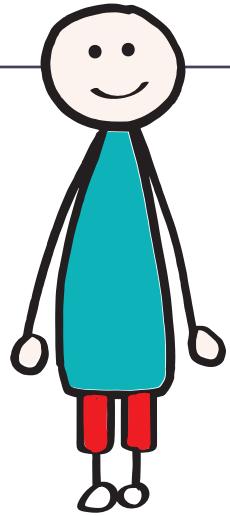
The full book is available to download by scanning the QR code to the right.

Further activities and explainers by Alex are available on AsIAm.ie and by scanning the code to the right.



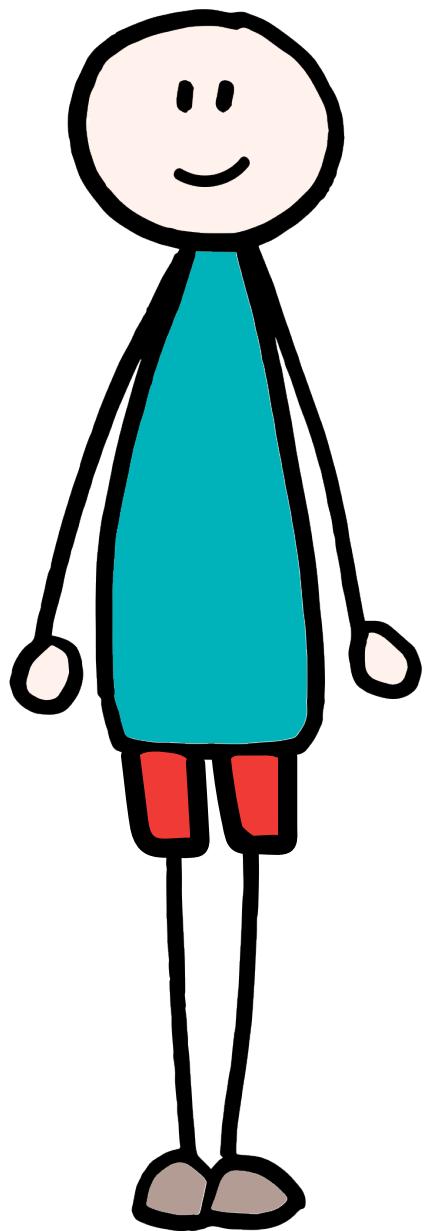
Time to say goodbye!

Use this space to draw a picture of yourself going back to school!



Notes

Notes





See you
soon, good
luck in
school!



SuperValu

