



Autism Toolkit

An information guide for supporting autistic learners at Peebles High School.

This guide is for young people, parents/carers and staff.

Different terms are used to describe autism. Many autistic people prefer 'identity first' language e.g. autistic person rather than person with autism. Peebles High School (PHS) will use the term 'autistic learner' to describe young people. The term Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) has replaced Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) because the term 'disorder' conflicts with the understanding that autism is a difference, not a deficit. However, if a young person or their family expresses a preference for a particular term, this will be respected.

Every autistic learner has their own unique profile of strengths, abilities and challenges and approaches to support should be responsive to the individual. With neuro-affirming practice (the right understanding and adjustments) autistic learners can participate, engage meaningfully, be their authentic selves and thrive in school.

PHS is committed to improving the experience of autistic learners. This toolkit has been written by the ASC working group made up of Tweeddale cluster teaching staff, parents/carers and the Educational Psychology and Autism Outreach services. The views of young people were gathered by these services. The aim of the toolkit is to help our school community support our autistic learners to achieve their potential. In addition, the working group developed a school policy (link below) as well as this toolkit to help parents/carers and young people through their secondary education journey.

<https://peebleshighschool.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Autism-Policy-.pdf>

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|--------|
| 1. Support strategies | |
| • Strategies for Autistic Learners | p4-6 |
| • Information and Strategies for Young People to Support Autistic Peers | p7-10 |
| • Strategies for Parents/Carers | p11-12 |
| • Strategies for Teachers and School Staff | p13-17 |
| 2. ICT/iPad tools to support accessing and engaging with the curriculum and assessments | P18 |
| 3. Assessment and SQA Exam Support Arrangements | p19-20 |
| 4. Study Skills | p21 |
| 5. Where to get support | p22-23 |
| 6. Moving to and from high school | p24-25 |
| 7. Appendix 1 - Examples of Sensory Items | P26-27 |
| 8. Bibliography | P28 |

1. Support strategies

Please note, these strategies can be used to support young people who have/are in the assessment process/don't have an autism identification. Support is based on need, not diagnosis.

Strategies for Autistic Learners:

Asking for Help

- Ask your teacher for help! They are there to support you. Ask in a way that works for you such as speaking to them, sending an email or message, asking for a 1:1 check in etc
- Teachers use different strategies to help - tell them which ones work best for you.
- Sometimes you may want to pretend things are okay when they are not (this is called 'masking'), but your teachers can help if you tell them what works for you. It's okay to let someone know if you are struggling

Managing the Classroom Environment

- Your teacher will try to maintain a calm, supportive classroom but if the environment is making you feel anxious (e.g. noise, lights, layout etc), tell someone (your classroom teacher, your Pastoral teacher or your parent/carer)
- If the seating is difficult for you, let your teacher know where you feel most comfortable sitting in the room
- Choose what works best for you and helps you feel comfortable in class

Homework, Assessments and Learning

- If you are feeling anxious about homework and/or assessments, talk to you teacher, they will understand and try to help
- Choose a quiet and supportive space to study when you need to focus

- If you are worried about your learning in general, speak to your Pastoral teacher. They can help by talking to your subject teachers for you
- Talk to your Pastoral teacher if you think you would benefit from leaving class early to avoid crowds

Tools to Help You Feel Safe and Regulated

- **Early transitions** - arrange to leave class slightly early to avoid crowded corridors during busy times
- **Quiet space** - ask to take a brief break in an agreed calm area when feeling overwhelmed
- **Grounding object** - use a small sensory item to support self-regulation (See Appendix 1)
- **Written instructions** - ask for written or visual instructions to be provided when verbal directions feel difficult to process
- **Predictable routines** - there may be a classroom routine in place, but you can create your own routine to set up your table, ready for the lesson
- **Trusted adult check-in** - check-in with a designated trusted adult like your Pastoral teacher when needed
- **Discreet break signal** - a discreet signal or card can be used to indicate when a short break is required
- **Preferred seating** - ask the teacher to arrange seating in a location that helps you feel comfortable and secure
- **Noise regulation and sensory supports** (See Appendix 1) - use earbuds, loops, headphones, fidgets etc during independent tasks or in noisy environments

- **Grounding strategies** - use techniques e.g. breathing exercises, tracing your hand etc when you feel overwhelmed. This will help you feel calm so you are ready to learn
- **Safety script** - a small card with calming reminders to support emotional safety. Flashcards and notes can help to remind you of strategies that help you

Information and Strategies for Young People to Support Autistic Peers

Understanding

- Autism is a different way of thinking and sensing the world, not something to "fix"
- Autistic people may communicate, move or learn differently
- Differences aren't the same as problems

What this means for you:

- Don't judge autistic learners, don't assume they are rude, weird, or shy
- Ask, don't guess

Communicating Respectfully

Do:

- Use **clear, direct** language instead of vague hints e.g. say, "Do you want to join our group?" instead of "You *can* come if you want..."
- Give extra time for processing if they don't answer right away
- Ask what they prefer:
"Do you like texting or talking?"
"Is it okay if I ask about this?"

Don't:

- Pressure them to make eye contact
- Tease about tone of voice, stimming or interests

Being a Good Friend

Include

- Invite them to games, chats or group activities - but accept "no" without pushing

- Make space for their interests. If they love astronomy or trains, it's okay to talk about it, show an interest

Respect boundaries

Autistic learners may say:

- "I need a break"
- "Too loud"
- "I'm not comfortable with that"

These are not rejections, they are self-care.

Sensory Awareness

Many autistic people experience the world more intensely.

Common stressors:

- Loud noises
- Bright lights
- Crowded hallways
- Strong smells
- Being touched unexpectedly

How you can help:

- Offer quiet places to sit at lunch or groupwork time
- Make space during loud or chaotic moments
- Don't grab or touch without permission

School and Groupwork Tips

- Let your peer choose their role in a group e.g. writing, researching, organising
- Share instructions in writing if possible
- If they're overwhelmed, offer to explain the task one-to-one
- Be patient with changes in energy or focus

Supporting During Stress or Meltdowns

A meltdown is not a tantrum — it's overload.

What to do:

- Stay calm
- Offer space: "Do you want quiet or company?"
- Remove extra stress (loud music, questions, pressure)
- Don't take it personally

Don't:

- Don't touch them unless they say it's okay
- Don't crowd, scold or joke

Celebrate Their Strengths

Autistic peers often have amazing qualities such as:

- Deep creativity
- Strong memory
- Honesty
- Passion for their interests
- Unique problem-solving

Recognize and encourage these. A sincere compliment goes a long way.

How to Be an Ally

- Speak up if others tease or exclude them
- Correct myths - autism doesn't mean they don't want friends, not all autistic learners communicate the same way
- Ask how you can support - "Is there anything that would make this easier for you?"

Things You Can Say

- "Take your time — no rush"
- "It's okay if you need a break"
- "Let me know how I can help"

- "I like having you around"
- "Your idea is really clever"

Summary

- Respect their communication
- Be patient
- Give space when needed
- Include them naturally
- Reduce sensory overload
- Ask about their preferences
- Celebrate differences

Strategies for Parents/Carers:

Communication with School

- Information is shared between primary and secondary colleagues during transitions e.g. P7 or change of school
- Parents/carers should share any additional information and updates with your child's Pastoral teacher
- Your child may find changes in routine difficult so having as much information as possible helps to prepare them for changes in school
- Communicate with your child's Pastoral teacher regularly to stay informed and involved in your child's education

Supporting Emotional Wellbeing

- Be aware of the 'coke can phenomenon' - your child may mask their struggles all day in school and show their distress at home, or the other way round
- Discuss any changes in behaviour or emotional wellbeing with school staff to ensure joined-up support

Routines and Organisation

- Use calendars, checklists, visual schedules and routines to help with your child's organisation and reduce anxiety
- Look at your child's school timetable with them and consider creating a visual timetable together to help them understand their week

Supporting Sensory and Regulation Needs (See Appendix 1)

- Provide items that help your child regulate such as fidget objects or noise-cancelling headphones (if they find these helpful)
- Communicate with your child's Pastoral teacher to ensure these items can be used as needed during the school day

Uniform and Clothing

- Talk to your child about the school uniform - what are they comfortable wearing and how does this align with the PHS uniform policy?
- Sensory sensitivities may make certain fabrics or styles difficult to tolerate. Discuss adaptations with the school if needed

Preparing for Physical and Developmental Changes

- Adolescence brings changes in body development and hygiene routines
- Prepare your child early by gradually introducing items such as deodorant, sanitary products or razors so they can explore and adjust to any sensory challenges
- Early exposure helps reduce anxiety and gives time to build comfort before these items become essential

Strategies for Teachers and School Staff:

Responsive, Relationship-Based Practice

- Build strong relationships through regular check-ins with learners, seeking and responding to the young person's voice e.g. through surveys, conversations etc
- Take time to listen and validate learners' experiences. View situations from the young person's perspective
- Use humour sensitively and relationally, based on knowledge of the learner

Understanding Autism and the Individual Learner

- All teachers (including supply teachers) know who our autistic learners are
- They have access to information about young people on the school electronic information management system (SEEMiS) and the whole school tracker. Regularly review learner information to ensure strategies remain relevant
- Every autistic learner has a highlighted box on the register with information to support them e.g. permission to use a fidget object
- Teachers understand that not all autistic learners are the same
- There is no such thing as 'autistic behaviour' - all behaviour communicates something
- Engage in forward planning to anticipate needs and reduce barriers.
- Focus on the strengths of autistic learners - autism is not a deficit, it is a difference
- Individual differences and experiences should be respected
- Diversity should be highlighted and celebrated
- Encourage open dialogue with young people to meet their needs - get to know them

- Autistic learners may 'mask' challenges - be alert to signs of this
- Be aware of the 'chameleon phenomenon' - learners may appear fine at school but show distress elsewhere (or vice versa)
- Reflect on your practice and classroom environment to meet the needs of autistic learners
- Signpost and utilise evidence-based resources e.g. EPIC (Edinburgh University) to support staff and families

Creating a Supportive Environment

- All autistic learners should feel valued and secure
- Be predictable in your actions - this helps to build trust
- Having clear structure, routines and expectations reduces confusion and anxiety
- The PHS Learning Structure helps autistic learners know what to expect
- Provide advance notice of changes (e.g. room changes, assessments, staffing)
- Classroom displays should not be too 'busy' - aim for a clutter-free environment
- Consider the classroom environment - sounds, smells, lighting, layout and visual aesthetic. Use adjustable lighting e.g. dimmers where possible and reduce noise and clutter. Maintain consistent classroom layouts, routines and structures to reduce anxiety and support regulation
- A consistent seating plan helps - ensure learners can hear and see you and sit them near the front if this is what they prefer. Use seating plans sensitively, balancing predictability with flexibility based on individual need
- Use visual supports, these benefit a wide range of learners, not just autistic ones

- Make use of the resources in the accessibility boxes in the Pupil Support faculty
- Ensure the curriculum is accessible
- Review strategies regularly to ensure they remain effective
- Use tools like *The Circle Inclusive Classroom Scale (Physical Environment)* to audit practice

Communication and Instruction

- Pre-teach or explain expectations in advance to avoid uncertainty
- Instructions (both written and verbal) should be short and concise, slow down speech, stress key words
- Use structured routines (e.g. cue cards, predictable lesson formats)
- Agree individual communication supports (e.g. cue words/signals where appropriate)
- Differentiate across the whole class to avoid stigma
- Give thinking time to process information
- Give time for the completion of written work
- Break down tasks into manageable steps
- Use visuals to support understanding
- Encourage the use of accessibility tools as appropriate
- If an autistic learner is dysregulated, reduce language
- Some autistic learners have a very literal understanding of language. It is important the communication is concise and unambiguous
- Be mindful that responses from autistic young people may come across as abrupt or rude, do not take this personally

Addressing Anxiety and Emotional Wellbeing

- Be aware that autistic learners often experience more anxiety than their neurotypical peers

- Normalise and support self-regulation strategies, such as breathing techniques (e.g. tracing hand, paced breathing) and use of sensory tools
- Reassure learners that regulation strategies are valid and supported
- Ensure time and space for emotional expression when needed
- Allow for 'bad' days - anxiety levels may vary
- Anxiety can affect sleep and concentration - pass on any concerns to Pastoral staff
- Building self-esteem is key, positive responses from staff can reduce anxiety
- Autistic learners may be anxious about homework and assessments - discuss expectations and have consistent homework routines
- Use 'now' and 'next' strategies to support lesson transitions
- Provide structured choice where appropriate, avoiding overwhelm. Be mindful that some learners benefit from adult-directed grouping for clarity and reduced anxiety and while others benefit from guided choice
- Apply professional judgement based on individual need rather than a one-size-fits-all approach

Sensory Needs and Stimming - hyper and hypo sensitivity

- Autistic learners may process and experience sensation differently
- They may cover their ears/eyes, retreat, rock, flap, chew, jump, run, hide or make sounds. These are known as 'stimming' behaviours
- Stimming helps them self-regulate - do not discourage it unless it causes harm
- Allow movement breaks

- Offer a range of sensory supports, such as noise-reducing options e.g. earbuds, loops, headphones (offering choice and dignity) and access to quiet fidgets (See Appendix 1)
- Teach young people about sensory differences and how to respond supportively

Motivation, Strengths and Learning Styles

- Autistic learners may have personal motivators. Incorporate learners' these to enhance engagement and motivation
- Use a range of approaches to meet diverse needs (visual, practical, verbal)
- Autistic learners may have a strong vocabulary but struggle with inference and understanding vocabulary in context
- Poor organisation skills are not a sign of lack of effort - offer support, use visuals and timers

Transitions and Events

- Be mindful that transitions can mean environment (a change from one class to another), activity (moving on to another activity), year group and even thought (a change of concept or a different opinion)
- Some situations will require additional planning:
 - breaks and lunchtimes
 - trips and excursions
 - outside learning experiences
 - Open Day visits

2. ICT/iPad tools to support accessing and engaging with the curriculum and assessments

Technology can help to support the needs of autistic learners when used along with other strategies. Some autistic learners may find putting a pencil on a piece of paper challenging due to feeling under pressure not to make mistakes, sensory issues or they need support with fine motor skills. This can result in paper being ripped up and distressed behaviour. Others are unable to focus, work independently, understand the task presented or have difficulty planning and formulating their ideas. Some may have underlying additional literacy issues that means they have low levels of reading ability.

Every learner in PHS has their own iPad which has accessibility tools to help autistic learners. Click on the links below to find out more.

<https://www.thinglink.com/scene/1779901798782337701>

[Student Guides - YouTube](#)

3. Assessment and SQA Exam Support Arrangements

Autistic learners may need specific arrangements in their exams and assessments. Some autistic learners require more than others and in some but not necessarily in all subjects.

We ask teachers to think about the specific needs of each autistic learner and to gather evidence for each subject and level. This is because each autistic learner is different – even with the same difficulties as their peer, they may not need the same type of support. This is what we call a 'needs-led' approach.

The evidence to support the assessment arrangement (AA) is analysed by the moderation team - decisions are not just based on the nature of being an autistic learner, but also on how they learn, and what effect these arrangements have on their ability to demonstrate what they've learned.

All assessment arrangements should be normal classroom practice and there is no guarantee of AA without evidence.

The following are examples of AAs which could be used to support autistic learners, **depending on the needs of the young person concerned and pending evidence from class teachers:**

- Adapted paper e.g. coloured paper, modified font size and style and line spacing
- Extra time (usually 25%) - due to it taking longer to re-read questions and process information
- PC without spellcheck e.g. when a learner has poor/illegible handwriting or if this is the learner's preferred learning style
- Prompt - may be required when a learner has little/no sense of time or has significant concentration difficulties
- Reader - speech to text software e.g. Ivona MiniReader will be encouraged as much as possible

- Scribe - ICT will be encouraged, as much as possible, and learners should use laptops/iPad keyboards as standard practice
- Stop-the-clock breaks - may be required if an autistic learner is feeling overwhelmed or anxious, to allow them to self-regulate. The duration of breaks (which are taken as and when learners require) are noted by the invigilator and the time added on at the end
- Use of noise-cancelling headphones

The assessment arrangements for each young person will be shared with them and their parents/carers prior to exams. Communication between the school/young people and their parents/carers helps to alleviate any potential additional stress.

4. Study Skills

Autistic learners learn in a different way and may take longer to process and remember information.

Tips for studying:

- Create a personalised study environment that is sensory-friendly - think about distractions and how to minimise these
- Use different coloured folders for each subject
- Use Post-it notes to summarise notes e.g. a very short sentence or drawing might help
- Work out what time of day suits the learner best to study
- Study little and often - 10/20 min bursts
- Start with the basics and build up understanding
- Keep notes to a minimum
- Use flash cards - key points on one side and on the other side draw a reminder, then test knowledge
- Use mind maps and make notes (write down information)
- Look at past papers and underline the keywords of the task
- Make 'to do' lists
- Make a study timetable (include breaks)
- Some autistic learners like to listen to music when they study
- Familiarise yourself with your exam venue ahead of time - doing a walkthrough of the exam location can alleviate anxiety and enable autistic learners to concentrate on the exam content, rather than feeling stressed about the environment

5. Where to get support

Peebles High School is dedicated to supporting autistic learners.

Class teachers - have autistic learners in their classes. Teachers will help to identify, support and closely monitor **all** learners. Teachers want to help all young people achieve their potential.

Pupil Support Faculty -

- every young person in PHS has a Pastoral teacher who will support them throughout their time in school. Parents/carers can contact Pastoral staff with any concerns, including potential autism identification. Pastoral staff will also offer emotional support to young people
- Support for Learning (SfL) teachers and Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs) can help with suitable classroom strategies and study skills for autistic learners and carry out classroom observations and consultations with subject teachers to ensure the correct support is in place. PSAs may be in classes as part of shared support
- staff in the Glen provide consistent support for their learners and work closely with families, the wider community and associated professionals

Child and Adult Mental Health Service (CAMHS) - parents/carers of young people with an identification of autism can contact CAMHS for support.

SBC Autism Teacher Service - young people who have an identification of autism can be referred to this service. This can be done by Pastoral staff.

You can find more information on these websites:

<https://differentminds.scot/>

www.autismtoolbox.co.uk

<https://www.neurodivergenceconnect.co.uk/post/embracing-difference-supporting-neurodivergent-learners-without-assumption-or-judgment>

[Home - Epic Think Learn](#)

https://nas.chorus.thirdlight.com/file/24/xT2FqU_xTq.MH1LxTXUAxTdQY3I/Autistic-Sensory-Experiences-resource.pdf

6. Moving to and from high school

Primary transition

Support for Learning (SfL) staff across the cluster (primary and secondary) work together to ensure that information and strategies used for individual young people are shared.

Pupil Cards/Passports

- agreed use across the cluster schools
- same format for all schools
- agreed timing for when to be completed/updated to send to PHS

Strategies Sheet/Transition Profile

- agreed use across the cluster schools
- agreed timing for when to be completed/updated to send to PHS

Information Evening for Parents/Carers

- open to parents/carers of all neurodivergent P7 pupils

Enhanced transition programme

- extra visits with parents/carers
- meeting with older autistic learners already at PHS/question and answer opportunities
- extra tour of school with focus on quiet areas/safe spaces/where to go if help needed
- opportunity to see clubs on offer

Information to continue to be shared from Primary to Secondary

- P7 class teacher meetings with Pastoral staff
- P7 class teacher Aide Memoires

- Primary Head/Deputes discuss children at PHS School Liaison Group (SLG) meeting
- Primary SfL and PHS SfL teachers meet
- PHS SfL/Pastoral staff invited to Meetings Around the Child (MACs) where appropriate
- Liaison with the SBC Autism Outreach Service

Transition between Year Groups

Pastoral staff coordinate support for autistic learners during year group transitions.

- Timetables are shared as early as possible
- Pastoral staff liaise with parents/carers and class teachers during course choice times
- If appropriate, introductions to new teachers may take place prior to the change of timetable

16+ Transition

Pupil Support staff (Pastoral, SfL, Inclusion and The Glen) work together and with wider school staff to support autistic learners during their time at Peebles High School. Planning and supporting a young person's transition to the next phase of their life will begin timeously and will involve parents/carers and external partners such as Skills Development Scotland (SDS), Community Learning Development (CLD), No One Left Behind (NOLB), further/higher education establishments, Volunteer Centre Borders, Social Work etc.

7. Appendix 1

Examples of Sensory Items

Auditory (Sound) Supports

To reduce noise and overwhelm

- Noise-reducing earbuds e.g. loops-style
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Foam earplugs (discreet option)
- Access to quiet spaces for study or regulation

Tactile (Touch) Supports

To support focus and self-regulation

- Small fidget tools e.g. fidget cubes, tangle toys
- Stress balls or putty
- Textured items e.g. fabric strips, Velcro, keyrings
- "Silent fidgets" for classroom use

Visual Supports

To reduce visual stress and support processing

- Coloured overlays or reading rulers
- Adjustable screen brightness/blue light filters
- Access to uncluttered workspaces
- Visual timetables or cue cards

Movement & Proprioceptive Supports

To help regulate energy and body awareness

- Resistance bands on chair legs
- Access to movement breaks
- Carrying/heavy work tasks e.g. moving books
- Weighted lap pads (where appropriate)

Comfort & Regulation Items

To support emotional regulation

- Hoodie or familiar clothing for comfort
- Water bottle (hydration can support regulation)
- Chewable items (safe, designed sensory chews)

- Personal 'calm kit' (small pouch with chosen items)

Environmental Adaptations

Whole-class inclusive supports

- Adjustable lighting (lamps, dimmers where possible)
- Seating options (edge of class, quieter areas)
- Reduced clutter and clear organisation
- Access to a low-stimulation space when needed

8. Bibliography

https://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Equality-Act-2010-Technical-guidance-for-schools-in-Scotland-2015_0.pdf

<https://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Scottish-Educational-Context-of-Inclusion-and-Equality-November-2019.pdf>

<https://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Legislative-and-Policy-Framework-Summary.pdf>

SBC Includes -

[Inclusion Policy FRAMEWORK FOR STAGED INTERVENTION Revised Jan 2022.docx](#)

<https://scotborders.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/IntranetContent/INCLUSION%20FRAMEWORK%20FINAL%20Jan%202020.pdf#search=inclusion%20framework>

<https://scotborders.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/IntranetContent/Inclusion%20Policy%20March%202020-FINAL.pdf#search=inclusion%20framework>

Getting it Right For Every Child -

<https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/>

<https://differentminds.scot/>

