



**Ambitious
about Autism**

Parent resource

Autistic and **OK**



Guidebook for parents and carers

STELLANTIS

Contents

Autistic and OK: Primary School	3
Other helpful resources for parents and carers	4
How to talk about autism with your child	5
Planning your conversation	5
Setting the scene	5
Talking about autism	5
Continued support.....	6
Recognising early signs of stress	6
After-school decompression	7
Support in school	8
What does good support look like in school?.....	8
Education, health and care (EHC) plans	8
Expressing needs and asking for help	10
Transitioning into secondary school	12
APPENDIX A: Reasonable adjustments menu	15
APPENDIX B: Top tips from parents and carers	20





Autistic and OK: Primary School

Building on the success of the Autistic and OK programme for secondary schools, Autistic and OK: Primary School helps children get the right understanding and support earlier in their school journey.

Many autistic pupils find school difficult at times. They may struggle to have their needs understood, find friendships hard, feel overwhelmed by noise, change or busy environments, or experience stress and anxiety that build over time. We know that getting the right support early can make a big difference.

That is why we created the Autistic and OK programme for secondary schools, to help autistic young people understand themselves, look after their mental health and wellbeing, and feel more OK in school. The secondary programme has been successful in reaching schools across the UK and showing the value of giving autistic young people tools, language and support that help them feel understood and more confident in managing school life.

The Autistic and OK: Primary School programme is designed to help primary schools build a community where autistic children feel understood, accepted and able to be themselves. It aims to support children in some of the areas that can feel hardest in primary school, including belonging, feelings, friendships, stress, asking for help and preparing for the move to secondary school.

This Guidebook for parents and carers is part of the wider Autistic and OK: Primary School programme. It has been created to offer simple, practical advice and tools to help you support your child in everyday school life, and in some of the moments that can feel more challenging.

The guide is intended to sit alongside the wider programme, which also includes pupil resources, staff training and webinars for parents and carers. You do not need to read it all at once. You can dip into the sections that feel most useful for you and your child.

Like the secondary school programme, Autistic and OK: Primary School is being shaped with autistic young people and other key contributors so that it's grounded in lived experience, practical for schools and focused on what really helps children feel more OK in school.

Other helpful resources for parents and carers

If you're at an earlier stage in understanding your child's needs, or your child has been recently identified as autistic, you may find our **Right from the Start** toolkit helpful. This practical resource brings together straightforward information for parents and carers of younger children, including the autism assessment process, information on starting school, practical tips, checklists and links to further support. Please note that this toolkit was last updated in 2020, so some information may not reflect current guidance or services, but may still be a helpful starting point.



For families in England, **IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice)** offers free information, legal guides, template letters and support on SEND law, including school support, Education, health and care (EHC) plans (see page 8), mediation and First-tier Tribunal (Special Educational Needs and Disability) appeals. If you would like more detailed advice about your child's legal rights and entitlements in education, you may find their resources helpful. You can find them **here**.



How to talk about autism with your child

Planning your conversation

The tips below are helpful, whether your child has a formal diagnosis of autism or not. You can adapt the phrases and language used, to best suit your own circumstances and knowledge of your child.

Setting the scene

It can be helpful to think about how your child prefers to communicate and where they might feel the most comfortable. When having big conversations with an autistic child or young person, you might want to:

- Check in with them first about how they're feeling. If they've had a bad day, or are feeling tired or overwhelmed, it might not be the best time to have a conversation with them.
- Have the conversation while doing an activity they enjoy, such as colouring, going for a walk or playing a game.
- Instead of one long conversation, consider having a series of shorter conversations over time.

Talking about autism

We would always recommend keeping your language simple and concrete when talking about autism. Metaphors - where you describe something by comparing it to something else, rather than saying exactly what you mean, can sometimes be confusing for children. For example, saying "your brain is like a superpower" or "you see the world through a different lens" may sound positive, but it might not be clear what that actually means. Instead, try simple phrases like "autism means your brain works differently".

- Start with a general question like 'what do you think being autistic means?'
- Listen to and validate your child's feelings and experiences – they might feel confused or worried, or feel nothing at all – and that's all OK.

- Prepare simple examples that show a balanced view of autism, like ‘some autistic people might find it harder to play in loud places but might be very good at learning about their interests’. You might want to ask your child what they find more difficult and what they think they’re good at.

Continued support

- **Leave space to ask questions**

Autistic children might process the information they have learned at different speeds. Let them know it’s OK to come back to the conversation. You might want to give them a journal or sketchbook where they can write down or draw their questions.

- **Revisit the conversation**

It may be helpful to revisit the conversation after a few days or even weeks. You could start by asking if they remember the conversation you had before. You can also check to see if they have any worries or questions they want to talk about.

- **Offer to learn more about autism together**

As a parent or carer, you might also have questions about autism, or your child may ask questions you don’t know the answer to. You could spend some time with your child looking at videos or reading about autism together to answer those questions.

Recognising early signs of stress

Sometimes, autistic children may not say directly that school is feeling hard. Instead, stress can show up in other ways. These signs can build gradually, so you may notice patterns over time:

- tummy aches, headaches or feeling unwell before school
- changes in sleep or appetite
- becoming more tearful, irritable or tired after school
- seeming very quiet or withdrawn
- more meltdowns or shutdowns at home
- not wanting to go to school or becoming anxious on Sunday evenings or in the mornings
- finding it harder than usual to cope with small changes or demands.

These signs do not always mean there is one single problem, but they can be a sign that school is becoming stressful or overwhelming. If you notice changes, it can help to gently track when they happen and share this information with the school.

After-school decompression

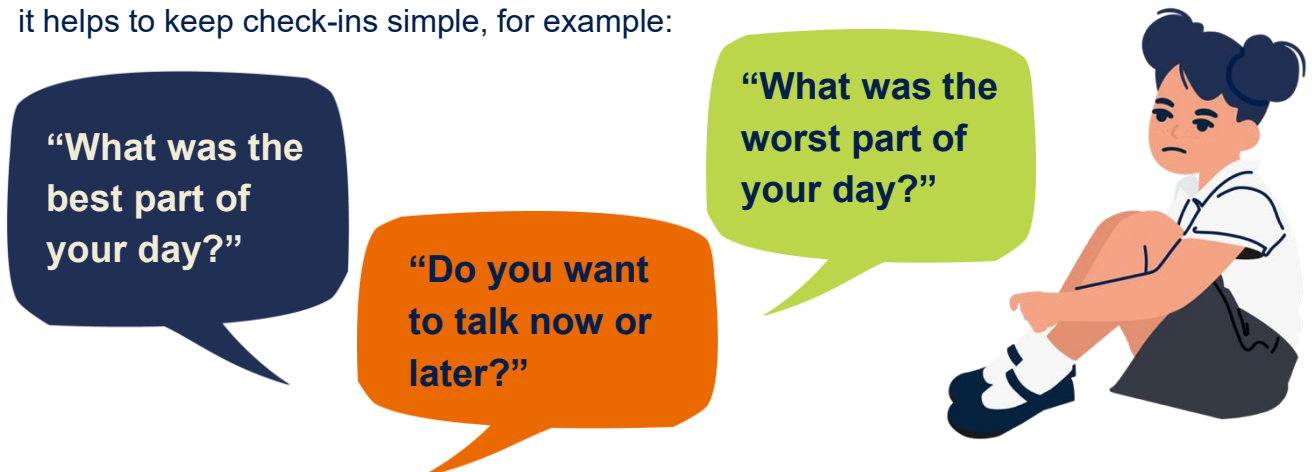
Many autistic children use a lot of energy getting through the school day. Even if school has gone 'well', they may need time to decompress (recover) afterwards. This can mean they:

- do not want to talk straight away
- seem more irritable, tired or emotional after school
- need quiet, movement, sensory input or time alone
- find homework or extra demands hard after a full school day.

It can help to build in a simple decompression routine after school. This might include:

- a snack and quiet time
- movement or outdoor time
- favourite sensory activities
- time with no questions or demands
- a predictable routine before homework or evening activities.

Your child may not always be able to talk about their day straight away. Sometimes, it helps to keep check-ins simple, for example:



Support in school

What does good support look like in school?

Individual

Reasonable adjustments (see Appendix A) are changes or support put in place to help your child access school more comfortably and successfully. These might include things like visual timetables, movement breaks, quiet spaces or support with transitions. Reasonable adjustments are not a “one size fits all” approach. The support that schools put in place should be tailored to your child and the way that autism affects them individually.

The ‘Reasonable adjustments menu’ in Appendix A provides a detailed list of possible support strategies and adjustments that may help your child in school. It can be used to help you think about what support might be useful, identify what is already working well and prepare for conversations or meetings with school staff about the support your child may need.

Timely

Once support is agreed upon, ask your child’s school to give you a timeline for how long it will take to put in place. Reasonable adjustments should be implemented as soon as possible.

Flexible

Check in with your child about what is working well and what might need to change. Reasonable adjustments should be changed if they aren’t working well.

Consistent

Reasonable adjustments should be recognised and put in place by all staff working with your child, not just your child’s main classroom teacher.

Education, health and care (EHC) plans

What is an EHC plan?

An EHC plan is a legally binding document provided by the local authority that sets out the needs of a child or young person, outlining the different types of support they will receive at school or in their education provision.

Support without an EHC plan

Your child is still entitled to support in school even if they do not have an EHC plan. Schools are recommended to follow the 'Assess, Plan, Do, Review' cycle of applying support for children. The Statutory guidance for organisations which work with and support children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities can be found [here](#).

Support with an EHC plan

The EHC plan must make clear what support your child or young person needs. The support provided should not be left up to your child's school. If you're unhappy with the contents of your child's plan, you can ask for it to be changed at the next annual review, during mediation or by appealing it in the First-tier Tribunal (Special Educational Needs and Disability). You can find out more [here](#).

Our top 10 quick adjustments

- 1 Visual timetables** help increase predictability throughout the school day and are clear and easy to understand.
- 2 Time-out passes** can allow a child to take a break from a situation before they become overwhelmed.
- 3 Visual timers** can be used to support transitions between activities, lessons and break times.
- 4 Stim toys** in the classroom can help support a child to focus and manage sensory sensitivities.
- 5 Quiet spaces** either within the classroom or in another room can help give your child a space to take a break if they're feeling overwhelmed.
- 6 Movement breaks** planned throughout the day can be helpful in supporting children to focus and regulate their sensory systems.
- 7 Seating changes** to reduce sensitivities to light, sound, smell and movement.
- 8 Information in advance** that communicates changes to routine, seating plans, events or even staffing.
- 9 Structured activities** at break and lunchtime may support your child in otherwise unstructured periods.
- 10 Emotions thermometers** can help autistic children visualise their emotions and communicate them to their teacher.

Expressing needs and asking for help

Asking for help can be difficult, especially for autistic children. They may not know what help they can ask for, or their differences may make communicating their needs more challenging. You can help by:

Practising together

This could be by scripting how they might want to ask for help, acting out the conversation, or writing or drawing what they want to ask for. Repeatable ways to communicate what they need can help your child express themselves. You could practise phrases such as:

- 'I need help'
- 'I need a break'
- 'It's too loud'
- 'I'm worried'
- 'I don't understand'
- 'Can you say that another way?'

Starting small

Asking for big changes might be scary for your child at first. It's OK to start with small requests and build up to bigger questions. You could use our 'Reasonable adjustments menu' in Appendix A of this guidebook as a starting point.

Using different forms of communication

Verbal communication might be more difficult for some autistic children. Encourage them to use ways of communicating that feel right for them.

Celebrating and reassuring

When your child does express a need or asks for help, make sure to celebrate the step they have taken towards independence, and reassure them that asking was the right thing to do.

Reflecting on what works

Talking about support little and often can help your child reflect on what might be working and can let them know it's OK to say if something isn't working for them. A visual chart could help them organise adjustments into what is working and what isn't.

Friendships and play

Friendships can be one of the most enjoyable parts of school, but also one of the hardest. Autistic children may have different preferences around friendships and play.

For example, your child might:

- prefer one close friend rather than a large group
- enjoy parallel play or being near others without joining in fully
- like predictable games or repeated activities
- need more support to manage fallouts or misunderstandings
- enjoy spending time with adults as well as peers
- need time alone at break or after school.

There is no one 'right' way to socialise. What matters most is that your child feels safe, included and able to be themselves.

You can help by:

- talking about what a good friend feels like
- helping your child notice when a friendship feels kind and balanced
- keeping playdates short, structured and low pressure, if needed
- reminding your child that it's OK to like different kinds of play from other children
- supporting them with simple scripts for joining in, saying 'no' or moving away from difficult situations.



Transitioning into secondary school

Transitioning into secondary school can be both exciting and anxiety inducing for all children. For autistic children, they may require extra support in preparing for the changes both at home and at school, and the process may take longer than their first day of school.

For many children, primary school has been a familiar place for a long time. Even when parts of it have been difficult, it's still likely to feel known, predictable and safe. Leaving that can feel like a big loss as well as a big change.

It can help to remember that transition is a process, not a single event. Support may be needed before, during and after the move to secondary school.

To help, you could:

- **Identify key contacts** at your child's secondary school. This is most likely to be the school's SEND co-ordinator, but could also be a form tutor or the head of year.
- **Prepare information that will be useful for secondary school staff**, including your child's sensory needs, anything that may trigger overwhelm, communication tools and strategies that helped throughout primary school.
- **Plan extra visits** to your child's secondary school that will help them feel ready for the change.
- **Use a visual calendar** that clearly marks the date your child starts secondary school.
- **Create a photo book** of the new school, including buildings, individual classrooms and key members of staff, if possible.
- **Plan and practise the new journey** to school throughout the school holidays or earlier.
- **Wash new uniform items before the first day** and let your child wear and get used to them.

It's also important to create space for your child to share what they're worried about. They may feel anxious, uncertain or excited, or all of these at once. Letting them

know that it's OK to feel anxious can help. Sometimes, they may not need an answer straight away. They may just need to feel heard.

You can also help by celebrating milestone moments along the way, such as:

- visiting the new school
- meeting a new adult
- practising the journey
- trying on the uniform
- asking a question about the move.

These steps can help build confidence and remind your child that they're capable of managing change.

It's also important to recognise that your child may be leaving behind trusted adults, familiar routines and attachments in primary school. Reassure them that it can take time to build those relationships and routines again in secondary school, and that this is OK.

Your child's current school will be well placed to support you in planning for the move, but it's important to remember that transition support may still be needed in the days, weeks and even months after your child starts secondary school.

Every child's transition to secondary school is different, but many parents and carers have told us that early planning, clear communication and practical preparation made a real difference. A selection of the top tips and experiences they shared can be found in Appendix B.



Further support for parents and carers

If you would like more support, you can also explore the Autistic and OK parent and carer videos. These are short, webinar-style videos on themes that parents and carers have said they want more information about.

They include:

- **Reducing school anxiety and stress**

This includes early signs that school may be becoming too much, and strategies to help children talk about feelings and reduce school anxiety.

The webinar can be found on YouTube here:

<https://youtu.be/bEe0u6gPa3Y>

- **Supporting your child with friendships**

This includes practical ways to help your child build and maintain positive friendships, guidance on playdates and what to do if you're worried about bullying.

The webinar can be found on YouTube here:

<https://youtu.be/yBMUmEus7Rk>

APPENDIX A:

Reasonable adjustments menu

This menu is designed to help parents, carers and schools think about the kinds of reasonable adjustments that may support an autistic child in school. Not every child will need the same support, and adjustments should always be tailored to the individual child. You can find more information about what reasonable adjustments are and how they can help disabled pupils at school [here](#).

You can use this appendix to prepare for a meeting with the school, think about what is already working well, identify what might need to change and agree what to try next.

Please use the columns below to mark each adjustment as:

- already in place
- would like to try
- not needed right now.

1. Communication and understanding

Possible adjustment	Already in place	Would like to try	Not needed right now
Break instructions into smaller steps	☐	☐	☐
Check understanding without putting the child on the spot	☐	☐	☐
Give extra processing time before expecting a response	☐	☐	☐
Use visuals to support spoken information	☐	☐	☐
Repeat or rephrase instructions if needed	☐	☐	☐
Give information in advance, where possible	☐	☐	☐

Reduce the amount of verbal information given at one time	☐	☐	☐
---	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

2. Predictability, routine and transitions

Possible adjustment	Already in place	Would like to try	Not needed right now
Use a visual timetable	☐	☐	☐
Give warnings before transitions or changes	☐	☐	☐
Use countdowns or visual timers	☐	☐	☐
Prepare the child in advance for changes to routine, staffing or classroom arrangements	☐	☐	☐
Provide transition objects, prompts or visual supports	☐	☐	☐
Allow the child to move between spaces slightly earlier, if needed	☐	☐	☐
Provide a consistent structure where possible	☐	☐	☐

3. Sensory environment

Possible adjustment	Already in place	Would like to try	Not needed right now
Access to a quiet space or calm area	☐	☐	☐
Sensory tools such as fiddle toys, headphones or wobble cushions	☐	☐	☐
Seating changes to reduce sensory load	☐	☐	☐
Reduced exposure to noise, bright light or busy areas where possible	☐	☐	☐
Planned movement breaks	☐	☐	☐
Allowing the child to leave noisy environments before becoming overwhelmed	☐	☐	☐

Flexible uniform adjustments, where appropriate	☐	☐	☐
---	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

4. Emotional regulation and wellbeing

Possible adjustment	Already in place	Would like to try	Not needed right now
Regular check-ins during the week	☐	☐	☐
Use of a feelings chart or emotional regulation tool	☐	☐	☐
Time-out or exit card	☐	☐	☐
Support to recognise early signs of stress	☐	☐	☐
Calm-down plan for when things feel too much	☐	☐	☐
Opportunities to regulate before returning to learning	☐	☐	☐

5. Learning and classroom participation

Possible adjustment	Already in place	Would like to try	Not needed right now
Reduced quantity of work, where appropriate	☐	☐	☐
Extra time to complete tasks	☐	☐	☐
Visual examples or models	☐	☐	☐
Alternative ways of recording work	☐	☐	☐
Flexible grouping arrangements	☐	☐	☐
Reduced pressure to answer in front of the class	☐	☐	☐
Support with organisation and remembering equipment	☐	☐	☐

6. Friendships, play and social times

Possible adjustment	Already in place	Would like to try	Not needed right now
Planned activities and games at break and lunch	☐	☐	☐
Access to quiet or lower-demand play spaces	☐	☐	☐
Support with joining in or leaving activities	☐	☐	☐
Planned support from a trusted adult at social times	☐	☐	☐
A small group or club option at break/lunchtime	☐	☐	☐
Support to manage unstructured time	☐	☐	☐

7. Asking for help and self-advocacy

Possible adjustment	Already in place	Would like to try	Not needed right now
Help card or visual prompt to ask for support	☐	☐	☐
Time-out card	☐	☐	☐
Practised phrases for asking for help	☐	☐	☐
Regular opportunities to say what is working or not working	☐	☐	☐
A one-page profile or pupil passport	☐	☐	☐
Support to identify needs and preferences	☐	☐	☐
Choice in how to communicate concerns	☐	☐	☐
Encouragement to reflect on what helps	☐	☐	☐

8. What helps most?

Use this space to note the adjustments that seem most important for your child right now.

The adjustments that would help my child most are:	
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

9. Review questions

These questions can help when talking to the school:

- 1 What is already in place?
- 2 What is working well?
- 3 What is not working well?
- 4 What could we try next?
- 5 Who will be responsible for putting this in place?
- 6 When will we review it?

Notes:

APPENDIX B: Top tips from parents and carers

What helped your child prepare for secondary school?



We visited the school a few times together – Samantha-jade.



Seeing the school many times before, taking a photo of his form teacher so he knew who to expect and telling him about her. – Anonymous



Several visits to the new school in the lead-up to the move. The secondary school had a fun day where the new students got to know some of the staff and existing pupils. – Carole



A folder containing the following in Year 6:

- pictures of the school and layout of the buildings
- pictures of relevant staff
- behaviour policy
- details of who to go to for help.

– Anonymous



Visiting the school with the learning support assistant who supported him in primary school, building a strong connection with the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) before he started, and helping him become familiar with the school, the route and the support available all made a big difference. Sharing key information about him with staff in advance also helped to ensure the right adjustments were in place. – Anonymous



Having an EHC plan so that I knew what support he would be receiving. – Anonymous

What made the transition easier?



The secondary SENCO went above and beyond to support the transition and help my son feel safe. It was also helpful when higher level teaching assistant support was available, alongside staff seeking to understand the communication behind the behaviour and removing unhelpful pressure. – Liz



Commuting to school with a friend. – Anonymous



Working with the teachers and teaching assistants and keeping our child well informed and included in any conversations about moving on to secondary school. – Carole



- own locker
- quiet room specific to SEND pupils
- fantastic teaching assistants
- being able to go into class before others at the start of the day so as not to get overwhelmed
- being able to have a packed lunch in a separate area.

– Anonymous



He had lots of transition sessions so that he had fun at his new school and his head of year called me, as well as the SENCO, to run through his needs.
– Anonymous



Visiting the school, meeting the teachers so she got used to them and having tours around school. – Samantha-jade

Are there any top tips, strategies or routines that worked well?



Reduced timetable and calls home from a trusted adult to maintain connection. Ongoing mental health support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Trying to keep a healthy wake–sleep cycle and diet and exercise. Vitamin D gummy supplements for the months he wouldn't leave his bedroom or the house. – Liz



I always got up before him to make sure he had his toothbrush downstairs, his bag packed (I would write out his timetable) and a breakfast with protein. – Anonymous



The earlier you start talking about the move to secondary school, the better. Introduce yourself to the new teacher, SENCO and teaching assistant. Keep in regular contact so you can share any concerns from home and hear quickly about any issues in school. Highlighting problems early and working as a team with staff can make a real difference, as secondary school is a big transition. – Carole



He gets a taxi, which makes attending possible as he wouldn't be able to attend if he had to get the school bus. He can offload before and after school with the taxi team, which really helps him to cope with school. – Anonymous

