



Top 10 tips for autism-friendly schools

a different
brilliant[®]

Understanding,
engaging and celebrating
the strengths, interests and
aspirations of people
on the autism spectrum.

Creating an inclusive school environment benefits all students, especially Autistic learners. This guide offers 10 practical strategies to make schools more autism friendly, emphasising the importance of genuine accommodations and collaboration with students, families and support networks.

Here are Aspect's top 10 tips on how your school can create autism-friendly environments.



1. Foster a culture of inclusion

An inclusive school environment benefits everyone. Show students that diversity is valued by having a **statement of inclusion** and actively modelling self-support strategies. Ensure accommodations – like flexible seating, sensory tools or alternative communication methods – are available to all students, not just those with disabilities.

What might this look like?

- Posters that say, "Everyone is different, and everyone is welcome."
- Teachers openly using timers, movement breaks and noise-cancelling headphones to normalise accommodations.
- Peer understanding programs that celebrate neurodiversity.



2. Check in with the sensory environment

Many Autistic students experience sensory sensitivities. Reduce overwhelm by **adjusting what you can and pre-warning about what you can't**. Provide alternatives for sensory discomfort, like offering **gloves for messy activities** or **quiet spaces for breaks**.

What might this look like?

Ways you can accommodate sensory sensitivities could include:

- dim lighting or natural light alternatives instead of harsh fluorescent lights
- noise-reducing strategies like quiet corners, noise-cancelling headphones or limiting background music
- access to fidget tools and sensory breaks.



3. Make expectations clear

Autistic students may struggle with unspoken rules. **Explain the hidden curriculum** – unwritten social expectations that others intuitively understand. Regularly update students when rules or expectations change to avoid confusion.

What might this look like?

- Clear, written rules with visuals.
- Teachers explicitly explaining transitions, such as "When we go to assembly, we sit quietly and listen."
- Breaking down multi-step instructions into small, manageable chunks.



4. Talk about neurodiversity and different brains

Teach students that everyone's brain works differently. Discuss neurodiversity in a positive, strengths-based way to build acceptance and understanding.

What might this look like?

- Books and classroom discussions about different ways people think and learn.
- Encouraging students to share their own experiences of thinking differently.
- Acknowledge Neurodiversity Celebration Week and World Autism Understanding Day through classroom activities, assemblies or during breaks like morning tea.



5. Communicate transitions in the school routine

A predictable routine reduces anxiety. A **visual schedule** helps all students understand what's happening next and prepares them for transitions.

What might this look like?

- A classroom schedule with images or written words.
- Individualised schedules for students who need them.
- Using a "First, Then" chart to support transitions (e.g. "First math, then break time").

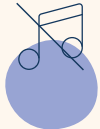


6. Allow time and patience

Some students need extra time to process information, respond or transition between activities. Patience from educators reduces stress and promotes confidence.

What might this look like?

- Teachers waiting 5–10 seconds after asking a question before expecting a response.
- Using timers or countdowns before transitions.
- Allowing flexible pacing for assignments and verbal responses.



7. Be proactive about meltdowns and shutdowns

Instead of trying to stop a meltdown in the moment, **prevent** sensory and emotional overload before it happens. Understanding triggers and having calming strategies in place can help avoid distress.

What might this look like?

- A designated **quiet space** students can use before reaching meltdown.
- Recognising early signs of distress (e.g. pacing, covering ears) and allowing movement breaks.
- A plan in place for when a student needs extra support.



8. Make communication accessible

Not all students communicate in the same way. **Be open to alternative and non-verbal communication**, including **gestures, pointing, body language, writing or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices**. **Remember that eye contact is not necessary for effective communication** – forcing it can be stressful and uncomfortable. Instead, focus on understanding the student's preferred way of expressing themselves.

What might this look like?

- A student using an iPad or speech-generating device to share thoughts.
- Teachers responding to a student pointing, nodding or reaching toward something as valid communication.
- Offering students the option to write or type responses instead of speaking.
- Allowing students to engage in conversation while looking away, rather than expecting direct eye contact.



9. Reduce visual clutter and support learning visually

Autistic students often benefit from **clear, visually structured environments**. Too many posters, bright colours or clutter can be overwhelming and distracting.

What might this look like?

- Classroom walls with minimal decoration and **organised spaces for different activities** (e.g. a clearly labelled reading area).
- Colour-coded materials to make instructions easier to follow.
- Visual aids like checklists, diagrams or graphic organisers for lessons.



10. Get autism training from Autistic people

The best way to understand autism is to **learn from Autistic people**. Training from Autistic consultants ensures schools are using practices that truly support Autistic students.

What might this look like?

- Schools inviting Autistic speakers or consultants for teacher training.
- Working with Autistic students and their families and support network (i.e. speech pathologist, occupational therapist, psychologist) to implement strategies in the classroom that work for the individual student.
- Making continuous improvements based on what works best for students.



Aspect schools

Creating an autism-friendly school environment is essential to ensuring that Autistic students feel supported, understood and empowered to thrive. Schools that embrace inclusive practices benefit not only Autistic students but the entire school community.

At Aspect schools, we are leaders in autism education, providing dynamic, individualised learning tailored to each student's unique strengths, challenges and learning styles. A 'one size fits all' approach does not work in autism education, which is why individualised planning is at the heart of our approach.

To learn more about Aspect schools and how we support Autistic students, visit: aspect.org.au/our-services/going-to-school

Aspect Autism Friendly

Aspect's Autism Friendly team is dedicated to partnering with organisations to create environments which genuinely support and include Autistic people. Find out how we can help your school: aspect.org.au/our-services/autism-friendly

More information

For school staff

- inclusioned.edu.au
- reframingautism.org.au/teaching-autistic-students-an-educators-guide
- autismcrc.com.au/knowledge-centre/resource/resources-teachers
- amaze.org.au/inclusion
- positivepartnerships.com.au/workshops-online-learning/professional-learning
- education.nsw.gov.au/campaigns/inclusive-practice-hub/all-resources/primary-resources/understanding-disability/autism/evidence-based-strategies

For families

- reframingautism.org.au/service/i-am-a-parent/

