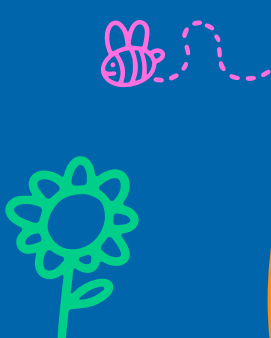
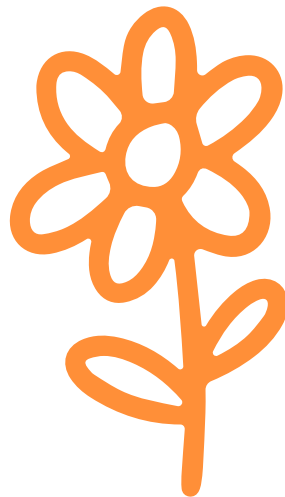
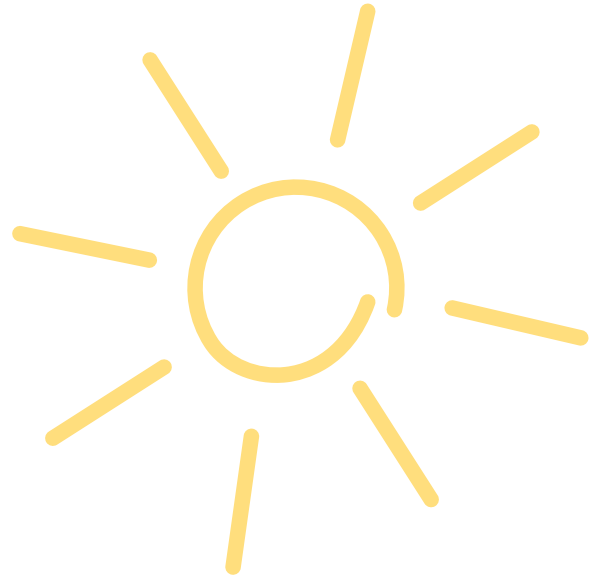
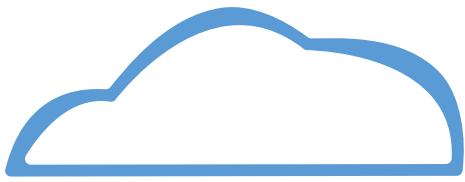




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Department of Children, Equality,  
Disability, Integration and Youth

# Introductory Guidelines to Support the Meaningful Inclusion of Autistic Children in Early Learning and Care & School Age Childcare





Special thanks to those who reviewed this publication and made a valuable contribution to its development especially Professor Emer Ring, the team at As I Am and Sinéad Lawton of Barnardos.

These guidelines are a complementary publication to the Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools – Supporting Children and Young People, and are designed for use with young children in Early Learning and Care and children in School Age Childcare settings.

Prepared by the Department of  
Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth  
**gov.ie**

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# 1. Foreword



We all understand and acknowledge the critical role high quality early learning and care services play in children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development and well-being, alongside the provision of other key services for children and families. School-age childcare services can also play an important role in supporting children's holistic development, complementing the formal education provided in schools.

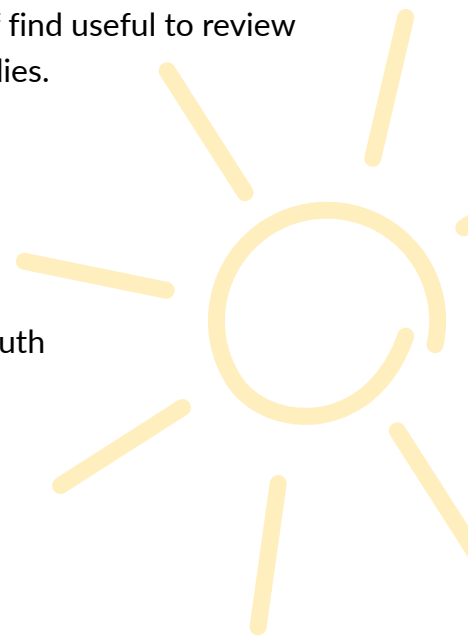
I am very aware that autistic children and their families need more than just access to these services; they need meaningful inclusive participation in a setting that has prepared to meet their needs.

Continuing to deliver on the commitments on inclusion in First 5 and the Autism Innovation Strategy I am pleased to publish these Introductory Guidelines to Support the Meaningful Inclusion of Autistic Children in Early Learning and Care & School-Age Childcare settings. Meaningful inclusion of neurodivergent children and their families in these settings starts with the early years educators and school age practitioners being fully informed of their role in active inclusion. These guidelines are part of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) suite of supports and resources supporting the inclusion of children in the ECCE programme and beyond.

Attitudinal change is hard to bring about in society and early years educators and school-age practitioners are often at the forefront of that change. These guidelines can be used as a starting point that I hope settings and staff find useful to review and extend their inclusion of autistic children and their families.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Roderic O'Gorman".

Roderic O'Gorman  
Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth





I warmly welcome these guidelines for those working with our youngest children. They are an action of our Department's Autism Innovation Strategy. This Strategy will work hard to respond and enhance the lived experience of autistic people, their families and carers, so we can ensure that challenges and barriers currently being faced are being adequately addressed and to improve understanding and accommodation of autism within society and across the public system. These guidelines for early learning

and childcare are an example of a clear action that can make a tangible difference to children's lives.

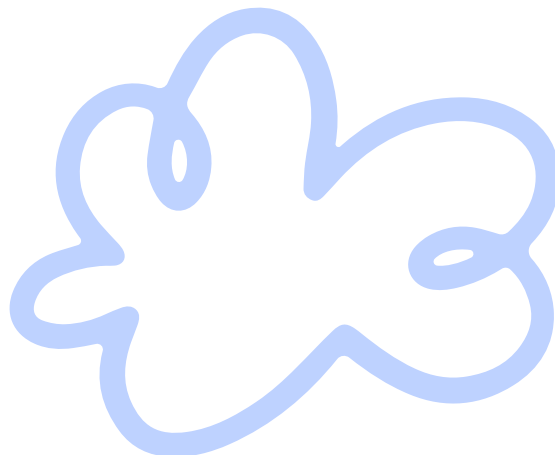
Early learning and childcare is the first time a family will engage in an educational experience for their child. This makes it most valuable in laying the foundations for both the child's learning journey and in the families developing a trusting partnership with educators.

Early years educators and school age practitioners have a key role in creating a more inclusive and responsive society. Their understanding and engagement with learning about the inclusion of neurodivergent children and their families in early learning and childcare, creates an opportunity not only for the children but supports the development of a fairer and more equitable society.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anne Rabbitte", written over a horizontal line.

Anne Rabbitte

Minister of State with special responsibility for Disability



## 2. Introduction

This publication has been developed as an action under the National Autism Innovation Strategy, which aims to address the bespoke challenges and barriers facing autistic people and to improve understanding and accommodation of autism within society and across the public system. This guidance is for early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners working in centre-based services and childminders who are currently working to support the meaningful inclusion of autistic children in early learning and care and school-age childcare.

### 2.1. What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability or difference, which relates to how a person communicates and interacts with others, and how they experience the world around them. Autism is part of the broader neurodiversity family of differences or disabilities, which encompasses people with differences such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, Epilepsy, Tourette's Syndrome and Dyscalculia.

While autistic people are born autistic, it is not something that parents learn when their child is born. As a child grows up, they may begin to experience and interact with their world in different ways, such as how they communicate differently to other people, find day-to-day situations stressful or overwhelming, and rely on structure and routine in order to manage. This in turn may lead to a person receiving an autism diagnosis.

**Every autistic child is unique and has different strengths, needs, likes, dislikes and ways of being. As with every child, the child's individual personality and temperament will shape their approach to learning.**



## Some Helpful Terms

### Neurotypes

Neurotypes is a term used to describe the particular way a person thinks about the world. People are often said to be one of two different neurotypes:

#### Neurotypical

Every brain is unique but most brain development in babies and young children takes a more typical pattern of development. People whose ways of thinking and processing the world are along the lines of what society expects are said to be 'neurotypical'.

#### Neurodiverse

Some brain development takes a less typical pattern of development and this results in a different way of thinking, learning and behaving. People who have these differences in thinking are said to be 'neurodivergent', as their way of thinking and processing the world can diverge from what society expects. This term is often associated with autistic people and refers to a group or community where one or more people may be neurodivergent as well as people with other differences like ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia.






## Neurodiverse-affirming practice

Neurodiverse-affirming practice in early learning and care and school-age childcare is an inclusive practice that sees differences rather than deficits. It creates a supportive, accepting and adaptive environment attuned to each child's differences and needs. This practice starts with the creation of a safe, warm and welcoming space for neurodivergent children and their families. Neurodiverse-affirming practice views autism as a part of human diversity and supports the child to have a positive self-identity.

### A note on language and inclusion

Language and terminology is important to children's inclusion and may change over time. It is one of the roles of early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners to be aware of updates in the type of language used. A good rule might be to take the lead on language preference from the diverse group itself, as we can often be afraid of saying the wrong thing or inadvertently offending someone. We should take into consideration the importance of asking families and members of the community what language they use or prefer.

 The As I Am guide to language can be found here:

<https://asiam.ie/advice-guidance/resource-library#Autism-and-Language-What-s-the-Right-Word>



### 3. A Children's Rights Approach

Early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners in Ireland view their work from a children's rights perspective, with an understanding that every child has the right to positive, inclusive and rich early learning and care and school age childcare experiences. Children's rights must be central to the approach taken in a setting to ensure a supportive learning environment for every child.

All children are unique and complete, and every young child needs support with all areas of their development. Every autistic child will present differently and will, therefore, need individualised supports. There is a host of different strategies to support children to develop skills in communication, social engagement, emotional and physical regulation, some of which are outlined in this guide.

### 4. Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

*Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum Assessment, (NCCA) 2009) celebrates early childhood as a time of being, of enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold, laying important foundations for later learning. Early childhood marks the beginning of children's lifelong learning journeys.

*Aistear* promotes a view of babies, toddlers and young children as competent and confident learners within loving and respectful relationships. All babies, toddlers and young children have a right to access and participate meaningfully in experiences to fulfil their potential as unique individuals.

The NCCA is currently updating *Aistear*. The Principles and Themes will remain but will be revised and updated. The process also includes considerations in supporting *Aistear*, intended to inform the development of guidance materials to support educators as they engage with the Principles and Themes.



Aistear recognises that diversity, equity and inclusion in early learning and care are about creating a fair society where barriers are identified and addressed within empowering and inclusive environments. Aistear empowers early years educators to:

- recognise the child's abilities, identities, needs and potential and respect their right to belong.
- put supports in place so that the child is empowered to participate and contribute in a meaningful way.
- recognise and celebrate the child's achievements at every age and stage of development.

## 5. Creating an Inclusive Setting


The first step in supporting children and their families is creating an inclusive setting. This starts with management and staff sharing and agreeing the values they want the service to include. This will guide their practice and provision to children, their families and the wider community.

There are a number of resources available to support the development of inclusive practices in Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare settings in Ireland:

- The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines were developed to support, guide and empower the early childhood care and education sector to deliver a diversity, equality and inclusion focus to practice and continuing professional development.

 The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines can be found here: <https://assets.gov.ie/38186/c9e90d89d94b41d3bf00201c98b2ef6a.pdf>

- Diversity, Equality and Inclusion training is available for all staff through the City and County Childcare Committees.
- The Leadership for Inclusion training (LINC) is a one-year special purpose Level 6 award for early years educators to support the inclusion of all children. This initial training and follow up programme of CPD qualifies the graduate to work as an Inclusion Co-ordinator (INCO) within a setting.

 Details on the LINC Programme can be found here: <https://lincprogramme.ie/>

## 5.1. Communicating the Setting's Inclusive Values

There are a variety of ways to communicate the inclusive values of the service and what that means to staff, children and their parents and to other key stakeholders:

- Providing information on the service website and in the staff handbook, the parents handbook and the curriculum statement
- Giving information directly to parents when they first visit the service or during open evenings
- Creating opportunities for families to meet each other during the year
- Having a parent's committee to support the work of the service

## 5.2. Supporting the Transition from Home


Creating a strong and positive connection with parents is essential to the transition process for all children, and especially for autistic children. Parents are the experts on their young child and a strong relationship helps in gathering as much initial information as possible about the child, their family culture and their likes and dislikes. A warm welcome with positive messages about the setting's neuro-affirming policy will be very reassuring to the family. A gradual introduction to allow the child to get to know the service and staff is essential. The child might wish to bring a favourite toy or other transition item from home. The family wall activity, explained in the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines, or a personal transition book can be useful to support a successful transition.



### 5.3. The Key Person Approach

The key person approach ensures the child is assigned a named person who is primarily responsible for creating a close relationship with them. The key person is the point of contact for the family and works in partnership with them.

In this approach, an early year's educator or school-age childcare practitioner has a key relationship with a small number of children. The key person approach is primarily focused on the relationships and communication between educator/practitioner, parents and children. Having a secure relationship with one person in shared care supports children's emotional wellbeing and enables them to become familiar with and confident in the setting. This approach can be particularly supportive for autistic children. The group size and the adult: child ratio in a group should be adjusted depending on the needs of the children in the group.

 Barnardos publication on The Key Person Approach can be found here: <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.13085/188>


### 5.4. Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)


The goal of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is to create an inclusive setting, so that all children, regardless of ability or support need, can benefit from quality early learning and care. The model achieves this by providing both universal supports to early learning and care settings, and targeted supports that focus on the needs of the individual child, without requiring a diagnosis of disability. The reason why a diagnosis is not necessary in AIM is that, in many cases, children may not have received a diagnosis before they attend an early learning and care service. This may be because their parents are unaware that their child is, for example, neurodivergent or because the process of diagnosis is not yet complete. The experience of the early years educator will allow them to identify each child's strengths and to assess each child's needs and work with the parents and staff to support the child's learning and development and help remove barriers to inclusion.

**In line with a commitment in First 5, the Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, AIM has now been extended to support ECCE aged children outside the ECCE programme.**

## AIM is supported by Better Start

Better Start provides targeted supports that help individual children with disabilities access their local pre-school and meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme. A national team of AIM Early Years Specialists provide expert educational advice and mentoring to pre-school educators to support the inclusion of children.

 Further information on AIM can be found here: <https://aim.gov.ie/>

 The AIM 'My Inclusion Plan', is a very useful tool for educators when developing specific goals and actions to support a child's development, can be found here: <https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2021/08/Access-and-Inclusion-Plan-My-Inclusion-Plan.pdf>




## 6. Supporting Parents

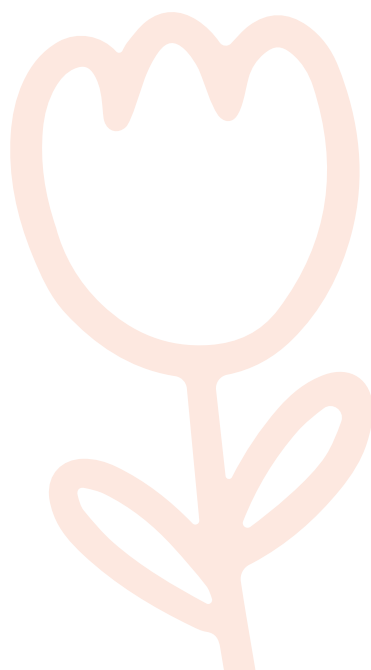
When parents first begin to understand their child may be neurodivergent, they may struggle to come to terms with their child's differences and what those differences will mean for their child's development. Strong partnerships with families at this time are essential particularly for parents who may need additional support with their child's participation, learning and development. Knowing how to approach these conversations and what to say when sharing concerns, while also trying not to cause undue distress for the child's parent or the early year's educators, can sometimes be challenging. Labelling or suggesting a diagnosis of children is not the role of an early years educator.

Research indicates that all children, including autistic children, have better academic and social outcomes when educators and parents work in partnership. Ongoing sharing of information through effective daily communication and regular meetings enable parents and educators to act as a team, working together to support the child.

With or without a diagnosis, meeting the learning and care needs of the child is always the early years educators, and indeed the school-age childcare practitioner's, key concern.

 Barnardos guide for early years educators when sharing developmental concerns with parents can be found here: <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.13085/398>

Parents and guardians may wish to contact the As I Am Autism Information Line: <https://asiam.ie/contact#autism-information-line>





## 7. Strategies for Supporting the Autistic Child

The single best strategy for supporting any child is to have a positive view of them and their abilities. The next step is to prepare to support the individual child. This involves the staff working together, to prepare the environment for the child, engaging in relevant professional learning and making purposeful observations of the child in the setting. Early years educators and school age practitioners should seek access to coaching, consultation, and peer support networks to help practitioners navigate complex situations. Better Start AIM specialists are a good place to start when looking for support.

When a child first joins a setting, early years educators and school age practitioners will begin to build a picture of the child's likes, interests, strengths and needs. The picture will be created in discussion with parents. This information will support the team around the child to plan, document and support the child's meaningful participation. Consideration should be given to the child's behaviour when joining as they may relate to them adjusting to the new environment. As with all behaviour, it can be a means of communication.

Below is information on common presentations early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners will recognise and strategies for supporting children using a strengths-based approach.

### 7.1. Sensory Processing

The five senses include sight (eyes), hearing (ears), taste (gustatory), smell (olfactory), and touch (skin). However, there are also three other senses: the vestibular sense (information about movement and head position) the proprioceptive sense (information about our body parts/body awareness) and interoception (this refers to sensations related to the physiological/physical condition of the body. Interoceptors are internal sensors that provide a sense of what our internal organs are feeling. Hunger and thirst are examples of Interoception).

As a child grows and begins to explore their surroundings, they learn to firstly notice/register information from their senses, then process it and then respond appropriately. This is called Sensory Processing.





A Sensory Profile is a description of the child’s unique sensory needs. Building an individualised sensory profile of the child will develop early years educator’s understanding of the environmental supports the child needs to have in place to enable their learning and care.

Autistic children who present with difficulties or differences processing information from their senses might appear over-responsive and/or under-responsive to certain types of sensory input. A child’s sensory experience can fluctuate between over/under responsive depending on central nervous systems interpretation of signals or safety/threat from the environment. See table below.

<p><b>Over responsive</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child is quick to notice information received from their senses or is highly aware.</li> <li>• A little might seem like a lot to a child who is over responsive.</li> </ul>	<p>Children who are over responsive to sensory information may be either:</p> <p><b>Sensory Sensitive</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child registers information from the senses intensely but cannot remove themselves from the situation.</li> <li>• Child may appear impacted, for example, by noise, light, or touch.</li> </ul> <p><b>Sensory Avoider</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child also registers information from the senses intensely but actively avoids experiences.</li> <li>• Child may avoid touch, situations with a lot going on, loud noises, foods with certain textures.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Under responsive</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child appears not to notice and process information received from the senses well.</li> <li>• Child often seeks extra sensory input or they might need support from others to register sensory input.</li> </ul>	<p>Children who are under responsive to sensory information may be either:</p> <p><b>Sensory Seeker</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child may appear always on the go, may chew and bite non-food items, may enjoy crashing, jumping, likely has difficulty sitting still.</li> </ul> <p><b>Slow to Register Sensory Input</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child may have low arousal, fatigues easily, may appear slow to react and respond to information in their environment, can appear clumsy, may appear to bump into objects.</li> </ul>

It is important to note that every child can present differently. Some can be over responsive to touch and avoid wearing tight clothes but they might also be under responsive to movement and appear to be always on the go. It can for example be difficult to get a young child to try ear defenders because of sensitivity to touch even though the child will benefit from the reduction in noise because of their sensitivity to noise. In this example, slow and staged introduction of the ear defenders will lead to the child becoming accustomed to the sensation in the context of a trusting relationship.

 An e-learning CPD module on sensory processing can be found here: <https://www.betterstart.ie/for-elc/learning-and-development/>

 A leaflet developed by HSE Occupational Therapists with helpful tips and strategies can be found here: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/1/lho/corknorthlee/therapy/paediatric-occupational-therapy/sensory-processing.pdf>

*See below for ways you can help to reduce anxiety in children by providing sensory supports.*

## 7.2. Stimming

Self-stimulatory behaviours or “stimming” is a type of self-regulatory behaviour that often involves repetitive behaviours, movements or noises. Stimming may involve something like hopping from one foot to the other, repeating a word or phrase, flapping hands or something subtler like playing with hair. This is often a self-soothing, regulating and enjoyable behaviour or may be a way for a non-verbal child to communicate excitement, joy, engagement, anxiety or upset. As the early year’s educator or school-age childcare practitioner gets to know the child, they will be more aware of the things that make a child upset or anxious, and can remove the cause and help the child co-regulate, for example, by breathing together.

**Stimming behaviours are very useful to the autistic child and should not be seen in a negative light. For many neurodivergent people, stimming serves an important self-regulatory function to help manage sensory input.**

For autistic children who are very sensitive to sensory information, stimming can reduce sensory overload because it focuses their attention on just one thing. For autistic children who are under-sensitive, stimming can stimulate ‘underactive’ senses.

Stress responses like self-biting or hitting can be replaced with safer behaviours. Elements of the environment, social expectations or lack of knowledge and understanding may unintentionally make certain stims more challenging without necessarily meaning the child's underlying needs have changed. With compassion, staff can work to identify supportive ways for them to maintain well-being. For example, leading the child to a sensory wall that you have created of different textures and materials for the child to touch might be a replacement behaviour. The child might also have access to a box or basket of sensory toys they have chosen that might include items such as thera-putty or fidget toys to help with regulation.



Information about fidget toys and items that can offer autistic children sensory support can be found here: <http://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/AsIAm-Autism-Town-Fidget-Guide.pdf>

### 7.3. Play and the Autistic Child

Time and space for play is a fundamental right of childhood. Play is the child's medium for learning and much of the child's early and development takes place through different types of play. Play contributes to the child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional well-being. Play offers all children including autistic children opportunities to be physically active, to investigate and explore, solve problems, use their imagination and creativity and to experience social interactions.

In all early learning and care and school-age childcare settings there should be opportunity for play that is child-led and freely chosen for all children. There is no right or wrong way to play. Many neurodivergent children engage in play preferences that are repetitive or they favour parallel play, playing near or alongside another child. Over time, the child may initiate contact and include another child or adult who have been playing nearby. The less pressurised the play, the more likely the child will enjoy it.

When working with autistic children, it's important to recognise play may manifest differently than neurotypical expectations and still have tremendous value. Through observing autistic children engaging in play we can appreciate each child's unique strengths and cultivate them. Based on the information from observations, some possibilities include:

- Sensory play with items like water, kinetic sand, and/or bubbles may be effective in providing calming self-regulatory experiences for some children
- Object/texture focused exploration can nourish a child's curiosity without social demands.

- Solitary construction/organization activities can contribute to cultivating a child's creativity and problem-solving skills.
- Parallel play alongside others respects needs for space while allowing observation of social modelling.
- Creative arts like storytelling,

Older children may also enjoy:

- Interest-based play explored through video editing, collecting, music etc.
- Technology supporting self-directed learning through interactive apps/games.
- Creative arts such as photography or music, tapping imaginative development.

The Middletown Centre for Autism explains:

*"Autistic children are known to play in ways that are different in relation to play development and the types of play favoured. Because their play can look different to non-autistic children's, it can sometimes be a cause of concern for parents and educators. This can lead some to attempt to change the way that autistic children play so that it seems more "appropriate", however if we change autistic play to look more neurotypical, it no longer falls under the definition of play. It is no longer intrinsically motivated, self-chosen or self-directed. Indeed, pressure to play in a non-autistic way may be an early lesson for autistic children that they need to mask their identity, interests and even their own discomfort. Supporting an autistic child or young person to play should focus on their wishes, interests and preferences".*

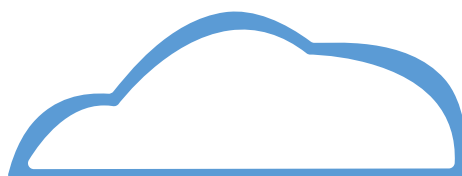
Link to the Middletown Centre for Autism website description of autism and play:

<https://outdoor-play.middletownautism.com/background/autism-and-play/>

### Let's Play Guide

This guide to play created by the team at As I Am is very well suited to early learning and care and school age childcare practice. It includes practical resources and ideas and is also great for sharing with parents. Link to the Let's Play [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebfefba7b3c24a18e646/6630d0ca542cf301ab4bac5e\\_AsIAm%20digital%20play%20resource%20April%202024%20-%20smaller-min.pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebfefba7b3c24a18e646/6630d0ca542cf301ab4bac5e_AsIAm%20digital%20play%20resource%20April%202024%20-%20smaller-min.pdf)

All children should be supported to play in the way that suits them.



There are a number of ways that early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners can support children's play, these include:

- Ensuring the child has the time and space to be immersed in their chosen type of play.
- Staying nearby and appearing interested but not interfering.
- Mirroring the child's play to show interest but not intruding.
- Mapping play and create a play profile: A good way to get to know a child's chosen play types is to observe them throughout the week and draw a map of the spaces the child chooses to play and their preferred play equipment. These spaces can be prepared and enhanced with the child's chosen play objects or provocations for play.
- Providing daily access to playing outside is a regulatory requirement in all settings. Playing outdoors will have an enormous benefit for autistic children. Connecting with nature and with other children, as well as access to opportunities for risky play outside, will offer additional learning opportunities.

## 7.4. Daily Transitions

Daily transitions involve movement between play spaces and activities during the course of a normal day. While preparing for and negotiating change is important for all children, it is particularly crucial for autistic children as they may become overwhelmed or distressed by changes to their environment and routine. Some children may require a specific transition plan to be able to freely enjoy outside play opportunities, for example. This may be a visual display of the daily routine or a lead in time with the next activity highlighted.

## 7.5. Visual Aids and Cues

Visual daily routine cards are used by many services working with children. Staff can make these cards themselves using photos taken in the setting. Providing visual schedules throughout the day helps establish predictability which many autistic children find soothing.

These visual cues and aids can be tailored to the specific needs and preferences of each neurodivergent child, fostering independence, predictability, and a sense of control in the early learning and care environment. Other examples of visual supports include - video, preferred cartoon characters doing tasks, visual calendars, timers. Clear labelling of spaces, objects, and materials will support wayfinding.

Photos can depict routines like snack time, playing outside etc. Sequencing photos from left to right demonstrates order and timelines. You may include a “first/then” board to foster understanding of multi-step activities. These display the activity or part of the day that is happening right now and what will be happening next. This allows for a predictable but not a rigid routine. An example might be a ‘first’ card with a symbol for wash hands and then a ‘next’ card with a symbol for eat snack.

Social stories use images and simple text or speech bubbles to normalise new experiences. Stories help prepare children for changes in routine, unfamiliar people like visitors to the setting, or situations that can cause anxiety like eating lunch in the cafeteria. They model appropriate behaviours, perspective-taking, and emotional regulation.

Visual task boards break down multi-step activities into chunks. For example, making a collage may include photos for “cut,” “glue,” and “decorate” steps. Children can check off photos as they complete each part of a project. Some prefer choice boards where they select the order and can skip steps to promote independence.

## 7.6. Special Interests

Many autistic children develop special interests that they have a passion for and may develop a deep knowledge of, such as dinosaurs, vehicles, a particular cartoon, music group, movie or game. Special interests may last for a varying amount of time and other interests may emerge.

A child’s special interest can be identified through observation and communicating with the child and parent. Whatever the child’s special interest is, it should be encouraged. Adding to and extending the special interest will support the child’s sense of identity and belonging. The early year’s educator can also use the interest to include the child, for example, in story time. Older children may wish to share their knowledge of their special interest with a chosen school-age childcare practitioner. This is a sign of trust and the chosen practitioner should take the time to listen and honour this trust. The child may enjoy a special interest box or shelf where they can safely leave or display their special interest objects.

Special interests are deeply meaningful and can provide a sense of comfort, belonging, and emotional regulation for the individual. They can serve as a source of self-expression, identity, and coping mechanism.

## 8. Reducing Anxiety

Autistic children can experience high levels of anxiety. Being worried or frightened feels overwhelming for the child and impedes learning. Reducing anxiety starts with understanding the causes of the anxiety and will differ for each child. Common causes could include sudden changes in routine, an unpredictable environment or sensory overload. By careful observation, an early years educator or school-age childcare practitioner can support the child both before the anxiety rises and when the child begins to exhibit signs of being anxious.

This is a link to anxiety management strategies from the Middletown Centre for Autism:

<http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/anxiety-management/anxiety-management-strategies/>

### 8.1. Provide a Sensory Break

Intense sensory experiences such as loud noises or bright lights may cause a child to feel overwhelmed. It can be helpful to offer the child an opportunity to take a break from the stimulation.

Make a space available where it is possible to provide the child with a sensory break. This space might include:

**Lighting:** Provide adjustable lighting that can dim or contain natural light. Offer for example the choice of sunglasses or a peaked cap as needed.

**Seating:** Include a choice of seating that might include comfortable cushions/beanbags for sitting or lying. (Consider textures that are not observed to be overly stimulating for the child)

**Calming activities:** Have fidget toys, stress balls, or theraputty available for manipulation. Books, drawing supplies, and other quiet solo activities can be helpful in engaging children. Allow children agency in selecting their preferred calming activity and have activities organised in a manner accessible to the child

**Acoustics:** Use sound-absorbing material on walls to muffle noise if possible. Offer noise-cancelling headphones or an mp3 player with calming audio (e.g. nature sounds). It is important to be aware that calming audio for one child may not be calming audio for another, therefore careful observation of a child's response to what they consider calming is vitally important.

**Temporal prompts:** Use a sand timer as a visual cue for duration of breaks. Incorporate 5-minute timer to prompt when it's time to return to regular activities.

**Structure:** Create visual schedule for area rules/expectations. Model use of space to promote understanding of when/how to access independently for self-regulation.

## 8.2. Offer Sensory Activities

Children often enjoy sensory activities for anxiety reduction such as playing with water, playdough or sand, and children should have access to these every day. Some children enjoy touch such as skin brushing with a soft brush or an activity such as blowing bubbles. For many children, a change of environment like going outside can be beneficial.

## 8.3. Encourage Choice

Encourage the child to let you know what they would like to do, asking, for example, 'I see you are overwhelmed/upset with the noise. Would you like to go to the quiet area?' By giving the child choice, you are supporting their independence and ability to self-regulate. Having a choice board on the wall with visual representations of the child's favourite activities can be useful for all children including non-verbal children in reducing anxiety. A visual representation can be a concrete object, a photograph or a drawing. The main criterion for selecting the visual representation is ensuring the child fully understands what is being represented.

## 8.4. Support Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is a skill that many children need support developing. The first step to learning how to regulate emotions is to recognise them. Strong emotions like being angry, frustrated or even over excited can feel scary if the child doesn't understand what is happening to their body. Co-regulation is the warm responsive action of the adult when a child is struggling to regulate. Children need repeated experiences of co-regulation from a regulated adult before they can begin to self-regulate. Co-regulation involves the adult modelling regulation by doing calming activities such as breathing with the child, naming the emotion, and suggesting actions the child might take such as a favourite activity or spending some time playing outside.



## 8.5. Create a Predictable, Calm Environment

Young children learn best in a predictable, calm environment. This is especially true for autistic children. This starts with a predictable, calm early years educator or school-age childcare practitioner. The tone of voice the adult uses, as well as the volume of their voice, are critical elements in creating this environment.

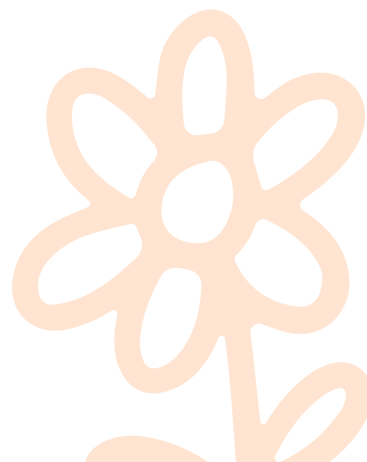
Attention should also be given to the colour of the play space. Spaces that are too bright may lead to sensory overload, and neutral colour tones are preferable. Avoid over use of displays or posters on walls that may be visually distracting. Well organised spaces, free from clutter also help to create calm. Each piece of furniture and toy should be carefully chosen and respected. At the end of each session the space should be tidied and returned to its organised state ready to receive the children the next day.

The DCEDIY has developed universal design guidance on how to create calm, legible, and distinct spaces that support Early Years learning and care. <https://aim.gov.ie/aim-supports/universal-design-guidelines/>

## 8.6. Support Children with Masking

Neurodivergent children face particular challenges when they consciously or unconsciously try to fit in with others, or 'mask', in places like school. Autistic children may have spent the school day suppressing stimming, and trying to cope with sensory and social situations, and they may need support with unmasking when they arrive at their school-age childcare. Autistic children attending school-age childcare may have big feelings they need to express when they arrive to the service after school. Some children have described the feeling when they finish school as like a fizzy drink that has been shaken up and uncapped.

The school age childcare practitioner can work with the child on strategies that will help them unmask such as changing out of their uniform, spending time alone in a quiet space or having some time on an electronic device of their choice. Teaching children to practise positive self-affirming messages and working together to create a culture where everyone in the service points out the great things about each other will help with issues of esteem.



## 8.7. Provide for Physical Integration

Autistic children may have difficulty in being aware of their body and how it coordinates. Physical tasks can be a very useful and fun way for children to develop body confidence and support sensory integration. In this strategy, the early year's educator or school-age childcare practitioner will set up a hard work task in advance. This might include moving wooden bricks, small logs or small planks from one location to another, or digging sand or soil outside. Other ideas include pouring jugs of water from one tub to another. Set up, clean up and sweeping up may present other opportunities for hard work and learning on how the body and brain work together.

Physical work also presents an opportunity for autistic children to work alongside other children and make connections. Including the child in a group that completes a hard work task together and is collectively praised for completing their task builds confidence and belonging.

## 8.8. Intentional Teaching


To achieve the goals outlined in a child's 'My Inclusion Plan', some intentional teaching may be necessary. These goals might include, for example, toilet training, attending a birthday party, visiting Santa or transition to school. The goals of the intentional teaching, as well as the work plan and method, will be agreed with the parents in advance of starting and where appropriate with the child. Plans work best when the same approach is taken at home.

Wherever possible, children's consent and participation should be sought and encouraged.




## Social stories

One common method in intentional teaching with autistic children is the use of Social Stories. Using Social Stories is a way to break down individual steps with visual representations to help communicate information about a situation, skill or concept in a way that is meaningful to the child. Social Stories can be used with any child or group. They are short, simple stories that break down a situation, skill, event or behaviour into smaller steps using objects, images and/or text to support the child's understanding. They can help prepare children for challenging or unfamiliar situations.

 The Better Start tip sheet on using Social Stories™ can be found at: [Transitions Tip Sheet: Supporting your Child's Transition to Primary School - Better Start](#)

Many learning strategies involve the breaking down of the action into easy steps such as teaching instructions with a song like a cleaning up transition song, giving auditory and/or visual alerts, and using visual schedules/cues that allow the child to see the steps involved, for example, when washing and drying hands, getting their lunch box or putting on their shoes.

 Look up the Montessori 'Rabbit Holes' method of teaching children to independently put on their coat which many children enjoy.



## 9. Communication and Language Development

Supporting communication and language development with very young children involves taking a total communication approach. This is especially important for autistic children. This includes the use of facial expression, body language, gesture, sign, sound, symbol, written language, picture, object of reference and electronic aid.

Language development in young children varies widely and can be a key challenge for autistic children. The best way to encourage language development in all children is to:

- Engage in conversations on things that interest the child
- Treat the child as a talker. Speak, leave a gap for response, speak again
- Read stories that include the child and their interests
- Wait, don't anticipate the child's needs. Let them point or gesture
- Limit questions and try not to put any pressure on the child
- Provide commentary to the child's play
- Encourage calmly by repetition if the child says a word
- Work with the parents to support a shared understanding of agreed approaches
- Honour and calmly encourage every attempt to communicate

When supporting autistic children, especially school age children, take into account individualised modes of communication and take a total communication approach.

Supporting communication is most successful when it builds on the child's strengths in an environment that is positive and encouraging.



## **Gestalt language processing**

There are two main theories regarding how children acquire language – analytic language development and gestalt language development. Analytic language is a path of language development where a child learns single words, followed by two-word phrases, eventually leading to multi-word sentences. Gestalt language development where a child begins by learning gestalts, or chunks of language, and then learns to break down these word combinations to form original phrases. Many autistic children are gestalt language processors (GLPs) which means they learn language in chunks/ gestalts that have an emotional attachment for them. This is a natural but less recognised way to develop language and as it is a different way to develop language some of the strategies would also be different. For gestalt language processors, echolalia is the first step in that child's natural development of language.

## **Respond to echolalia**

Echolalia is the utterances of words or phrases the autistic child has heard and then uses out of context. These utterances may not appear to be connected to their current actions but they should always be responded to as an attempt to communicate. Careful observations will allow the educator to understand when the child is using echolalia, for example, to self-soothe, show excitement, make requests, say yes or no. Early years educators should respond to the child and acknowledge what they said by repeating, explaining or extending their language.

Self-expression also can happen through auditory stimming. As with any stim, repetition fulfils important regulatory functions and brings joy through exploration of resonant sounds, melodies and cadences in speech.

Interest in communicative forms including echoing holds educational value in scrutinising the mechanics, patterns and social uses of language. It reflects natural variation in how humans learn to converse.



## 9.1. Use Declarative Language

Early years educators can support daily interactions and connections through the use of declarative language. Declarative language is a statement or a comment aloud about what is going on in the play space, or what the educator is seeing, hearing or wondering about. This is not questioning but commentary.

The commentary might start with 'I'm wondering...' or 'I can see you are...' or 'I can see what you are doing there...'

Care should be given to use a clear, even tone of voice during the commentary, accompanied by warm regard and an open, engaged facial expression. This will support trust and connection between the adult and child.

Using declarative language has many benefits. It:

- Models language and gives the child language to their action
- Ensures the child knows the educator is present and engaged in their play
- Supports a range of processing speeds

## 9.2. Give One Instruction at a Time

When giving instruction to a child or group, use only one statement, breaking down the communication to one instruction. It is not helpful to give two or more instructions at the same time. For example, saying 'Take off your coat and hang it up' is too many instructions for some children to process. It is better to be specific, 'Hang up your coat please' or 'Let's go inside'. Pause and wait to allow the child sufficient time for processing. Be prepared to repeat.

## 9.3. Offer Clear, Positive Instructions

Young autistic children benefit from understanding the clear behavioural expectations in the setting, especially in relation to safety for themselves and other children. Having behavioural expectations and working towards their realisation supports the dignity of the child.

As with all children, it is always much more effective to give children clear, positively framed instructions. Tell the child what you want them to do rather than what you don't want them to do. Reframe instructions that aren't working and be mindful of the language you use. For example, instead of 'Don't run' say 'Let's walk' and support with visual cues where necessary.

## 9.4. Picture Exchange Systems (PECS) and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

A picture exchange system helps autistic children to communicate without the use of speech by using pictures to enable the child to express their needs, make comments or answer questions. This system usually starts with pictures of a small number of items the child is very familiar with and builds up over time. A picture exchange system can support language development and usually involves training for the adults in the child's life.

Important - Using a total communication approach means that all forms of communication are acknowledged and validated and that communication is not compliance based. This means a child should never need to exchange a picture before their communication attempt is accepted. Modelling should happen without expectation (e.g., if a child is pointing to an item and it is clear what they want, you can model the word/show the picture but without expectation or need for them to complete a picture exchange to get the item).

There has been some evolution in the field away from solely using the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) towards more expanded and flexible Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) methods.

PECS was an important early framework, but it uses a primarily visual symbol system that may not be optimal for all. Recent research emphasises customising to individuals' strengths/preferences.


Picture-based systems are still very helpful for many, but options have grown to include speech-generating devices, tablet/computer apps, tactile sign language, photographs and other concrete objects that the child understands. Combining several modalities can accelerate language development.


Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) offers alternatives to verbal speech. AAC involves all forms of communication except for oral speech to express needs, wants, thoughts and ideas. Examples of AAC are objects, use of signs, pictures and written text AAC Devices, touch to speak, text to speech applications, creative arts, digital storytelling and interactive books. All can be excellent aids for receptive and expressive language development for autistic children.

A focus on functional communication beyond just requesting favours allows expression of opinions, complex ideas, and social closeness through conversation. Systems should support various communicative intents.

Promoting natural reciprocal dialogue better fosters relationships and inclusion versus discrete turn-taking. Dynamic AAC accommodates more fluid multi-partner interactions.

Self-determination and autonomy are prioritized by offering choice regarding communication aid selection, symbol system, and how/when tools are incorporated into daily living and learning.

 Better Start offers the Hanen 'Teacher Talk' training course to support early years educators in helping young children to develop language and literacy skills. More information on accessing this training can be found here: <https://www.betterstart.ie/for-elc/learning-and-development/>

 A video from As I Am on supporting language development at home that may be useful for parents can be found here: <https://youtu.be/LJCztb2ehUc>

## 10. Participation

The full participation of autistic children in the service takes careful observation, skill and dedication of trained early years educators and school age practitioners. Listening to children, seeking their input in the everyday actions and activities of the setting and acting on that input is an essential role of staff.

All the children and their families will take a cue from the staff and the atmosphere of inclusion they create. These messages might extend to the life of the children outside the service. Many parents of children with disabilities for example report their children never being invited to playdates or birthday parties. While this is beyond the control of the service, examples of inclusion and kindness can have lasting impacts.



# 11. Implementing these Guidelines

To create an inclusive setting by:

- ✓ Agree the values and ethos of the service with management and staff and develop an inclusion charter
- ✓ Develop an inclusion professional learning plan for staff
- ✓ Develop an Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) Post
- ✓ Adopt a positive neuro-affirming approach and communicate this to the wider community
- ✓ Have a Key Person approach
- ✓ Communicate regularly with parents
- ✓ Gather as much information as possible about each child
- ✓ Explore and establish ways of including each child's voice in the conversation
- ✓ Seek AIM support at the appropriate level through Better Start
- ✓ Use the AIM 'My Inclusion Plan'
- ✓ Prepare the environment including spaces for sensory breaks
- ✓ Decide as a team what strategies to engage
- ✓ Develop an individualised sensory profile
- ✓ Map each child's interests and play
- ✓ Provide daily sensory activities
- ✓ Honour special interests
- ✓ Develop individualised visual cues
- ✓ Develop intentional teaching plans
- ✓ Ensure the child's consent and participation

You can consistently build trusting relationships with the child and their family by working together with warm, positive regard to support the child's learning and development.

## 12. Better Start Quick Links

['My Inclusion Plan', a resource for Early Years Educators. - Better Start](#)

[Tip Sheet: Social Stories - Better Start](#)

[Tip Sheet: Sensory Play - Better Start](#)

[Choice Boards - Better Start](#)

[First/Then Strategy Tip Sheet - Better Start](#)

[Using a Visual Daily Routine - Better Start](#)

[Transition Supporting Children's Transition to Preschool Tipsheet for Early Years Educators \(betterstart.ie\)](#)

[Transitions Tip sheet: Supporting Room to Room Transitions - Better Start](#)

[Resources Archive - Access and Inclusion Model \(aim.gov.ie\)](#)

[Dark Den Cube/Pop Up Dark Den - Access and Inclusion Model \(aim.gov.ie\)](#)



## 13. List of Acronyms

AAC – Augmentative and Alternative Communications

AIM – Access and Inclusion Model

CPD – Continuous Professional Development

DCEDIY – Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

ECCE – Early Childhood Care and Education Programme

ELC – Early Learning and Childcare

GLP - Gestalt Language Processor

INCO – Inclusion Coordinator

LINC – Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years

PECS – Picture Exchange Communications System

SAC – School Age Childcare

## 14. Further Reading

Reliable sources for additional information and further reading include:

As I Am <https://asiam.ie/>

Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/>

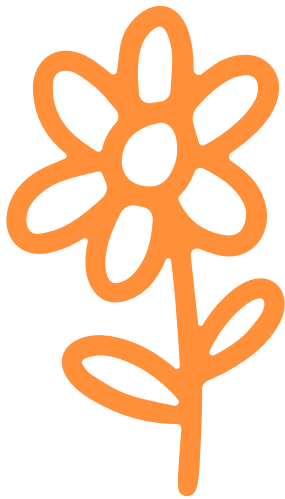
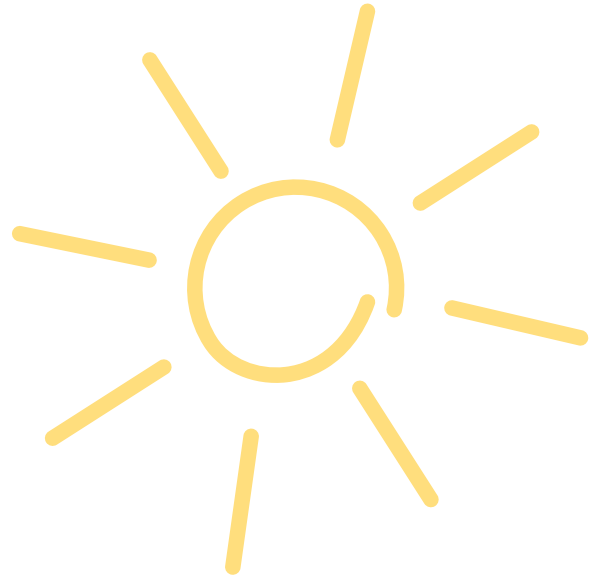
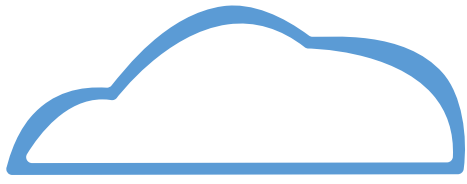
Leading Inclusion from the Inside Out. A Handbook for Parents and Early Childhood Teachers in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Special School Settings. (2021) Ring, Emer, Ed.; O'Sullivan, Lisha, Ed.; Ryan, Marie, Ed.; Daly, Patricia, Ed. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Middletown Centre for Autism <https://www.middletownautism.com/>











An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,  
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige  
Department of Children, Equality,  
Disability, Integration and Youth

