



**Understanding
and Supporting
Autism in
Mainstream
Schools**

Hearing from young people with Autism

Autism in School

School is a big part of our lives, so how school feels really matters. Understanding more about autism can help you understand how we may experience school and how you can impact this experience positively. We need adults who listen to us, believe in us, and try to understand what is going on beneath our behaviour.

What is Autism

Autism is one of the ways some people's brains grow and develop differently. It affects how we think, feel, communicate, and understand the world around us. It is not an illness, and it is not something that needs to be fixed. Autism looks different in every person. Some of us talk a lot; some of us are quiet. Some of us appear to cope well on the outside, while others clearly struggle. It may not be obvious that someone has autism.

Most important of all, we are children first. We have likes and dislikes, things we enjoy, things we find challenging, and things at which we are good. Some of us feel incredibly positive about our autism and the ways it makes us different, but others of us find it extremely hard feeling different from others. Autism is part of who we are, but it is not all of us.

When we struggle with behaviour, it is often a sign that something underneath needs attention. Understanding the reason behind behaviour does not mean lowering expectations; it means helping us meet those expectations successfully.

"Please see me before you see my autism."

Strengths & Support

Our strengths often get missed. Many of us are kind, creative, thoughtful, honest, and determined.

When adults help us feel safe, understood, and accepted, our confidence grows and our strengths have space to be appreciated.

We are often called out for doing something wrong or for neglecting a specific task. Being noticed or remembered positively is especially meaningful. For example, a teacher noticing hard work or effort, or a birthday being remembered.

"I was not being naughty. I was overwhelmed."

Transitions, Change & Control

Change can feel more overwhelming for us than other people. Moving between lessons, activities or places can make us feel unsure and anxious, especially if it happens suddenly.

Our school days often include many transitions including davening, lessons, assemblies, breaktime, lunch, Kodesh/Chol lessons and extracurricular activities. Changes around yomim tovim, special schedules or substitute teachers can feel especially unsettling, particularly if we are not prepared in advance.

Having some control, choice and preparation helps us feel safer. Clear routines, knowing what comes next, and being given time to adjust do not limit us; they help us cope. Visual timetables can be extremely helpful.

When school is calm and predictable, we feel safer and learning feels possible. When it is loud, rushed, unpredictable or confusing, everything becomes much harder.

Please do not assume that we do not want to do things even if they are more challenging for us - ask us for our view. We, or the adults who know us well, might have some clever ideas about what might help us join in.

Communication & Thinking

Many of us understand words very literally. Long explanations or too many instructions at once can be confusing for some of us, even when we are trying hard to listen. It can be especially hard when switching between two different languages. It can help us if you try and only give us one instruction at a time and then allow us time to process this before giving us the next one. Visual prompts alongside any verbal instructions are also extremely helpful.

Sometimes, some of us will need extra time to think before we answer. This does not mean we are not listening or do not know the answer. Our brains may just need a bit longer to process.

We may not always show understanding in the usual ways, like making eye contact or using the right tone of voice. This can sometimes be misunderstood. We are not being rude; this is just something that may be harder for us to do.

Because some of us understand words very literally, we may not always understand when others are joking, being sarcastic, or trying to 'hint' at things without being clear. It helps us if you state what you mean clearly even if you think it is obvious.

Sensory Experiences

Some children with autism experience the classroom differently through their senses. Sounds, lights, movement, touch, or smells that most children barely notice can feel much stronger, distracting, or overwhelming, making it much harder to concentrate or stay calm. Corridors, assemblies, playgrounds, and lunchtime can be especially hard.

Some outings, special events or activities can be exciting

and enjoyable while also feeling overwhelming. Enjoyment and overwhelm can exist at the same time.

Taking the time to talk to us ahead of events, and telling us what we can expect, would make a tremendous difference in how we feel approaching the event.

Clothing expectations, such as certain fabrics, tights, layers or uniforms, can sometimes add to sensory discomfort.

When our senses feel overloaded, it becomes extremely hard to concentrate, stay calm or explain what we need, even though we are trying our best.

"When it's noisy, my head feels full."

Emotions, Anxiety & Regulation

Some of us often feel emotions very strongly in our bodies and it can be difficult for us to communicate about them to others. When we are anxious or overwhelmed, our bodies might feel tight, shaky, hot, or exhausted and we cannot always explain why.

Many young people with autism experience higher levels of anxiety than their peers. Busy spaces or socially demanding environments can be particularly anxiety-provoking. Anxiety does not always look like worry. It can also present as silence, anger, perfectionism, tears, or trying extremely hard to stay in control.

Sometimes we reach a point where things feel too much.

This might look like:

a meltdown, where feelings come out all at once

a shutdown, where we go noticeably quiet, frozen, or withdrawn

These are not choices. They are not unruly behaviour. They

are our bodies trying to cope and responding to the difficult feelings we are having. We are not trying to be difficult. We are trying to show that something feels too much, too fast, or too hard for us to manage.

When we behave in an inappropriate way, please think about your reaction. Allowing us to get away with it easily sends the message that you believe we cannot behave in a better, more acceptable manner – which can have a direct impact on our self-image and self-esteem.

However, please make sure not to tell us off in public when we are not sure what went wrong, or when we are struggling to follow along, feel distracted, or are maybe experiencing sensory overload, as this will induce an overwhelming feeling of shame and failure.

If we do behave wrongly in class, we can be asked to leave and return when we feel ready, or, be allowed to return only after a conversation with the teacher after class. Accountability is important and should not be disregarded. The most effective approach is often to stay curious about what led to the behaviour while maintaining clear, fair and consistent expectations.

What helps is calm adults, fewer demands, quiet spaces, and time to feel safe again. What makes things worse is shouting, rushing us, or trying to talk things through before we are ready.

"Please remember to praise my decent work and effort, too."

"Please help me calm down before asking questions."

Social Experiences

Many of us want to make friends, but social rules can be confusing and tiring to work out. Group work, playgrounds, and unstructured time can feel confusing and overwhelming. Autism can make it difficult to automatically learn social rules and apply them in different settings. It can be helpful if people tell us social expectations and do not assume that we know them.

Small gestures of friendship from a peer are very encouraging, given that we often feel alone or misunderstood. Friendships may not always look the same for every autistic young person. Some of us enjoy having a small circle of close friends, some connect best through shared interests, and some prefer spending time alongside others without lots of conversation. Different ways of connecting can be just as meaningful.

"I want friends – I just don't always know how."

Things that *really help us*

Being prepared for change

Clear instructions, one step at a time, with visual reminders when possible

Calm, predictable adults

Movement breaks from class

Being consistent with how you react to our behaviour.

Quiet spaces we can use without getting into trouble

Being asked what support would help us participate, rather than assuming we cannot take part.

People noticing our strengths, the things we do well and the times we manage to overcome challenging things.

Being rushed or shouted at

Assuming we cannot cope.

Talking about us instead of to us

Changing plans without warning

Assuming we are rude, lazy, or defiant

Expecting us to explain feelings when we are already overwhelmed (instead give us time to calm down first).

Being embarrassed in front of others

"Please see me as normal and don't excuse inappropriate behaviour"

Things that *make it harder*



In summary

- We do not mean to be difficult even if we sometimes behave inappropriately or get into a cycle of inappropriate behavior.
- Please help us do our best in a world that can feel too loud, too fast, or too confusing.
- When you slow down, listen, and try to understand our world, you help us feel safe.
- When we feel safe, we can learn and grow.

If you are unsure about how to best support a child with autism, please reach out to a qualified and competent professional for advice.



**When we feel
safe, we can
*learn***

**when we feel
understood,
we can
*thrive.*** 

*Created by experts on autism, alongside *Being Autistic (And What That Actually Means)* by Niamh Garvey and *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew: Revised and Updated* by Ellen Notbohm*

