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## **Creating an Autism Friendly Learning or Work Environment**

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## Navigating the building and the day

- Starting in a new place can be really challenging for anyone. However, for autistic people it can be especially difficult. There are things you can do to ensure that their experience of provider is as positive as possible and they can achieve their full potential. This can be approached as 3 key areas;
  1. Transition into training/employment,
  2. The time spent in training/employment and
  3. Move onto their next step be that employment, training or further study at a higher level.

The key to this being successful is to effectively support the learner and to help reduce their anxiety.

## Sensory differences

- Autistic learners often process sensory information differently – they may be hypo sensitive or hyper sensitive. If hypo sensitive they may display sensory seeking behaviours, or they may not feel pain. If an autistic person is hyper-sensitive, they can be overwhelmed by too much sensory input. This can cause increased anxiety and impaired ability to focus. Sensory input can include noise, visuals, smells, taste, touch, texture and people.

## Communication

- If an autistic learner does not look at you when you are talking to them, it does not mean that they are not listening. Eye contact can be uncomfortable (or even painful) for some autistic people. They will be able to take in what you are saying far easier if they do not look directly at you. Avoid telling a learner to look at you when you are speaking to them. This does not apply to every autistic person.
- Ensure that instructional language is explicit and unambiguous. Avoid idioms, metaphors, similes, long questions and explanations. Break down instructions and support with visual information or lists (for some learners e-communication may be more appropriate).
- A learners' vocabulary is sometimes more advanced than their understanding of words; check that the learner understands what you have asked of the class.
- Break down tasks to make them easier to understand, even provide a writing framework if necessary.

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- Autistic learners often have auditory processing difficulties so you may need to give them time to process your question, rather than expecting an answer immediately.
- Autistic people may also give the appearance of being compliant and willing to do any task they are asked and not may not give a verbal indication they have not understood your request.
- They may sometimes mask that they have problems by deflection or not being able to stick to tasks. This may manifest itself by the learner not being able to complete tasks, varying the task given and/or just concentrating on the elements they find interesting or drawn to.

## **Visual**

- For autistic learners who are hypersensitive to light, try to keep the surroundings plain, with pastel coloured display boards and keeping distracting displays to a minimum. This may be difficult when sharing rooms but it would be good practice if Providers could adopt this as a policy.
- Avoid fluorescent lighting. Aim for dimmed or natural lighting with no flickering lights.
- Dim lights where possible, especially when displaying information on screen to ensure there is limited glare on the board.

## **Sound**

- Be aware that learners may be over sensitive to noise; allow learners to wear headphones/noise reducers as needed.
- Reduce and eliminate background noise.
- Provide quiet spaces to work, any noises can appear amplified. Autistic learners can sometimes concentrate more effectively when working alone.

## **Stimming**

- Do not try and prevent learners from engaging in 'stimming' behaviours such as hand flapping and pacing as they rely on these behaviours to self-regulate and avoid going into shut down or meltdown when they are feeling overwhelmed.

## Reducing the learner's anxiety

### Once they have started on their training programme/employment

- Explain the rules clearly and maintain boundaries consistently.
- Stay calm if the learner is pushing the boundaries.
- Expect to repeat or recheck the learners' understanding of tasks.
- Do not expect the learner to read your facial expression.
- If appropriate use social stories in pastoral time/review meetings to explain appropriate behaviour.
- Be aware that a learner may use a lot of energy trying to fit in and may get tired and agitated at certain parts of the day such as before using public transport.
- Warn in advance of changes/room change/change of Assessor.

## Managing the environment

### How to deal with unstructured time in Centre Based Learning

Unstructured time can be particularly stressful for autistic learners. Many autistic people may find it hard to build and sustain friendships/ relationships/ social rules and therefore break times can be a difficult time. They can often feel isolated or become socially isolated.

Autistic people often find it hard to cope with change, and imagine what to do during unstructured time and are unable to plan their free time – therefore they often find sameness, a structured activity or structured time easier to cope with.

This can lead to the autistic person experiencing high levels of anxiety. You can help to alleviate some of their anxiety by making some simple adjustments. Some top tips of how to do this are outlined below:

- Make a timetable of things to do during each unstructured time – break times and lunch times or free periods of the day.
- Organise some structured groups/clubs – could be a special interest club. Create accessible social opportunities.
- Create a project – like a photo project which involves a small group - something which can be done during unstructured times but gives real focus.
- Here are some ideas for suitable clubs – Warhammer, cards, board games, xbox, art, photography.
- Use social stories, where appropriate, to develop practice scripts to use in specific social situations.

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- Provide opportunities for non-verbal communication if required, such as participating in shared non-verbal games and hobbies, which encourage turn taking.
- Sign post to external activities, events and clubs which provide supported opportunities for social interaction with peers such as targeted social groups.
- Use peer mentors to support learners in developing social skills and practicing social interaction.
- Help raise awareness of how neuro-typical people may use language that may be confusing i.e.
  - a) Idioms (e.g. save your breath)
  - b) Double meanings
  - c) Sarcasm (e.g. saying 'great' when you have spilled ketchup on the table)
- Raise awareness of how autism can affect social interaction and encourage acceptance of diversity amongst their peers.

### **In the Workplace**

- It would be good practice for the Assessor and Employer to support the learner with unstructured time during the working day e.g. break and lunchtime. Some of the tips above could be adapted to the work environment.
- Employers should consider what they can do to better support neuro-diversity in the workplace.

## Appendix 1

### Inclusive teaching and learning checklist

Some learners with ALN may not need additional support, if the learning environment is inclusive.

These strategies can benefit all learners not just those with ALN.

<b>Name:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	
<b>Group/Session:</b>	

Inclusive Checklist	Progress Towards	Evidence Planning
<b>Planning</b>		
Tutors plan differentiated activities and outcomes.		
Tutors plan the role and expectation of the learning assistants.		
Individual learner targets are used to inform teaching strategies.		
<b>In lesson</b>		
Greet all learners and settle group effectively.		
Introduce the lesson giving the big picture and link to previous and future lessons.		
The lesson content aligns with the objectives and assessments.		
Lesson objectives displayed and explained. Check learners are clear on objectives. Refer to objectives during and at end of lesson.		
Teach study skills and emphasise when they are being used. Support learners when applying study skills, progressing to independent use.		

Inclusive Checklist	Progress Towards	Evidence Planning
<b>In lesson (continued)</b>		
Pair and group work used effectively for support and activities.		
Speak clearly, rephrase and give specific examples (real life).		
Regularly reflect, recap and consolidate during lesson to maintain pace and assess learning.		
Plan questioning to challenge all learners. Allow processing time before responding to questions.		
Activities are explained clearly (step-by-step) or modelled (show a good one).		
Transitions between activities are clearly explained and managed.		
Use alternatives to written tasks.		
Effective use of IT.		
Present and assess in different ways to engage and motivate learners.		
Provide positive feedback that is specific and constructive.		
<b>Environment</b>		
The learning areas are well organised and free from clutter.		
Clear learning area rules and routines are established. Behaviour management is consistent.		
Learning area seating and layout planned in advance.		
Key vocabulary displayed and used.		

Inclusive Checklist	Progress Towards	Evidence Planning
<b>Environment (continued)</b>		
“Resource boxes” should be available for numeracy, literacy and topic.		
<b>Teaching materials</b>		
Provide electronic copies of presentations and handouts (prior to lesson).		
Limit the amount of text on resources, use bullets.		
Use suitable font, spacing, colours.		
Use visual displays – images, charts, diagrams.		
<b>Learning assistant/ peer-to-peer</b>		
Helping, explaining, and simplifying information.		
Help learner focus.		
Provide encouragement.		
Support organisational and study skills.		
<b>Notes :</b>		

*\*This checklist was provided by Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Department, Coleg Cambria*

# Appendix 2

## 'My Personal Profile' template

Learner Name: .....

Route: .....

Things I like to do  
(give 3 examples)

What I want to achieve at .....  
(give 3 examples)


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**What could affect my learning?**

**How can we overcome this?**

What could affect my learning?	How can we overcome this?

**Are there signs we need to know so that we can help you if you are getting agitated/ anxious?**

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**Useful contacts**

(Eg. CAMHS, social worker, PA, foster carer, YOS worker)

**Attendance and wellbeing comments**

Date plan agreed: ..... Signed: .....

**Is the plan working?**

Review date	Review comment	Learner signature	Tutor signature