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## **MODULE 22: Autism in the classroom**

Autism has a significant effect on the ability of those with the disorder to participate in mainstream education. Here you will learn about the educational options on offer for those on the autism spectrum. We will discuss the accommodations made for ASD students in mainstream settings and differentiated instruction in numeracy and literacy. You will learn about goal setting procedures in place for learning before the module concludes with information on assessment methods and parameters for measuring success.

22.1 Inclusion and proper placement

22.2 Accommodations

22.3 Differentiated instruction

22.4 Individualised educational plans

22.5 Monitoring success

### **22.1 Inclusion and proper placement**

How severely an individual's daily functioning is affected by ASD, as well as access to personal or government funding and parental preference, will determine their educational choices. Here we explore some of the options.



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### **22.1.1 Special Needs Schools**

Special needs schools aim to provide specialized care for children with many types of disabilities and disorders. There are special schools that cater for a wide range of special educational needs, and some which are specialised to autism alone. Every special school has differing available facilities and areas of expertise.

Schools specialised to autism will have a full complement of therapies and facilities available to ensure children on the autism spectrum can be comfortable and realise their potential. These might include sensory provisions such as soft play, hydrotherapy pools, saunas, sensory experience rooms, water play and time out rooms. Expert staff often include Occupational Therapists, Speech and Language Therapists and Clinical Psychologists. This is in addition to educational staff, who provide differentiated access to the National Curriculum or the school's alternative, tailored to the child's level of ability and comprehension.

Many schools will offer day pupil, full boarding, weekly boarding and flexible boarding options, as well as respite care breaks for children and young people who do not usually attend the school. Some children might live at the school every night of the year, while others will stay during term time or on an ad-hoc basis. There will be staff assigned to pastoral care and family liaison, as



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well as social and recreational activities. Boarding spaces are often designed to look like a home, offer individual rooms, and are thoughtfully prepared with the sensory needs of those on the autism spectrum in mind.

### **22.1.2 Autism Units**

Autism units aim to provide both specialist care and inclusion with mainstream education and neurotypical children. In this arrangement, self-contained classrooms and therapy rooms dedicated for children on the autism spectrum are found within a school providing education for neurotypical children.

One of the main benefits of this arrangement is its flexibility to foster both integration and ability-appropriate instruction. Children in the unit are likely to become part of some sort of integration program, spending some time per day or per week in the mainstream classroom. They might also get the opportunity to participate in plays, sports days, projects and school trips with their neurotypical peers, which may help them to make friends. Some children will gradually spend more time in the mainstream classroom and less in the unit, and in this way the latter acts as a bridge to smooth the transition from specialised to mainstream education. Perhaps still providing relevant therapies for the child and giving extra support, staff at the unit who are familiar with the child can become a safety net in times of difficulty and will be able to advise the child's teachers on learning and behavioural issues that may arise. This method of integration offers more support, is more streamlined and is far easier logistically than a child moving from a special needs school to a mainstream school.

Some children will remain in the autism unit for the majority of their education, particularly when mainstream teachers and classrooms are not well-equipped enough to accommodate their differences effectively in an integrative setting. In the self-contained classroom, there will be a much higher teacher-pupil ratio, a differentiated curriculum that takes each child's strengths and challenges into account, therapies with qualified professionals, and sensory provision. Staff in these units will be experienced in and/or trained to care for and educate children on the autism spectrum and there should be a wide range of facilities to make this happen effectively, such as visual aids, sensory experiences and a vast array of autism-specific learning materials.

Some children on the autism spectrum will, either from the beginning of their schooling or following special school or unit education, receive their education in the mainstream classroom. This is particularly likely to be true in the cases of those at the high functioning end of the spectrum (HFA) and those with Asperger's Syndrome.



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Depending on the child's needs, they may be supported in a number of different ways. A Learning Support Assistant might be assigned to work with a child on the autism spectrum, assisting him or her with the rules and procedures of the classroom and school, as well as academic work. An assistant might be employed on a full time basis to work with one child, or may divide his or her time between a number of children. The support given may be in the classroom, outside the classroom on a one-to-one or group basis, or a combination of both approaches. Depending on how well the teacher judges the child is integrating and achieving, the hours of the assistant working with the child might be increased or decreased. The time with the assistant may even be stopped altogether if the child is integrating and working particularly successfully.

Some schools have additional classes or therapy sessions for children that require them. These may be relevant to children on the autism spectrum, meaning that they will be taken out of lessons or breaktimes to attend. Each school is different, but some examples may include social skills or friendship groups, speech and language therapy, swimming lessons, music therapy, play therapy, art therapy, catch up classes in various subjects and reading practice.

### **22.2 Accommodations**

Teachers, whether working in special schools, autism units or in the mainstream classroom, make adaptations to their teaching and behavioural management methods to ensure that children on the autism spectrum can learn effectively.

#### **22.2.1 Structure and expectations**



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One accommodation teachers make for ASD children in the classroom is that of planning and forewarning. Routine and predictability are of paramount importance in reducing anxiety in those on the autism spectrum. To accommodate this, teachers will ensure that students have a copy of the timetable, perhaps in a pictorial format, both for the upcoming week and the day ahead. If there to be any planned variations in routine, teachers will let the child know where possible. Even planning to take a lesson outside can cause serious anxiety if unannounced, so teachers inform ASD students of any changes from the norm in their lesson plans. Children on the autism spectrum also require forewarning for transitions between activities to minimise stress when disengaging from the previous task. This is often achieved with the a verbal reminder, and possibly the use of a 5 or 10 minute sandtimer placed on the child's desk in the run up to an activity change.

When teaching those on the autism spectrum, conscious teachers make sure to use clear, unambiguous instructions, preferably with visual aids. This applies for both educational and social instructions. The unwritten rules of the classroom that other children pick up easily may not be intelligible to the child with ASD. Teachers are



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advised to provide comprehensive rules and expectations for behaviour, social interactions and academic work.

### **22.2.2 The learning environment**

Teachers should also make accommodation for the sensory issues of children on the autism spectrum, being aware of the sensory stimuli present in the classroom and providing measures for ASD children to regulate themselves in response to these stimuli.

Children on the autism spectrum can be very sensitive to light, sound and colour. If the child sits by a window, they should have the ability to pull a blind down to prevent exposure to strong sunlight. Fluorescent strip lights should not cause glare. If they are excessively bright or they make a humming sound, they should be turned off in the area that the ASD child sits if at all possible. It may be necessary to provide a lamp with softer light quality. Any other equipment that makes low-level continuous noise should be switched off if possible. Children on the autism spectrum should not sit facing brightly coloured or cluttered walls if at all avoidable.

Even though environmental stimuli can be limited, they cannot be completely controlled. It should be expected that a child on the autism spectrum will suffer from sensory hypersensitivity and overstimulation from time to time and this should be catered for with regard to seating arrangements and conditions for excusal from the room. Often three options are provided for children on the autism spectrum – the child's customary seat among the rest of the class, an individual table that is off to the side where there are less sensory stimuli, and a place the child go in times of overstimulation where there are minimal sensory stimuli such as noise and bright light. This place might be outside the classroom, though it must be made clear to the student and his peers that it is not for punishment or disciplinary purposes. Teachers might direct the student to where they feel is most suitable with regard to their current state, or the student might be given the authority to choose for herself.

In the case of understimulation, a sensory object might be provided. Children might be given a brightly-colored stress ball, sticky tack or another sensory object to allow them to find stimulation without causing disruption.

## **22.3 Differentiated instruction**

### **22.3.1 Literacy**

The most prevalent reading instruction methods at present are phonics programs that teach children individual sounds, soundblending and decoding techniques. Children on the autism spectrum often do not respond to these methods as successfully as they do to 'sight word



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learning', learning words individually by sight. ASD children learn through concrete, visual experience. Phonics programs are often primarily abstract, in that the words are divorced from any meaningful context, and auditory in nature. They do not find alphabet sounds easy to learn and find the decoding process especially taxing. Though phonics can be taught to children on the autism spectrum, it should be taught in a fun way using activities, games and software, and should be secondary to a sight word program.

Due to their visual learning strengths, ASD children can pick up words by sight with great success, particularly when these words are in context. Beginning with words such as the child's name and their favourite toys, activities and interests can be an effective way to begin literacy. Creating books of words with accompanying pictures such as 'My Life' or 'My Classroom Words' can become favourites with the child and foster literacy development. Pictures and words could be attached to the book with Velcro to allow matching activities. Telling stories is another effective means for teaching literacy to children on the spectrum, particularly tales of family life, pets, friends and favourite toys or television characters. Children often become particularly attached to one book or story, and this is encouraged in this context. Repeated reading of a text increases sight word knowledge.

The fine motor skill issues and visual coordination difficulties presented by autism may make writing particularly challenging and frustrating. Using large sized crayons that encourage a wide grip can help. Alternatively, many ASD children prefer to use computers and word processing to express themselves in the written word. Other choices include fill in the blanks, multiple choice, scribing and division of written tasks into smaller components.

A difficulty with understanding of sequences is another challenge posed by autism. This can cause a problem in comprehension and composition. Sequencing activities such as ordering cards that depict scenes from a familiar story can help boost sequencing abilities and improve the literacy skills of those on the autism spectrum.

### **22.3.2 Numeracy**

There is a link between strong mathematic talent and autism. Teachers implement differentiation strategies to bring ASD children's proficiency and talent in mathematics to the fore.

One problem ASD children can have with numeracy and mathematics is interpreting the sophisticated verbal instruction and complex vocabulary that accompany visual examples. The language of mathematics is so different from everyday vocabulary that



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children with language processing difficulties may find it a barrier to mathematic success. It is advised that ASD students are provided with, or assist in making their own, reference books. One should illustrate each mathematical concept visually and another should constitute a mathematic terminology dictionary.

Another challenge might be the symbolic representation of amount in the form of numerals. Creating a strong link between the practical reality of a number and the symbolic numeral can be done by using counters or objects to count out and match to the numeral.

Many ASD children also find manipulating a pencil to be challenging. Encouraging the use of a pencil for easy, fun activities such as drawing, tracing and dot-to-dot helps the child to get accustomed to using a pencil and creates positive experiences and memories of pencil use.

Other differentiation strategies used include instruction with concrete objects and practical examples. For example, fractions might be taught by cutting a cake or folding a piece of paper. Addition and subtraction might be learned through manipulating marbles, counters or shells.

The instructional session might be broken up into segments, separating one concept from another. This helps the ASD learner to avoid confusion and anxiety, thereby increasing their chances of mathematic success







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## 22.4 Individualized educational plans

### 22.4.1 What are IEPs?

An IEP, or an Individualised (or Individual) Education Plan, is a list of goals set for a child's developmental and educational attainment. Though not a legal requirement, it is very widely used among educational providers for SEN children and is compiled by teachers, therapists and, where possible, the child themselves. When a child on the autism spectrum has a statement of special educational needs, this will include long term objectives. The IEP provides shorter term objectives.

An IEP includes:

- Three to five short term targets for the child in the following areas:
  - Communication
  - Behaviour
  - Social Skills
  - Literacy
  - Numeracy
- The timescale for the target
- The help that will be given to facilitate the child reaching the targets
- How the help will be given, by whom and how often
- How often the help and targets will be reviewed
- How it will be determined whether the target has been reached
- How it will be determined whether the help is to be continued or has been successful

IEP targets should follow the SMART acronym, being Specific (clearly focused and easy to understand), Measurable (possible to work out whether the target has been achieved), Achievable (realistic according to the ability of the child), Relevant (compatible with the long term goals set in the child's statement) and Time-bound (to be completed within a specific timeframe).

Examples of IEP objectives:

#### Example 1

Rebecca will observe the rules of the classroom and thereby improve her social skills. This goal includes the following objectives:



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Rebecca will raise her hand and wait to be selected before talking aloud in Circle Time. She will be prompted to raise her hand by the teacher pointing to the 'raise hand' card on the board.

Rebecca will not hit or scratch her peers. If she does so, she will be removed to another area of the classroom or to the chill-out zone until she is calm. She will apologize to whomever she has hurt or attempted to hurt.

Rebecca will reply to '*Good morning, Rebecca*' with '*Good morning*'.

When Rebecca is called by the Speech Therapist, she will disengage from her activity and go to her speech and language session without protest. Teachers will give Rebecca a 10 minute and 5 minute warning before the Therapist is due to arrive. If she continues to protest, teachers and therapist will investigate why Rebecca dislikes this activity and try to implement strategies to make her more comfortable.

These objectives will be reviewed at the end of the Spring Term.

### Example 2

Rebecca will learn number bonds to 10.

The teacher will present 10 counters. Then the teacher will present the first half of a number bond with counters.

Rebecca will use counters to show the second half of the number bond.

Rebecca will then use a pen and a whiteboard to write down the number bond sum in numerals e.g.  $10 = 4 + 6$

Rebecca will show every number bond correctly, without help, 5 times before this objective is reached.

### **22.4.2 P-Scales**

While reading the previous section, you may have wondered how teachers and other professionals involved in an ASD child's education choose relevant IEP targets. One tool used is the P-scales.

The National Curriculum is the set of standards used to determine what all state-educated children in the UK will learn, when they will learn it and the levels of proficiency in various skills and learning outcomes that are to be attained. The NC is divided into Key Stages, from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4, which dictate the subject matter that will be taught, and levels,



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from Level 1 to Level 8, which measure specifics of attainment, skills, knowledge and understanding.

For children on the autism spectrum and other children with SEN, many of the Level 1 targets of attainment are not realistically achievable. This is particularly relevant for non-verbal students. The P-scales were introduced in 2007 to ensure that educators were still able to track the progress of children working below or up to Level 1. The P-scales are divided into Levels 1-3, which detail general developmental attainments, and Levels 4-8, which are divided into subjects and lead onto Level 1 of the National Curriculum levels.

P-scales can be used as a shared framework between educators, therapists and parents to discuss development, facilitating a coordinated approach between home and school. The P-scale levels provide clear pathways to developmental and educational progress, potentially increasing ambition and improving outcomes for children on the autism spectrum. They also provide incremental breakdowns of the longer term targets from the statement of special educational needs, which encourages parents, teachers and pupils to recognise and celebrate progress on a regular basis and might make these long-term targets more easily achievable.





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## **22.5 Monitoring success**

### **22.5.1 Reviews of IEPs and Statements of Special Educational Needs**

#### Reviews of IEPs

The educator is responsible for carrying out, gathering evidence for and reviewing students' IEPs. It is advised by the SEN Code of Practice that an IEP review should be carried out termly or at the very least twice a year, if the child is beyond the Early Years Foundation Stage. Ideally this review should involve the parents, all teachers and therapists involved in the IEP targets, and, if possible, the child herself.



The review allows all those involved in the child's development and education to recognise successes and to identify challenges. It also facilitates self-reflective practice by highlighting where interventions have had the desired effect and where they have not. This informs future interventions and strategies, ensuring that ineffective practice does not continue. An IEP review that brings the parents together with involved professionals offers a chance to make sure everyone is on the same page with regards to targets for the child's development and ensure that



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best practice is carried out across contexts. The review might also reveal more about the nature of the child's autism spectrum disorder by their response to their IEP targets, allowing future intervention to become more closely tailored to the child's needs.

The IEPs of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage should be continually under review, with regular face-to-face discussions between educators, therapists and parents, wherever possible.

### Reviews of statements of special educational needs

Generally known as 'statement reviews', these are the responsibility of the local authority. Because a statement of special educational needs is a legally binding document that obligates the local authority to provide the stated child with the type of education set out within it, the review is required by law at least once a year.

The review will ensure that the education provided is as stated in the statement and changes or revisions may be made in light of the child's progress and development or changing circumstances. The review process includes a meeting with the child's parents who are permitted to attend with a friend or adviser.

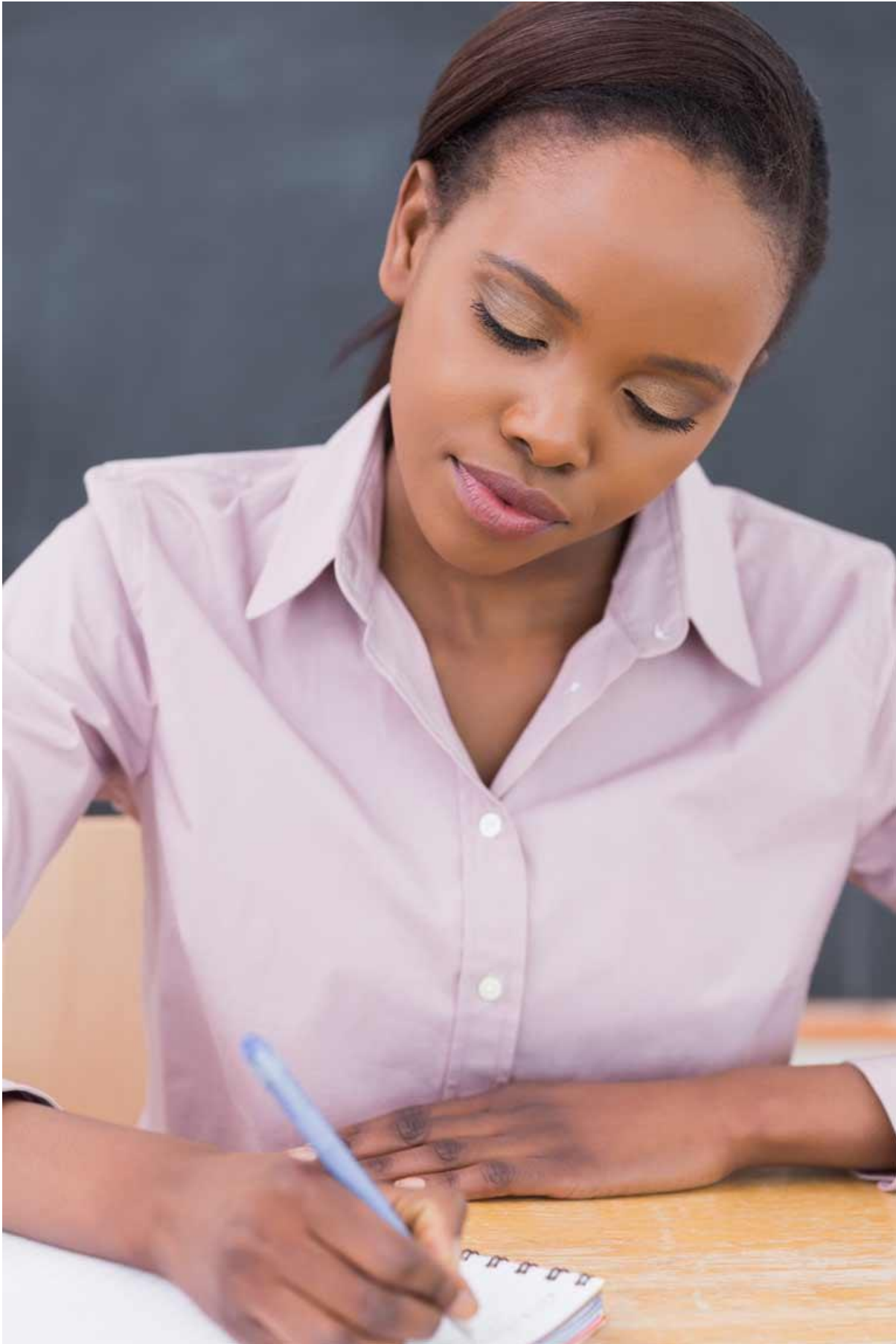
As of 2014-5, government policies with regard to SEN provision are changing. Support for children with special educational needs will be carried out through 'SEN support' and the new Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. It is unclear as yet how and when the reviews will be carried out, but it is thought that the EHC plan reviews will follow a similar process to the system it is replacing.

### **22.5.2 Other successes**



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Because statements of special educational need and IEPs generally consist of only a few targets, educators and parents should expect any number of other successes and challenges in the classroom. Whether these successes and challenges are educational, behavioural, social or practical in nature, taking them into account will ensure that the child's needs beyond his or her statement and IEP are recognised.

A common way to monitor these types of successes and challenges is by keeping a school-home diary which details any events of note throughout the school day or at home. As well as highlighting achievements, this can help parents and educators to identify patterns of certain behaviours or challenges that they want to assist the child in overcoming. The school-home diary then becomes a record both of measures taken in facilitating the child's success in the highlighted areas and of the child's responses to those measures.

### **22.5.3 Rewarding success**

When success is achieved in relation to a short term or long term goal, or even outside of any set goals, it should be celebrated. Many children on the autism spectrum achieve in small increments, but this should not prevent their success being recognised.

If an ASD child attends a mainstream school or an autism unit within a mainstream school, school reward systems for good behaviour, achievement in academic work or any other aspect of school life can be used in exactly the same way as they would with neurotypical children.

Award ceremonies, celebratory assemblies and prizes in any type of school can boost morale, self-esteem and motivation to achieve in ASD children, though educators must be mindful to prepare the child for any disruption in routine the celebration might cause.

**[EXAM LINK](#)**