north east autism society



WORLD AUTISM ACCEPTANCE WEEK

Primary School Teacher's Toolkit

31st March – 6th April

Since 2019, the North East Autism Society has been passionately campaigning for autism acceptance, rather than awareness. And every year we encourage as many schools as possible across the region to get involved and join us on our mission.

Your pack contains:

Helpful resources covering everything from 'What is autism' to common myths and misconceptions about autistic people, as well as a range of ideas for classroom-based sessions and activities to help you shape your lessons throughout Autism Acceptance Week.

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What is Autism?

Autism is the word used to describe a lifelong difference in a person's neurology. It's very difficult to say exactly what 'it' is because it can't be separated from the person.

Edinburgh university describe it as: "A way of being in the world; it's a way of processing the things that come into your body (sights and sounds and so on). It affects how you perceive and interact with people. There will also be differences in how you plan and manage activities, and organising that information can translate into different behaviour."

In essence, an autistic person will see, process and understand the world in a different way from someone who isn't autistic, for all of their life.

Historically the focus on autism has been through the language of 'impairments' and deficits, instead of differences or even skills and abilities.

We at the North East Autism Society have had to change the way we think and as a result, the work that we do, with most of this stemming from listening to and working with autistic people, who have been the voices consistently missing from the autism narrative.

Without denying challenge, our aim has been to help the wider world shift to understand and accept those of us who are autistic.

Research published by Newcastle University in 2021 suggests that around ***one in 57 (1.76%)*** *children in the UK will be autistic.*

Neurodiversity explained

Neurodiversity is more than just a term – it's both a fact - and a movement.

It's the belief that all 'brain wiring' – or neurological difference - is essentially a normal variation in humanity.

Like biodiversity - neurodiversity understands and sees wonder in the fact that differences exist, but doesn't place more or less value on these different variations. In a nutshell - we're all in this together.

No more us and them.



Dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism, ADHD, Tourette Syndrome and many more neurodevelopmental 'differences' would come under this banner, alongside what has traditionally been termed 'neurotypical'.

This helps us understand the complex nature of 'brain wiring' where there is both individuality and overlap; commonalities and difference.

This new understanding helps remove the stigma of deficits and disorders - and with it a toxic cure culture, subjecting people to harmful therapies and treatments in pursuit of an elusive 'normal.'

THIS BETTER WORLD FOR ALL OF US IS POSSIBLE.

WILL YOU JOIN US?

Fact check:

5 Common Myths and Misconceptions

Myth 1. Autism can be cured

On the surface this one could seem sensible. If autism was a disease – then it stands to reason that there could be a cure. But as autism is just the word used to describe a normal variation in human brain 'wiring' it can neither be 'cut out' or treated away.

We're passionate about this one because believing something can be cured inherently means we think of it in negative terms – like it's an abnormality.

Myth 2. Only boys are autistic

In the past it was thought that autism was a male 'condition', however, with better research and evidence we know this isn't the case. And now we know this, we are seeing an increase in numbers of girls being diagnosed.

It's also important to note that the way girls 'mask' things they struggle with often aligns with social expectations of what girls should be doing. So an autism diagnosis may present itself earlier with a boy, but that doesn't mean girls are not autistic.

Myth 3. Autistic people can't show empathy

It is a common assumption that autistic individuals won't be able to empathise because they struggle to communicate. But this isn't true.

It is true to say, however, that one commonality that some autistic people share is that they often find reading social situations tricky and can struggle to 'put themselves in someone else's shoes'.

Conversely, it's very common, also, for autistic people to be highly empathetic.

Myth 4. Autistic people can't make eye contact

Let's be frank, looking someone straight in the face can be a challenge for anyone and for some autistic people eye contact is not just difficult, but downright painful.

The reason this one crops up so often is that it used to be part of a doctor's checklist used to identify autism... until we realised two things: one – it's not true for everyone (especially if you are diagnosed as an adult and have learned how to cope with what society expects) and 2 – every autistic person is unique and there are as many children, young people and adults who can make eye contact as there are that can't.

Myth 5. Autistic children are just naughty

All children can be naughty... autistic or not. But we think what this one is referring to is the snap judgement offered when autistic children may be struggling to deal with a situation or some kind of change in their environment.

While all autistic people process the world around them in a way that is unique to them, there are some commonalities. Sensory overload is one. Often referred to as a 'meltdown', if a child who experiences sensory stimuli in a powerful way is taken to an unusual or unfamiliar environment this can be an assault on their senses.

A shopping mall, for example. Noise, light, crowds, smells, temperature... throw in any communication challenges also common for children who are autistic and what do we get? Something that, with a cursory glance, could come across as a naughty child.

Sensory differences

Our senses help us understand what is happening in the world around is. We all experience messages from our senses differently, and many autistic people can have difficulty processing this sensory information.

That can make them feel overwhelmed, anxious or distressed. It can even be painful.

We have eight senses, and all are vital to how we experience the world and how we react:



Sight. If we struggle to process visual stimuli, we might find it difficult to organise visual information or filter out unnecessary details.



Sound. If we struggle with auditory stimuli, we may have difficulty filtering out background noise.



Touch. If we struggle with tactile stimuli, we may feel certain types of touch as painful or dangerous.



Taste. If we struggle with gustatory stimuli, we may be a picky eater and object to certain food textures.



Smell. If we struggle with olfactory stimuli, we may find smells distracting and overwhelming.



Vestibular – our sense of balance. If we struggle with vestibular processing, we may come across as clumsy.



Proprioception – an awareness of where our body is in space. If we struggle with proprioception, we may have difficulty waiting in line or knowing how hard or soft to push or pull things.



Interoception – our internal body sensations, like hunger, stress, or pain. If we struggle with interoception, we may not be aware that we are thirsty or need the toilet.

Some people are described as **"hyposensitive"** or under-responsive to certain sensory stimuli. They might actively seek sensations by fidgeting, rocking or chewing non-food items.

Meanwhile, others are described as **"hypersensitive"** to certain stimuli, such as loud noises or bright lights. They can be in a constant state of alert, waiting for the next sensory assault.

People can be a mix of both hyper- and hyposensitive to certain senses at the same time.

It is vital to understand that sensory processing difficulties are not a case of simply "liking" or "disliking" things but affect every aspect of life. We must be aware of people's sensory profiles and respectful of how it feels for them.

See
The senses – Autistic advocate Kieran Rose

Sensory - North East Autism Society factsheet

Communication differences

Autistic people may communicate differently to non-autistic people, but it shouldn't be seen as a deficit or a flaw.

Common differences include:

- Understanding non-verbal cues such as facial expressions or gestures
- The speed, pitch or intonation of someone's speech
- Understanding abstract language, humour or sarcasm
- Using other ways to communicate, rather than speech

Research shows that autistic people can communicate well with other autistic people. So rather than seeing the autistic person as having a problem communicating with non-autistic people, we should see it as a shared responsibility to come up with a solution.

This may involve adapting how you communicate, rather than assuming you are automatically right.

You should check you are making sense. A lot of slang words and phrases (like "hang on a minute") do not make sense in a concrete way.

It's important to give someone time and space to process what you are saying. Simply repeating things can be overwhelming.

Be aware that the context – background noise, or someone's emotional or physical state – can affect someone's ability to communicate.

Finally, don't make presumptions. If someone doesn't use speech, it doesn't mean they can't understand what you're saying .. or vice versa.

"I was in a school to observe a child, and he went up to a Teaching Assistant with sand-covered hands and made a noise. The TA said, 'use your words. What is it you're asking me?' But he was communicating with her, and it would have helped lower his anxiety if she'd accepted that form of communication. He didn't like having messy hands and he was probably overwhelmed by that sensation, and using words was going to be really tricky for him at that time" – Jodie Smitten, independent specialist working with autistic children.

See
An introduction to the double empathy problem - Autistic advocate Kieran Rose

Communication - North East Autism Society factsheet



Stimming

"Stimming" is short for a self-stimulating behaviour. It often refers to repetitive movements or sounds, such as hand-flapping, rocking or twirling.

People "stim" for many reasons. It can help them concentrate, process information and communicate.

It can also help them regulate their emotions. It can help people feel calmer when they're experiencing anxiety, overwhelm or stress, and can also be an expression of positive emotions such as excitement.

Stimming can also be a form of sensory regulation (see "Sensory Differences"). If someone is under stimulated, they may rock or spin to get more sensory input. If they are hypersensitive, they may stim as a way to focus on different sensations.

At school, young people might use discreet stims to avoid drawing attention to themselves. This could be twirling their hair, fidgeting with their fingers under a desk, or kicking a shoe on and off their foot. It can be misinterpreted as boredom or restlessness.

If stimming is not harmful, it should be understood as an effective way for people to regulate and calm themselves.

See
Stimming – on www.autisticality.co.uk

Masking

"Masking" is a term used to describe how many autistic children, young people and adults work hard to hide differences in how they think, feel and behave.

They hide, suppress or exaggerate parts of their identity to help them fit in and try to meet people's expectations of them.

They do it to keep themselves safe from bullying and discrimination, and avoid the stigma associated with being "different".

Sometimes they are not aware they are doing it because it has become second nature. And even when they do, parts of them may have been so suppressed that they can't just "take off the mask", even when they are with loved ones or on their own.

Masking might involve:

- **Mimicking other people's facial expressions and how they talk**
- **Pretending to have the same interests as other people and playing down your own interests**
- **"Scripting" or having ready-made sentences to use in social situations**
- **Suppressing your "stims" (see "Stimming")**
- **Hiding when you're stressed or overwhelmed by sensory stimuli**

Whatever form it takes, masking is an exhausting process. At the end of a school day, children and young people may need to withdraw and decompress, or they may become very distressed and have a meltdown.

Masking is one of the reasons that autistic children and young people may go unidentified at school. Teachers might not see any issues during the day, but the child melts down when they reach the safe space of home.

Burnout happens when people are so exhausted they can no longer keep up the mask. Autistic people describe it as feeling like their mind and body are shutting down. Then they need an extended period of withdrawal and rest.

"Autistic people describe masking as a survival strategy rather than just a social thing. It isn't just something that allows them to fit in in social situations. It's something that makes them feel like they might be able to maintain some safety when they're interacting with others and avoid further harm" – Dr Amy Pearson, University of Sunderland

See
Masking – autistic advocate Kieran Rose and NEAS

Emotional wellbeing – a series of factsheets from the North East Autism Society, including masking and burnout

Attention tunnels

Many autistic people focus attention on a small number of interests at any one time, sometimes in an all-encompassing way. It can be difficult for them to switch attention from one thing to another.

This is in contrast to most neurotypical people who can consider a number of issues at any one time.

When someone is intensely focused on a topic, it can feel very enjoyable and allows them to concentrate in great depth. But from the outside, it can look as if they are ignoring other people.

If they are pulled out of an attention tunnel too quickly, it can cause great distress – which can look like challenging behaviour.

See
An introduction to monotropism – autistic advocate Kieran Rose

Visual schedules, countdowns and allowing extra time can help make transitions go more smoothly.

Examples of reasonable adjustments in school

1

Flexible start / finishing times

These are peak times for busy crowds and schools bells both of which could cause unnecessary anxiety. Also allowing an alternative entrance / exit to everyone else may help a child to feel more safe during the transition.

2

Sensory adjustments

Adjustments such as alternative seating arrangements, fidget toys, ear defenders and movements breaks should all be considered as realistic and appropriate adjustments. Uniform policies should be relaxed for children who struggle with the texture or fitting of the uniform. Children should never be discouraged or stopped from stimming (unless harmful).

3

Classroom seating

Giving a child choice over where they sit in the classroom can help to decrease anxieties and may improve learning and focus. For example sitting near to the door gives the child a clear exit if they begin to feel overwhelmed.

4

Learning adaptions

Examples include: visually presenting tasks, verbal and written instructions, option to write or type work, planners and checklists, chunking information and allowing opportunities for doodling.

5

Time out cards to leave class and regular check ins

Both of these tools support emotional regulation during the school day. Do not expect a child to initiate these things themselves-they will often need to be prompted.

6

Behaviour policies

Detentions or punishments should not be given for anything caused by executive functioning issues or meltdowns for example. The child is not intentionally doing these things.

7

Preparation

Predictable environments reduce anxiety and give the child a sense of control. Last minute changes can cause a lot of distress. Inform the child and parents in advance where possible of any timetable or routine changes that will affect them.

8

Break times

Arrangements during this period such as: allowing a child to go into the dinner hall before others, a safe place chosen by the child to go to eat or chill out, structure needed during breaks, an adult that knows the child and will be available for the child to go to if they need to.

Alternative seating options for classrooms

Sitting still for long periods of time can be incredibly difficult and uncomfortable for any child. Some children will learn better when given the freedom to move around and regulate. Allowing a child flexible seating options also gives them control over their environment and their learning.

1

Wobble cushions and wedges

These cushions allow for movement whilst sitting. This helps a child to stay focused and alert but also allows them to regulate. The cushions could also be helpful for a child who struggles with their posture. The cushions can come with and without bumps which might help to 'wake up' a child's vestibular system.

2

Standing stations

Standing allows a person much more movement and also increases blood flow. This increase helps to circulate more oxygen to the brain which in turn helps with taking in information and attention.

3

Resistance bands

Giving a child the opportunity to move their feet and legs whilst sitting gives an outlet for excess energy which allows for better concentration and focus. Resistance bands are perfect for children who seek pressure pressure and heavy work.

4

Rocking chairs

Rocking is a great way for a person to stimulate their vestibular system. The rocking motion also has calming benefits and helps a person develop a sense of balance.

5

Bean bags

Due to a beanbag's shape and density it can be adjusted for maximum comfort and benefit. Also the pressure on the body provides a calming sense of security.

6

Balance boards

These boards can be used under a child's desk for their feet. They are good for supporting a child's proprioception system and awareness of themselves in space. Balance boards can also improve coordination.

Golden Rules

As a general rule language, particularly in this field, changes frequently. It can be difficult to remember all of the dos and don'ts.

To make it easier we've pulled together our 'Golden Rules'.

DO... SAY AUTISTIC

Use 'autistic' not 'has autism'. Also avoid using ASC/ASD and Asperger's Syndrome.

"Autism is not a removable condition, it is central to your being. It's an important aspect of your identity, as much your race gender, job etc."

DON'T... USE FUNCTIONING LABELS



Functioning labels are stigmatising and create assumptions. 'High' functioning implies less need and 'low' functioning presumes a lack of competency.

DO... ADVOCATE ONE VOICE



Avoid anything that conveys a sense of 'us' and 'them'

When we speak about autistic people we say 'those of us who are autistic'

DON'T... SAY LIVING WITH AUTISM



Or People with autism / born with autism.

"Autism isn't a dog that lives with me, or a twin who was born alongside me... it's who I am"

DO... TALK ABOUT HAVING NEURODIVERSITY



Neurodiversity isn't another word for autism. We all fall under a banner of neurodiversity. It's about individuals having different brains. Within that though, some of us have typical neurology and others are Neurodivergent in different ways.

DON'T... CONVEY PITY



Or suggest that autism is inherently negative.

No using terms like 'suffers from', and avoid talk of deficits.

Never say definitives – ie. Autistic people can't.

What parents want schools to know and do

"There needs to be a lot more understanding of masking!"

"Children need to stim, they also need movement breaks."

"Understanding of friendships needed, not just sent to a room to sit on computer at break times."

"Completed up-to-date training courses with people who are experts in this field. Ideally are autistic themselves or a parent/family member who is autistic."

"If a strategy isn't working, don't force it. Sometimes things can be implemented at a later date. Other times not at all.

"Accept that every child/person who is autistic is different in their own way. They don't all fit into the same outdated concept of what autism is. Notably girls."

"Routine and schedules are important. Advance warning of any changes is more than helpful. Be aware of sensory issues, what they are and how they affect the individual."

"Not to punish lack of homework without agreement from parents. So often they need to recover at home and the demand of homework just isn't worth the time and effort in the long run."

"Ask the child what they need. Listen carefully to what they tell you. Don't let your preconceptions about how you as a teacher need to manage the whole class, stand in the way of supporting this child."

"Anxiety caused by uncertainty could be minimised by explaining the requirements of a given classroom task, in whatever lesson. Break down the elements of the whole into bite-sized pieces and always physically demonstrate first. Many autistic people like me are visual learners, take longer to process information and rely on copying tasks to complete them."

"Never make assumptions about autistic people, you'll be wrong."

"Anxious parents are usually anxious because of valid reasons, whether that be honest fears or previous experience. Be the professional that wins their trust."

"Just because a child complies without poor behaviour absolutely does not mean they are not struggling."

"Believe the parents: just because you don't see it in school doesn't mean it isn't true. People (autistic or not) act differently in different situations - largely dependent on how safe they feel. Masking is real and it can cause real problems now and in the future. Also, believe the child if they do ask for help. Don't expect them to ask again if you fail them the first time."

"Be aware that anxiety and feeling sick going in, clinging to parents on departure etc, can be a flag for autism (it was for us but no one ever raised the possibility. I was just treated like a neurotic parent making things worse by 'hanging around').

"Do not assume a child is just withdrawn/shy because they could well be an autistic masker. We only found out during lockdown when his constant anxiety vanished overnight, so we began home educating, and then gradually he has unmasked over the past 3 years."

"Don't give negative points on class charts if they can't find their equipment - some struggle with organisation. I know my son does, he will go in with all equipment but may not be able to find it in the 2 seconds the teachers asked and then to put a big negative doesn't help their self-esteem."

"To put in place adequate lunch and break time supervision of children who need it - by suitably autism trained staff members!"

"A sensory room in every school."

"To make sure that staff working with our children have had at least some training on children with autism and know how to support them. I have been on both sides working in a school setting and now with an autistic grandchild. Staff need to understand things like stimming, sensory input, hypermobility, PECS communication."

"Don't make parents feel like they are THAT parent because they are always having to come to you before and after school!"

Lesson Plans and Activities

In this section of the pack we've compiled a series of resources, including educational videos, lesson ideas and engaging activities, to help you teach your pupils about autism – while championing our message of acceptance!

The videos - which have been created with the help of our Autism and Neurodiversity Think Tank and young Autism Activists - cover everything from 'What is Autism?' to differences in communication, common myths and sensory processing.

15 **Educational Videos**

16 **What is Autism Quiz**

17 **Exploring Our Senses**

21 **How We Communicate**

22 **Communicating Without Speech**

25 **Body Drawing**

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27 **Positivity Art**

28 **Attention Tunnels**

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32 **Snowdrop the Hedgehog Colouring Competition**

34 **Additional Resources**

Educational Videos

To help you teach the pupils in your school about autism, we've created a range of educational videos that can be shown to your class throughout the week. The topics, listed below, also coincide with the lesson plans and activity suggestions we've compiled at the end of this pack.

1. What is Autism?
2. Neurodiversity Explained
3. Communication
4. Famous people who are autistic
5. Fact check: Busting autism myths
6. What do we mean by difference?
7. Sensory processing

Autism Quiz

This is an active quiz!

Get participants to stand in the middle of the room and choose which side of the room to run to - the side of true or false?

With each question there's an opportunity for the quiz leader to dispel any myths surrounding autism.

1. **Both girls and boys can be autistic?**

2. **Only children are autistic?**

3. **Autistic people can find communicating tricky?**

4. **All autistic people avoid eye contact?**

5. **All autistic people are the same?**

6. **You can tell someone is autistic just by looking at them?**

Answers

A1: True. | A2: False. Autism is a lifelong difference in someone's neurology. | A3: True. Some autistic people may find communicating tricky. However it's important to understand that autistic people can communicate, this may just look different to typical communication. | A4: False. However some autistic people – and some neurotypical people – may find eye contact uncomfortable. | A5: False. Every human being is different. Autistic or not. | A6: False. Autism is a 'hidden condition' so you can't tell someone is autistic just by looking at them.

Exploring Our Senses

Understanding Our Senses

The aim of this activity is to:

- Understand how we experience information through our senses
- Understand that other children may experience sensory information in different ways

Resources needed:

- My senses worksheet (see next page)

Method

Start the session by discussing how many senses we have. Most people think we have five, but we actually have eight. You could do a quiz to see who can name all of the senses and where they are.

Then get the children to think about:

- 5 things they can hear
- 5 things they can see
- 5 things they can touch
- 5 things can smell

Support your class to complete the worksheet on the next page.

Once complete ask some of the children to present what they experienced to the class. Ask the children if they can notice any differences between what each of them is saying.

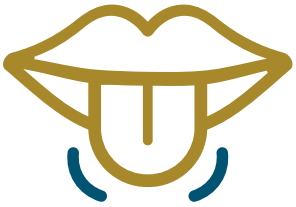
Using My Senses

In the boxes below, list 5 things you can...











Exploring Our Senses

The aim of this activity is to:

- Highlight that people experience sensory information differently – and that's okay!

Resources needed:

- Worksheet (see next page)
- Variety of everyday items - for example a pen, a teddy bear, a book, an apple, a jumper

Explain the following:

When we are exploring objects and things in our environment we use our senses. You may think that we only use one sense at a time but often we use many of our senses together.

For example you may think that when you are eating a biscuit you are just using your sense of taste but actually you are using your sense of smell as well. When you read a book you might think you just use your visual sense but actually what about your sense of touch and spatial awareness to turn the pages?

Together we are going to explore some everyday objects and think carefully about what senses we are using and how we are using it.

Method:

Give the children the selection of objects and ask them to explore the item and record their findings on the sheet provided.

Tell the children that some people also explore items using their mouth but this can be dangerous and not something we should be encouraging!

When the children have completed the activity ask them to discuss their findings.

Make a note of any differences and use this as a chance to explain that everyone might experience sensory information differently, and some people might use different ways to explore an object than what was originally thought.

For example someone may look closely at the fur on a teddy bear rather than stroke it.

Exploring Our Senses

Name of object	Smell	Touch	Hearing	Vision
Teddy bear	Linen	Soft and fluffy	Crinkly sound	Fluffy
Phone	Plastic	hard	Tappy noise	Bright colours

How We Communicate

The aim of this activity is to:

- Show that we all communicate information differently
- Reinforce that speech is not the only form of communication

Resources needed:

- Paper and pens/pencils

Method:

Describe a scene to your class. For example: *"I walked along the beach and the sand felt soft under my feet, I could see some children building sandcastles and some adults eating sandwiches. ..... I could hear the birds tweeting. The sand felt soft on my toes..."*

Give the children a piece of paper and ask them to individually communicate the scene you are describing. Tell them they can do this verbally, use written words, colours, pictures, or even make a model with the paper.

At the end of the activity, get each child to share what they have created with their classmates.

Talk about how people in the group have communicated the scene differently, and that is okay. Ask the children which way was easier to communicate, or whether there were any challenges with the chosen methods.

Communicating Without Speech

The aim of this activity is:

- To understand different ways of communicating
- To highlight that not everyone uses speech to communicate

Resources needed:

- Statement cards (on the next page)

Explain the following:

As humans, we communicate in lots of different ways. You might think that the only way to communicate is using words, to show you that that this is not the case let's try out the following activity.

Method:

Organise the class into groups of two or three, then hand out the statement cards (on the next page) to the children.

Ask the children to communicate what is on the card without using their voice.

After the activity ask the children how they chose to communicate their message? Responses might include actions, body language, drawing, facial expressions, movement.

Ask the children how they felt when they were trying to communicate their message and how easy it was to understand each other.

Explain that some autistic children can find it hard to use words to communicate and may use different methods like body language, visual pictures, photographs, written words, mobile apps.

Explain that this can be difficult, which is why it is important that we are respectful of everybody's preferred style of communication. Just because someone does speak it does not mean they can't communicate.



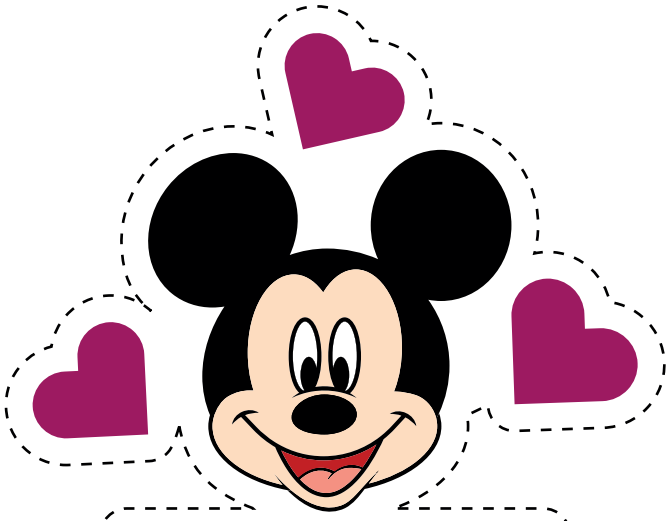
I am hungry



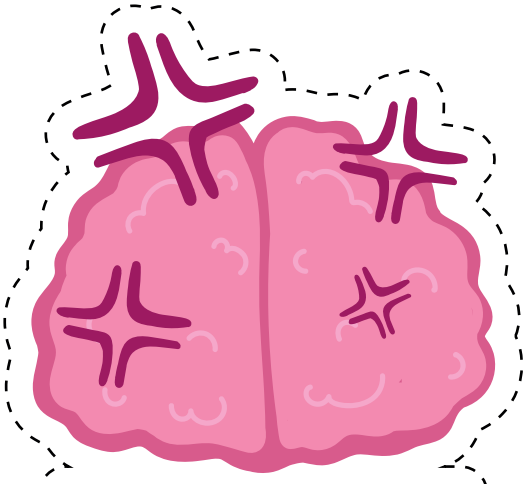
I would like a drink



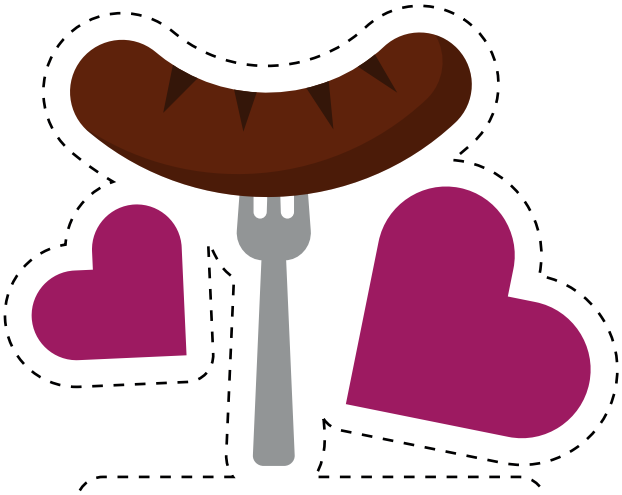
Where is my pen?



I love Mickey Mouse



I have a headache



My favourite food is sausages



I feel tired



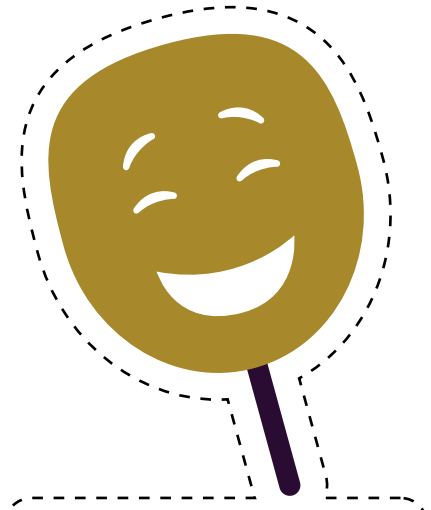
What is for lunch?



I have a toothache



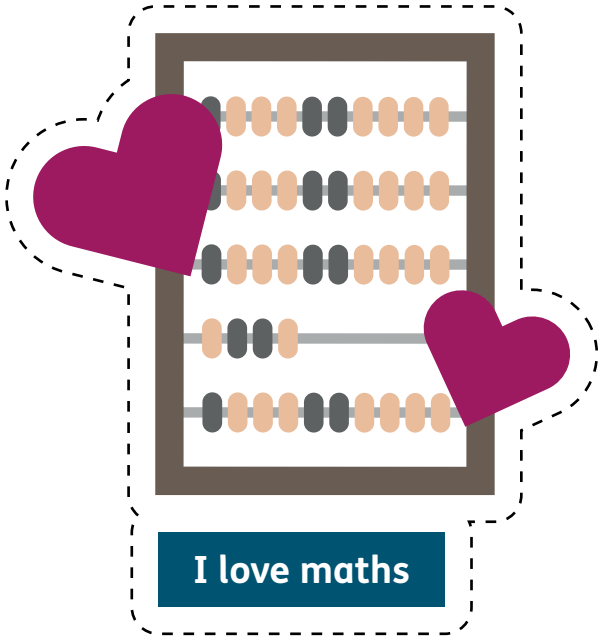
I am feeling sad



I am feeling happy



I lost my coat



I love maths

Body Drawing

The aim of this activity is:

- To support and develop young people's confidence and self-esteem
- To help young people to be able to recognise each other's differences and strengths

Resources needed:

- Large roll of paper
- Pens to draw body outline and write
- Materials to decorate (optional)

Method:

Young people should then be paired up. Each person takes a turn to draw around their partner's body. Once the body outlines are done each person has to fill their partner's body up with words or drawings that describe that person, as well as things that they like about them and what they think their strengths are.

It is important that this activity is positive therefore encourage the young people to choose only positive words. Where appropriate use questions to encourage the class to explore their thoughts further. The children should finish off by showing their partner the picture they have made and discussing it in pairs or with the rest of the class.



My five-point scale

The aim of this activity is:

- To support young people to develop their own coping strategies to use in difficult situations
- To encourage young people to talk about and recognise their own emotions
- To support young people to identify when they may need to use the scale

Resources needed:

- Templates printed out on paper
- Colouring pens/pencils
- Materials to decorate (optional)
- Copies of photo examples for young people
- Laminator and laminator pouches

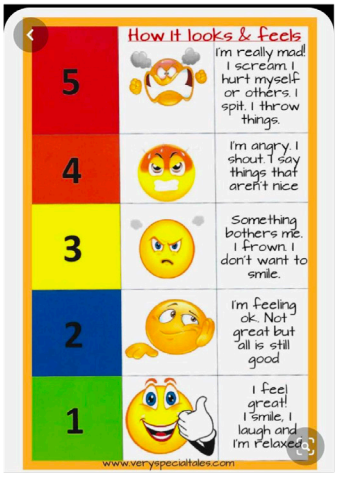
Method:

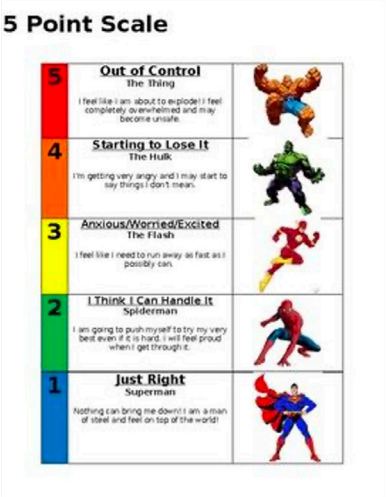
See pictures for examples. Teacher to make own example before session to show young people. Begin session with a discussion around what makes us feel anxious, angry, sad etc. and what we do when we feel this way.

Teacher to talk to the class about when these scales should be used and, where appropriate, use questions to encourage the class to explore their emotions and coping strategies.

Young people should then take the lead on their own scale, choosing their own materials and how they'd like to display it. Once finished, the teacher should laminate these for the class to keep or take home.

Teachers should make parents/carers aware of what their child has made so they can also encourage and prompt them to refer to their scale when suitable.





Positivity Art

The aim of this activity is:

- To support the development of the young people's confidence and self-esteem
- To help young people to identify their own insecurities and reflect on these
- To support young people to turn negative thoughts about themselves into positive pictures

Resources needed:

- Paper/cardboard to draw on
- Pens/pencils to draw
- Material to decorate (optional)

Method:

See picture for an example. Begin session with a discussion around what young people think self-confidence and self-esteem is. Young people should then be encouraged to write down negative thoughts or insecurities about themselves on a piece of paper and then turn this into a personal piece of art.

Where appropriate use questions to encourage the class to explore themselves further and, if they are happy to, discuss why they feel certain ways towards themselves.

Consider the room layout for this activity - some young people may not feel comfortable about others seeing the words they use. Offer children a choice regarding where to sit.



Attention tunnels

The aim of this activity is to:

- Understand how it feels to be absorbed in a task or activity
- Highlight that it can be difficult to switch from one task to another or to focus on several at the same time

Resources needed:

- Art sheet (see next page)
- Variety of everyday items – for example, an apple, a pen, a glove, a cup, a jumper

Explain the following:

Do you ever get so interested in a book, a game or an activity that you lose track of time and hardly notice what's going on around you? Does it feel good?

What happens, though, when someone wants you to listen to them, or to stop what you're doing immediately and do something else? How does that make you feel?

Together we are going to explore "attention tunnels" and how difficult it can be to drag yourself out of them.

Method:

Activity 1: Look at the art sheet on the next page. The road in the middle is something that you really enjoy and focus on. Write or draw on it what that thing is.

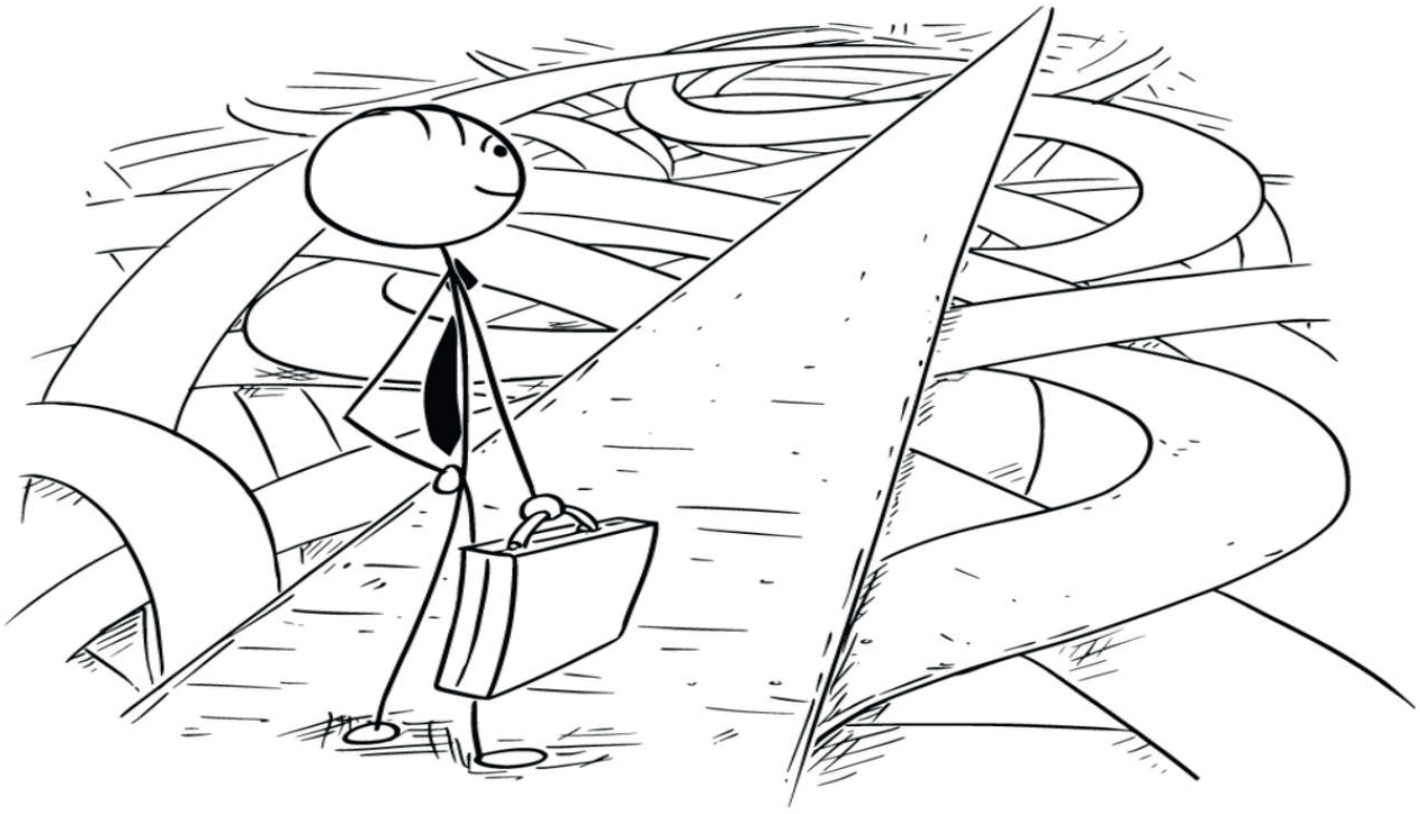
On the roads that shoot off from there, write or draw people or things that get in the way of thing you love doing (bed time? The end of your screen time?)

Get children to share what they have created with their classmates, and discuss the differences in everyone's pictures.

Activity 2: Set up a group of everyday objects and tell pupils they have several minutes to memorise everything that's there (don't specify exactly how long).

After 10-20 seconds or so, ask them an unrelated question. After another 10-20 seconds, ask them to do something else quickly (like stand up and turn around). After another 10-20 seconds, ask them to remember an additional piece of information, such as a name or a number. After another 10-20 seconds, play a burst of music. Stop the activity without warning.

At the end, see how many items pupils could remember. Discuss how it felt when they were distracted or when additional demands were placed on them. What would have made it easier for them? (timed countdowns? Allowing them to focus on just the one task? Silence?)



We are all different

The aim of this activity is:

- To celebrate difference

Resources needed:

- Craft paper
- Colouring pens/pencils
- Glue

Explain the following:

Everyone is unique, so why do we expect everyone to behave the same way or have the same strengths and weaknesses? We should celebrate difference, not judge, bully or persecute people who aren't the same as us.
(You can watch our video on difference here.)

Method:

Activity 1: Ask the class to draw a flower. Don't give any further instruction. Then ask them to hold up their drawings to see what everyone has drawn.

Chances are, a lot of the drawings will be the same. Show the pictures on the next page – did anybody draw anything like this? (they are all flowers). There are almost 370,000 types of flower in the world, all unique. And there are almost 8 billion unique human beings in the world, all just as different.

Activity 2: Create a paper chain as a class. Each pupil writes on their piece of the chain what makes them unique. This can then be strung together and displayed in the classroom. .








Snowdrop the Hedgehog colouring competition

Lastly, as a bit of fun, challenge your class to a colouring competition! Print off some copies of this poster of our mascot - Snowdrop the Spikeshuffler – and let the children's imaginations flow.



Additional Resources

Books for children

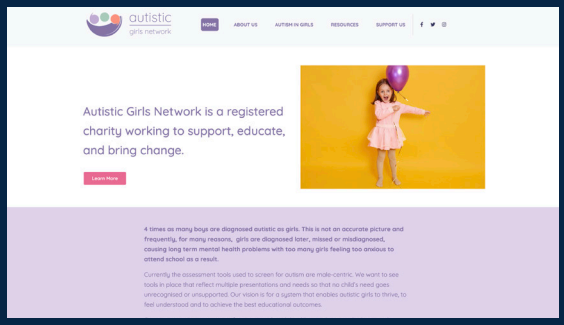
Snowdrop the Spike Shuffler by Peter Barron
Buster Finds his Beat by Pamela Aculey
Some Brains by Nelly Thomas
Wiggles, Stomps, and Squeezes Calm My Jitters Down by Lindsey Parker
We Move Together by Kelly Fritsch Anne McGuire and Eduardo Trejos
Just Right for You by Melanie Heyworth
Sensory Seeking Sebastian by Christia DeShields
Do You Want to Play? Making Friends with an Autistic Kid by Daniel Share-Strom, Maxine Share
Come On, Calm! by Kelsey Brown
Red: A Crayon's Story by Michael Hall
When Things Get Too Loud by Anne Alcott
Benny Doesn't Like to Be Hugged by Zetta Elliott
The Masterpiece: One Big Canvas by Jay Miletsky
The Molding of Clay by Jay Miletsky
Rosalee the Seeker by Nicole Filippone
Alexander the Avoider by Nicole Filippone
The Little Senses series by Samantha Cotterill
The Boy with Big, Big Feelings by Brittney Winn Lee
The Girl with Big, Big Questions by Brittney Winn Lee
The Boy Who Lost His Stims by Nathan McConnell

Websites

Family Development - North East Autism Society
see the Family Resources section for a series of factsheets about autism and emotional wellbeing



Autistic Girls' Network
a charity campaigning for better recognition of autistic girls and supporting them to find their identity



The Autistic Advocate
blog, video and resources by Kieran Rose, a member of the North East Autism Society's thinktank



Learning About Neurodiversity at School
free, downloadable resource pack of lesson plans, slides and videos



The contents of this toolkit are © North East Autism Society