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Reasonable adjustments for autistic pupils' sensory differences

Many autistic pupils have difficulty processing everyday sensory information. Any of the [senses](#) can be either over-sensitive (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hyposensitive), or both, at different times. Both can have an impact on how autistic pupils experience school.

Examples of over-sensitivity include:

- distorted vision - objects and bright lights can appear to jump around
- inability to cut out sounds - notably background noise, leading to difficulties concentrating
- smells can be intense and overpowering
- touch can be painful and uncomfortable - people may not like to be touched and this can affect their relationships with others.

Over-sensitivity can cause anxiety or even physical pain.

"The sensory overload caused by bright lights, fluorescent lights, colours and patterns makes the body react as if being attacked or bombarded, resulting in such physical symptoms as headaches, anxiety, panic attacks or aggression" Williams (1998).

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Examples of under-sensitivity include:

- vision – objects appear quite dark, or lose some of their features
- may not acknowledge particular sounds, and enjoy crowded, noisy places or banging doors and object
- holds others tightly - needs to do so before there is a sensation of having applied any pressure
- high pain threshold.

These sensory differences can affect [behaviour](#), and can have a profound effect on not only a child's experience of school, but also their wellbeing. It can also affect their home life. The school environment can feel overwhelming and stressful which can cause pupils to struggle to engage or experience [meltdowns](#). This can lead to [school refusal](#), or distressed behaviour that causes staff concern, [sometimes] resulting in [school exclusion](#).

Creating a predictable environment

Schools can employ different strategies to support sensory differences and reduce anxiety for autistic pupils.

"I'm sensitive to sounds. Loud sounds. Sudden sounds. Worse yet, loud and sudden sounds I don't expect. Worst of all, loud and sudden sounds I do expect but cannot control - a common problem in people with autism. Balloons terrified me as a child, because I didn't know when they were going to pop.I've heard a lot of people with autism say that if they can initiate the sound, they're more likely to be able to tolerate it. The same is true if they know the sound is coming." Temple Grandin (2014).

For some autistic pupils it may be the sense of uncertainty and unpredictability that triggers anxiety, distress and sensory overload. One approach to reduce anxiety may be to try to make the school environment as predictable as possible, giving autistic pupils a sense of control.

The duty to make reasonable adjustments

Under the [Equality Act 2010](#), schools have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled pupils are not placed at a substantial

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disadvantage compared to non-disabled pupils, and can participate in all aspects of school life. The Act considers autism to be a disability.

If an autistic pupil's sensory differences mean that they are struggling to navigate the sensory world of school, for example the classroom environment, crowded corridors and the playground, a school must make reasonable adjustments to help them not just cope, but also enjoy school and reach their full potential.

Many reasonable adjustments are inexpensive and just require creative changes in practice, rather than the provision of expensive pieces of equipment or additional staff.

Schools have a [duty to decide in advance](#) what reasonable adjustments a child may need, in time for the first day of the school year. Adjustments should be reviewed regularly.

A one-size fits-all approach is not appropriate, as every autistic pupil's needs will be different. A helpful starting point may be to speak to the parents to get their unique perspective and knowledge of their child. To facilitate this, parents and staff can complete a [sensory profile](#). The Autism Education Trust's parents' guide - [Working together with your child's school](#) - can be a useful tool to encourage parents to identify their priorities for their child, including those relating to sensory needs.

Reasonable adjustments to reduce the impact of sensory differences

- Allowing an autistic pupil to wear a slightly different piece of uniform. The duty to make reasonable adjustments also applies to school policies, including a school's uniform policy.
- Staggering the start/end of the school day allowing the pupil to come into the school building earlier, or later, than other pupils to avoid the noise and commotion of the playground and the school bell.
- In secondary schools, allow pupils to leave classrooms early when changing lessons, to avoid crowds and the hustle and bustle of corridors.
- Putting felt pads under chair legs to prevent the scraping sound of chairs being pushed back on a classroom floor.
- Switching hand dryers off and providing paper towels instead.

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- Allowing the use of ear defenders or headphones to block out noises such as school bells, or the use of sunglasses or blackout blinds.
- Creating a safe place where an autistic pupil can feel calm, for example a play tent in the classroom; a screened off work-station or area in the classroom; a quiet room in the school; being in the company of a trusted member of staff.
- Allowing the use of a 'fiddle' toy.
- Time out/stress alert card - a pass, which gives the pupil permission to leave the room.
- Different arrangements for breaks and lunchtimes, for example setting up a quiet lunchtime club or allowing an autistic pupil to go into the dinner hall before others.
- Ensuring classrooms are uncluttered with minimal décor and wall displays.
- Encouraging physical activity exercises or breaks, to help alleviate stress.
- Allowing the pupil to 'stim' ([self-stimulatory behaviour](#) - rocking, spinning, hand/finger flapping).

Making reasonable adjustments such as these for an autistic pupil can mean that their sensory differences do not become difficulties.

References

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Williams, D. (1998). Autism and Sensing: The Unlost Instinct. Jessica Kingsley Publishers