

# Inclusion and an Autism Friendly Environment

**Author:** Anne-Marie Harrison,  
Ideas Afresh Ltd



Situational examples included below are not intended as relative to any particular individual or school setting but do reflect true examples.

## Introduction

Inclusion and an Autism Friendly Environment supports SENCos and those working with school aged children and adolescents with a diagnosis or presentation of autism and / or associated neuro developmental differences (referred to as learners below).

## Exploring Inclusion

**“Inclusion in the classroom is often misunderstood as encouraging learners to ‘do the same thing, at the same time’”** (High School SENCO).

The observable responses and behaviours our learners demonstrate are influenced by the environment, surroundings and what is happening in the moment. For learners, expectations in these settings can be experienced as ‘new every day’.

Inclusion is different to simply being present and is deeper than simply altering resources and task focus. It is a complete state of belonging and accessibility which comes as a result of appropriate surroundings, attitudes, and facilities. The first consideration is to examine how inclusive our practices are.

Kolb's reflective cycle is a good theoretical basis for reflection. It encourages:

- Thinking about what you already do
- Thinking about why
- Thinking about what you may do differently next time

We can apply this 'identify, what, why, what' process, to situations we may be faced with in school, as well as our personal practice:

### 1) Identify

Lucy was arriving, very distressed and reluctant to enter school. Her parents and the head teacher were very keen that she 'like all the other children' arrived at 8.45am. Each morning was met with dread. Lucy was arriving later and later to school. It was however noted, the later she arrived the more quickly she calmed....

### 2) Think about what you already do

As a practitioner are you 'buying into' a pre-planned approach dictated by control with a 'we always do it this way bias', routine or desire for sameness? "keen that she 'like all the other children' arrived at 8.45am."

### 3) Think about why from both perspectives

**Teacher:** Desire for Lucy to have the same experience as the rest of her class.

**Lucy:** Socially and sensorily overwhelmed

Is it possible that practice has become routine bound, is there anxiety about flexibility and possibly the wider impact of this?

#### 4) Think about what you might do differently

Allow Lucy to arrive later than other children and/or offer a structured, later arrival.

Arriving later with a structure in place meant Lucy settled into learning more quickly. The teacher noted she was calmer and this was better for the other children too.

Hopefully, this process ignites dialogue. Change can be met with concern; some staff had thought other children might want to start coming into school 'when it suited them'. This did not happen as most children like arriving at the same time. Lucy's social and sensory development means this is not appropriate for her. Conversation around individual likes and dislikes resulted in an incredibly supportive peer group.

Well informed staff, up to date with policy agreements for Lucy and her Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), will also create a more inclusive environment. Therefore, supporting staff in collaborative short, medium and long-term use of strategies is imperative and can be best achieved through whole school training. This helps to ensure reflective practice and that observations and actions are embedded in unilateral knowledge and understanding.

#### Changes to create an autism Friendly Environment.

Year 5 Art and Design curriculum: **"Children will be encouraged to say what they like and dislike about their own work and that of their classmates"** I'd been supporting J for long enough, to know this could go badly wrong! He and I came up with some 'constructive things to say sentences' and agreed a 1 suggestion to 2 praise ratio. J loves ratios so it worked perfectly. He chose a sentence to read out and delighted his classmates with two nice comments! Phew! (Primary TA)

Very often more than one strategy at once is required. In Lucy's story altering the arrival time as well as introducing a structured, calm routine proved helpful. It may be the next plan is to collect a coloured sticker and join one or two other children with the same colour sticker.

Using colour or themes to give clear grouping guidelines can be instantly calming and supports a feeling of belonging as well as developing social skills. Planning helpful sentences and perhaps using display areas to put them up as reminders can also assist in supporting learners to navigate their social surroundings.

Many learners are reported as reluctant to answer on a roll call register. Again a small change such as display areas to facilitate a visual register can make this experience more autism friendly and support a feeling of inclusion. Clearly and visually communicating the environment, routines, plans and expectations is key in creating a more autism friendly environment. It is vital to do this in an informed and structured way. It too is a process of learning and needs to be implemented with a sound knowledge of the individual learner:

**“Ria has not answered or spoken to anyone in the room since the first week of term, I’m very worried about him.”**

(Geography Teacher)

**“Have you asked him why or spoken to him about it?”** (Parent)

**“No I didn’t want to bring attention to it but I did ask around the other departments and they said they don’t find this the case at all, I feel so bad, I just don’t understand it - I mean look at his marks, he is the best in the class at geography.”**

On further investigation Mum said: **“Ria had been told not to speak out and to put his hand up. She didn’t see the point in putting her hand up if she couldn’t speak. She is very literal in her understanding. She had taken no offence and was not upset but just compliant.”**

Clearer communication and some ‘question tokens’ were introduced as a whole class strategy. The teacher reported that it had been a great way of encouraging the quieter students to speak up and managed some of the more dominant students!

There are several examples of visual supports, many available online, but it is wise to seek autism specialist guidance if implementing these to specifically support a neurodiverse learner. This is because the individual profile can determine how successful they are. For example, if the profile means the learner has a very good focus on detail, a simplified less detailed picture or even word based support may be better but if a child is a more rigid thinker or less flexible, they may need more detailed, carefully selected photographs included in the schedule.

**Considering these questions may facilitate more inclusive learning:**

- Are there areas offering small sensory activities blu tac, fiddle toys etc or could learners bring in their own?
- Are there opportunities and places for calm time?
- Have we checked out if the oil timers, glitter tubes, are calming or stimulating?
- How well labelled, visually explicit is the environment?  
Are plans and areas clearly defined?
- Are choices available and do all learners fully understand them?

## An Inclusive Playtime

Many neurodiverse learners benefit from social support / friendship guidance. Friendship partners, role models and 'Buddy' areas are all worth exploring remembering it is important to first gauge the individual's social interaction skills, before emerging them in a socially demanding situation. For many learners mastering a one to one interaction, can be enough of a social demand. Many of our autistic neurodiverse learners cope best with a playground environment if there are structured activities available.

Some schools have successfully introduced 'action teams'. These teams are groups of children from further up the school, who engage and initiate ball games, chalk activities, skipping activities etc. Many of these activities are helpful for autistic learners as they offer a less intense social interaction and require little verbal communication but they do need planning and preparing for. A simple game of 'tag' can be disastrous if the perimeters are not clearly marked and pointed out and the expectations of appropriate physical contact explained. Social stories (Carol Gray) and advance planning about play time and playground experiences and activities will be helpful.

If a 'Buddy Bench' is available, it can offer an opportunity for positive social skills, it is a visual clue for where to go if you would like the company of another child. There are of course important considerations if contemplating these types of playground supports. The children involved need to be supported and agree to and have a full understanding of what is being asked. An adult is required to offer a distanced but knowledgeable overview and children should not be asked more than one break time a week to be buddy support.



Caution and an awareness towards intense, exclusive friendships and a respect for others should be addressed too. It may be that for some learners, the best, most relaxing playtime is spent alone. We need to check out that this is a choice not an inevitability.

### Create an Inclusive Workspace

**“Sam has openly told me he likes detention because he can work better in that room.”** (Year 10 Maths tutor)

If learners are not socially driven and have identified a more acceptable working environment it is understandable that they engineer access to it! Some methods of initial reduced classroom exposure and gradually building up to time in the classroom, can be helpful. Being mindful of what we are asking for in terms of tolerance is important. It may be introducing a personalised ‘workstation’ where the sensory needs of the learner are facilitated.

**“I know it might look a bit odd but honestly letting all the kids decorate cardboard dividers and bring in ear plugs for individual tasks has worked wonders and I was shocked by the fact half a dozen students, not just the two with autism like to put their dividers up too!”** (Year 10 Maths Tutor)

If learners are observed as sensorily overwhelmed, it may be worth considering:

1. Is it too bright, do we need a peak cap or sunglasses?
2. Is it too noisy, do we need earmuffs or headphones?
3. Would a calmer area in the room be helpful?
4. Is the task appropriate? Engaging, motivating, achievable but not too easy?

Creating safe but unusual workspaces can have positive consequences, for example an upturned table with a dark cloth over, a cushion and a torch can offer some of the richest and inclusive reading experiences! Being creative in finding solutions rather than exclusions is a satisfying and rewarding experience. 'making reasonable adjustments' (SEN Code of Practice 2015) can have a positive impact on the whole class.

## Policy to Practice

It may be some readers are daunted by these ideas of flexibility. Policy and practice can put huge pressure on practitioners. A high school teacher told me recently she is not allowed to create separate work areas because it may single out learners. There is a skill in knowing that you work better in quieter areas, you work better with music on, you work better led on a floor cushion or pacing at the back of the class. Our education system can perpetuate its own problems; if curriculums and teaching styles are not flexed to accommodate learners, there is no hope of success. Consider Albert Einstein's famous quote "the first sign of insanity, is doing the same thing over and over and expecting change".

By linking policy and practice through relevant story examples and experiences we can witness the impact of collaborative flexibility and support.

**"Yohan has known his four times tables since he was two, surely it is the elements of his learning that he finds more challenging, like choosing, that you could work on with him."**

Using skills to 'observe, reflect and collaborate', can influence and empower learning experiences.



“When the other children are reciting the X tables that Yohan is already competent in, I let him help me choose how we phrase the questions. He is getting highly creative and this week asked what 5 x 6 sand trooper squad leaders are, thank goodness the other children could enlighten me! They love that Yohan is adding so much fun to their tables and Yohan is just growing in confidence.”

This example of Yohan’s experience can generate a useful discussion. Acknowledging individualism, avoids the ‘same game’. It is not a healthy aim, to make all learners feel the same... it is healthy to help all learners feel included and to value one another’s individualism. Did Yohan feel included in the maths lesson? Does it matter that he is not the same?

Policies can support and empower flexible practice. It is important that through our observations and assessments we make sure policies work in favour of a personalised curriculum, rather than chiseling the edges to suit the offering. The proposed key elements of the new ‘Engagement Model’, that is to replace some aspects of P scale assessments from September 2021, focuses on these 7 areas:

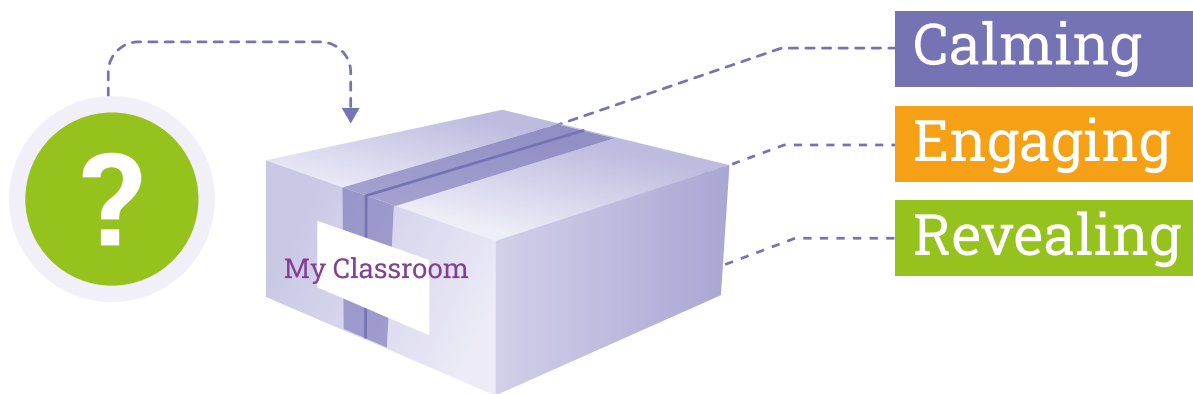
**Responsiveness, Curiosity, Discovery, Anticipation, Persistence, Initiation, Investigation**

Arguably these are the most enriching experiences and elements of lifelong learning. There is no doubt in our current curriculums and systems, inclusion can remain challenging but if we embrace the fundamental meaning “the action or state of being included in a group or structure” and operate as a reflective, observative, collaborative practitioner we can achieve this.

## 'Homework!'

This activity is a reflective practice opportunity that can be shared with other members of staff. Encourage them to evidence on pieces of card the social, emotional, and physical aspects, of **their** autism friendly classrooms.

Walk around your classroom and ask yourself where and how it is engaging your learners? Where is it, they can retreat for calm? How are these areas revealed? How are you communicating access to them? Are your routines, plans, expectations clearly, visually indicated?



## Further reading:

Daniels, N (2019) Social Skills for Kids. Rockridge Press

Kolb, D (2015) Experiential Learning (2nd Ed) Pearson Education. US

Winner, M (2009) Socially Curious, Curiously Social. Think Socially Publishing.

Jessica Balsley looks at setting up visual charts in a classroom  
<https://theartofeducation.edu/packs/set-autism-friendly-classroom/>

Mary Barbera discusses the importance of observation  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHlI0Eigsmk>

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## About Ideas Afresh Education

This resource is brought to you by Anne-Marie Harrison, Education and Training Director for Ideas Afresh Education Ltd, in partnership and with thanks to Witherslack Group. Anne-Marie offers family support and CPD accredited staff training.



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