



Supporting students with

EMOTIONAL NEEDS



When working with children on the autism spectrum, it's essential to understand key principles to create a supportive and effective environment.

U.S.

According to the [CDC](#), 1 in 36 children are diagnosed with autism.

CANADA

According to the [PHAC](#), 1 in 50 children are diagnosed with autism.

Individuality

Every child on the autism spectrum is unique and has different strengths, challenges, and needs. This is why it is called a spectrum. It is important to learn about the child as an individual with unique needs, what works for one child on the autism spectrum may not work for another. Take the time to learn about the children you work with, their needs, preferences and abilities.

TIP: Have a quick, friendly check-in with parents or guardians to learn if the child has any calming strategies, communication preferences, or triggers. A simple gesture like assigning them a consistent seat can help create a more comfortable and supportive ride.

Communication

Many children on the autism spectrum have difficulty communicating verbally. There are nonverbal cues, assistive devices, sign language and other methods of communication that they might use to communicate. Try to have a patient and understanding attitude towards learning how to communicate with the children you work with in a way that works for them.

TIP: If a child uses a communication device or visual cards, ask their parent or caregiver for a few key phrases or signals. Taking the time to understand their unique way of communicating can help build trust and make the ride smoother.

Structure

Children with autism often thrive in structured environments where routines are predictable. Changes in routine or unexpected events can be distressing. Using visuals, clear instructions, and consistent routines can help them feel more secure and reduce anxiety. Consider this when you make changes that will affect their day.

TIP: If a schedule, seat assignment, or route needs to change, give as much notice as possible. Explain the change and reassure the child. A small heads-up can make a big difference in easing anxiety.

Words Matter

It's important to consider the words you use when speaking about autism. It is possible to be unintentionally hurtful with your words. Here are some common things people say and alternative phrases to use instead.

There is no one way to experience autism — it looks different for everyone. Embracing and respecting each child's unique journey makes all the difference!

Say this: "Blake is on the autism spectrum."

Not this: "Blake suffers from autism."

Saying someone "suffers from autism" focuses on negativity. A more neutral term is preferred.

Say this: "Blake thinks and understands differently."

Not this: "Blake is disabled."

Intelligence should not be judged based on communication or social skills. Autism is a difference, not a deficiency, functioning labels can be inaccurate and inappropriate.

Say this: "Blake uses non-verbal methods to communicate."

Not this: "Blake can't communicate."

Communication includes body language, sign language, and written/typed language, not just speech.

Resources

National Autism Association: <https://nationalautismassociation.org/>

U.S. Autism Association: <https://usautism.org/>

Autism Canada: <https://www.autismcanada.ca/>

REFERENCES

Autism Speaks (2020). *Understanding the Spectrum*

National Autism Association (2017). *The Autism Spectrum Disorder: What Is It and How Does It Affect Children?*

Autism Canada (2021). *Words Matter*

