

START STRONG

Classrooms that Support Autistic Students

The start of a new school year is the perfect time to create a classroom environment that supports all learners, especially students with autism. A well-structured classroom, paired with strategies like visual supports, consistent routines, and clear communication, sets your classroom up for success!



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Autism Center for Education

1. STRUCTURE YOUR DAY

Autistic students benefit from environments that are predictable and consistent. Establishing a clear daily schedule from the beginning helps reduce anxiety and supports smoother transitions. Once your classroom structure is in place, teach it to your students. A visual daily schedule using pictures and text can help students anticipate what's next and feel more in control. Consider developing a daily classroom schedule and student-specific schedules to support individual students' needs.

TIPS:

- Write it down** -- Ask yourself, "What do my students need to be doing on a daily basis?"
- Post it** -- Display the schedule where all students and staff in the environment can easily see it.
- Teach it** -- Explicitly teach the schedule, referencing it at each transition, and use visual cues throughout the day to show progress.
- Stick to it** -- Consistency builds trust and comfort.
- Prepare for change** -- When the schedule must change, give advance notice of what to expect.
- Monitor and revise** -- If it isn't working, adjust the schedule and communicate changes to students and staff.

2. ESTABLISH ROUTINES

Establish routines early on and keep them as consistent as possible. Some parts of the day are naturally more challenging for students. These are ideal opportunities to plan and implement clear, predictable routines and procedures that help students understand where they should be, what they should be doing, and how to move through the day with confidence. For example, arrival and departure, transition from free time, or lunch/snack.

TIPS:

- Model and practice** -- Demonstrate routines and allow time to practice so they become second nature. Repetition is key!
- Use visual supports** -- Pair pictures with text to support literacy and communication.
- Be flexible** -- Adjust routines as needed while keeping them predictable, and don't be afraid to add new ones to help the day run smoothly.

3. USE VISUAL SUPPORTS

Visuals are powerful tools that can support almost any part of the school day, including routines, classroom expectations, communication, and academics. They provide consistent information and help build student independence. Some visual supports are designed to benefit all, while others need to be individualized to address specific students' needs.

TIPS:

- Label spaces** -- Use visuals and text to label areas like “Quiet Zone,” “Work Station,” or “Free Time.”
- Use visual cues** -- Provide consistent cues with text, icons, pictures, and/or colors to show where materials go, when and where activities happen, and to guide movement, such as transitions or where to stand.
- Make expectations clear** -- Develop visual tools like social stories and visual reminders for students and staff.
- Break down complex skills** -- Use step-by-step visuals such as task analysis or a first-then board to help students build confidence and complete tasks more independently.
- Support communication** -- Implement visual communication tools like picture labels or core vocabulary boards to express needs and ideas across environments.
- Keep them visible** -- Make sure visuals are easy for students and staff to see and use, and use caution before removing any visual supports.

4. ORGANIZE YOUR SPACE

Be intentional about your instructional space. A well-organized classroom helps students with autism understand expectations, focus, navigate the classroom independently, and feel secure. Think about how each part of the room supports learning and engagement. Your space itself can be a powerful teaching tool.

TIPS:

- Define spaces** -- Clearly designate spaces for specific activities. For example, a table for group work, individual desks for independent work, a cozy corner for reading, etc.
- Provide boundaries** -- Use physical or visual markers such as tape, furniture, or signage to clearly separate areas for different activities.
- Minimize distractions** -- Use decor such as bulletin boards, posters, etc., to reinforce routines, expectations, and academics.

5. CREATE A BREAK AREA

A designated space to take a break helps students learn to identify and manage their emotions, promoting self-regulation as well as social and emotional well-being. This space offers a calm location for students to reset and be ready for learning. Setting up your classroom with intention and empathy creates a space where all students can feel safe and supported.

TIPS:

- Keep it simple** -- The area doesn't have to be large or elaborate, just intentional and inviting. Consider a corner with a comfy chair, noise-cancelling headphones, and a few fidgets.
- Incorporate visuals** -- Provide visual supports that teach students how to manage their emotions through calming strategies and self-monitoring techniques while in the break area.
- Introduce the space** -- Teach how to use the break area proactively when they are calm and happy. Practicing ahead of time helps normalize the space and encourages positive use.
- Location** -- Select a spot within the classroom that offers some separation from the whole group, but is still visible to the teacher and staff in the room.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [Setting Up for Success: Visual Supports](#)
- [Daily Classroom Schedule, Student Specific Schedules, Mini-Schedules](#)
- [Strategies to Support Everyday Transitions](#)
- [How To: Environmental Considerations and Physical Structure](#)
- [How To: Environmental Considerations - Schedules](#)
- [How To: Environmental Considerations - Routines](#)
- [Preschool How To: Physical Structure](#)

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