



Harlington and Sundon Lower Schools
'A place to belong, grow and succeed'

A Parent/Carers' Guide to Autism



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This guide is designed to help you support your child, whether they have a formal diagnosis or you notice traits related to social communication and interaction. At Harlington and Sundon Lower Schools, we understand that every autistic child is unique, and we are committed to working with you to ensure they feel safe and understood.

What is autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition—not an illness. It affects how a child communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them. Common signs include:

- **Social Interaction:** Difficulty understanding how others think and feel, or challenges making friends.
- **Communication:** Differences in using or understanding verbal and non-verbal language (e.g., eye contact or tone of voice).
- **Routines:** A strong need for rituals and predictability, with significant anxiety over unexpected changes.
- **Sensory Processing:** Being over- or under-sensitive to sounds, lights, textures, or smells.

What can autism look like in girls?

Autism can look very different in girls, which sometimes makes it harder to identify. Girls often use a strategy called masking—they may mimic social behaviours and ‘copy’ their peers to fit in. Common traits in girls include:

- **Social Imitation:** Watching others closely to learn how to behave in social situations.
- **Internalised Anxiety:** Feeling intense stress about ‘getting it right’ socially, which may lead to an emotional ‘meltdown’ only once they reach the safety of home.
- **Focused Interests:** Having intense interests that may seem ‘typical’ (such as animals or books) but are pursued with unusual intensity.

What does the school do that supports children with autism?

Many of the things that we do in our schools as common practice for all children also benefit children with autism.

- **Visual Timetables & Now/Next Boards:** Providing clear, predictable structures for the school day.
- **Social Scripts:** Helping children navigate social interactions by providing clear 'scripts' or steps for play.
- **Predictable Transitions:** Giving advance warning of any changes to the routine, such as a different teacher or a school trip.
- **Sensory Breaks:** Access to quiet zones or 'calm spaces' when the classroom environment becomes overwhelming.
- **Trusted Adults:** Ensuring your child has a consistent person they can go to if they feel dysregulated.

What else can the school do?

If your child requires more tailored support, we can offer further specialised interventions:

- **Social Stories:** Using visual stories to explain social situations or upcoming changes.
- **Individual Schedules:** Personalised 'Now/Next' boards to break the day into manageable chunks.
- **Social Skills Groups:** Small group work to practise turn-taking and conversation skills in a safe environment.
- **Individualised Sensory Profiles:** Identifying specific sensory triggers and providing tools like ear defenders or fiddle toys.

What can I do at home?

- **Use Visuals:** Use calendars or pictured checklists for morning and evening routines. This reduces the 'verbal load' on your child.
- **Prepare for Change:** Talk through upcoming events or changes in advance. Use 'social stories' to explain what might happen.





- **Create a Low-Arousal Space:** Ensure there is a quiet place at home where your child can go to 'decompress' without demands.
- **Follow Their Interests:** Use your child's passions to build their confidence and engage them in learning.
- **Validate the 'Home-School Gap':** If your child 'masks' all day at school, they may need extra patience and quiet time when they get home.

What might the next steps be?

- If concerns persist despite the strategies put in place, please arrange a meeting with your child's class teacher. They may then refer the child to the school's SENDCo (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator).
- We may consider completing a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and ask you to do the same. This helps provide a standardised view of your child's needs.
- You may wish to speak to your GP about 'Right to Choose' for ASC Assessment.
- <https://bedslutonchildrenshealth.nhs.uk/neurodiversity-support/neurodevelopmental-assessment-and-diagnosis-process/#referral>

Where else I can get support?

- **Autism Bedfordshire:** Localised support and activities (www.autismbedfordshire.net).
- **National Autistic Society:** Comprehensive advice for families (www.autism.org.uk).
- **Ambitious about Autism:** Resources for young people and parents (www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk).
- **Girls and Autism (NASen):** Specialist resources for understanding the female presentation of autism (www.nasen.org.uk).

We are on your team! We know that parenting a child with autism can be exhausting and, at times, overwhelming. Please know that we are here to support you just as much as we are here to support your child. Our shared goal is to see your child thrive.