



EDUCATOR AUTISM TOOLKIT

A Practical Evidence-Informed Guide for Inclusive Teaching, Communication, Regulation,
Participation and Learning

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Global Autism Research Center (GARC)

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Publication Information

Purpose and audience

This toolkit is designed for classroom teachers, teaching assistants, learning support staff, special educators, subject teachers, school leaders, counsellors, therapists working in education, and other professionals who support autistic learners. It translates evidence-informed principles into practical classroom decisions that improve access, learning, participation, communication, wellbeing and safety.

Scope

The toolkit is intentionally usable across primary, secondary, specialist, international and inclusive education settings. It is not tied to one national curriculum, disability law or school system. Local legal duties, safeguarding requirements, curriculum rules, assessment regulations and individualized education processes must always be verified in the relevant jurisdiction.

Educational, clinical and legal notice

This publication is educational. It is not a diagnostic tool and does not replace individualized advice from appropriately qualified education, health, mental-health, speech-language, occupational therapy, psychology or safeguarding professionals. New or sudden changes in behaviour, communication, sleep, pain, eating, continence, seizures, mood, self-harm or functioning may require health assessment rather than an educational response alone.

Language and dignity

This toolkit generally uses identity-first language ("autistic learner" or "autistic student") while recognizing that individual preferences differ. Ask the learner and family what language they prefer. Avoid deficit-only descriptions, assumptions of low competence, or strategies whose main purpose is to make harmless autistic traits less visible.

Evidence approach

The guidance draws on authoritative health and education sources, inclusive-education principles, Universal Design for Learning, and peer-reviewed reviews of evidence-based autism practices. Practical recommendations are synthesized for classroom use and are not copied from source documents. Selected references appear at the end of the toolkit.

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REVIEW CYCLE

GARC intends to review this toolkit periodically and earlier if major evidence or authoritative guidance changes. Schools should also maintain local review cycles for policies, accessibility, safeguarding and restrictive-practice procedures.



Foreword

Inclusion is not achieved by placing an autistic learner in a classroom and expecting the learner to absorb the environment as it is. Inclusion is built when the environment, teaching, communication, expectations and relationships are deliberately designed so that the learner can understand, participate, learn, recover from stress and show what they know.

Autistic learners are not one educational profile. One student may speak fluently but need visual structure, processing time and explicit teaching of hidden expectations. Another may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), require high levels of support for daily participation, and demonstrate knowledge in ways that conventional classroom tasks fail to capture. A third may appear academically strong while using so much effort to manage noise, uncertainty and social demands that attendance or wellbeing deteriorates.

For educators, the most useful shift is from asking "How do I make this student fit the lesson?" to asking "What is the learning goal, what barriers are present, and what support will allow this learner to engage without lowering meaningful expectations?" This toolkit is built around that question.

Global Autism Research Center (GARC)

Practical Toolkits Series



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HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

Do not try to implement every strategy. Start with the Quick Start pages, identify the learner's top access barriers, choose two or three changes, and review whether those changes improve participation, learning, wellbeing or independence.



Quick Start: The First Two Weeks

A strong start is not a perfect plan. It is a short period of structured observation, respectful information gathering and immediate barrier reduction. The aim is to prevent avoidable failure while the education team learns what the student needs.

- ☐ Ask the learner, in an accessible way, what helps and what makes school harder.
- ☐ Review existing plans, reports and communication systems, but do not assume that old information is still accurate.
- ☐ Confirm the learner's reliable communication methods, including any AAC, visual supports, writing, typing, gesture or partner-assisted methods.
- ☐ Identify sensory barriers in the actual spaces the learner uses: classroom, corridor, cafeteria, transport, assembly, playground, toilets and specialist rooms.
- ☐ Create a predictable lesson routine and show changes before they happen whenever possible.
- ☐ Define two or three priority outcomes in observable terms, such as beginning work with less adult prompting, answering through AAC, staying in class with agreed sensory supports, or completing an accessible assessment.
- ☐ Learn the learner's early signs of overload and agreed recovery supports before a crisis occurs.
- ☐ Check for health, pain, sleep, medication, seizure, feeding, continence or mental-health information that school legitimately needs to know under local policy.
- ☐ Agree how home and school will communicate important information without creating excessive daily reporting.
- ☐ Plan at least one early experience of competence, interest or success that the learner can recognize as success.

IMMEDIATE ESCALATION

Follow local safeguarding, medical or emergency procedures when there is immediate danger, suspected abuse, serious injury, a seizure emergency, severe self-harm risk, credible suicide risk, sudden major loss of skills, or another urgent health or safety concern.



Quick Start: Essential Learner Snapshot

Area	What the educator should know now
Communication	How the learner understands information; how the learner expresses choices, refusal, questions, distress and academic responses.
Strengths and interests	Topics, activities, skills and contexts that support engagement or competence.
Sensory access	Noise, lighting, touch, movement, seating, clothing, smells or crowding that may help or hinder.
Predictability	How much advance warning, visual sequencing or preparation is useful.
Regulation	Early stress signs; helpful breaks; preferred calming or recovery supports.
Learning	What makes instructions clear; how much modelling, prompting or practice is useful; effective ways to show knowledge.
Social participation	Preferred social intensity, group-work supports, trusted peers/adults, bullying concerns.
Health and safety	Relevant allergies, seizures, medication responsibilities, mobility, eating, toileting, elopement/wandering or other risk information under school policy.
Student voice	What the learner wants adults to understand; current goals; disliked supports; preferred accommodations.

COMPETENCE FIRST

Never infer a learner's understanding from speech fluency, eye contact, body movement, handwriting, speed of response or ability to perform under stress. Create an accessible way for the learner to demonstrate what they know.



SECTION 1

Understanding Autism in the Learning Environment

A practical foundation for interpreting classroom differences without reducing the learner to a diagnosis.

- Understand autism as a diverse neurodevelopmental condition with highly variable educational profiles.
- Separate observable behaviour from assumptions about intention.
- Expect performance to change with sensory load, communication demands, predictability, health and emotional state.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

The educational question is not whether the learner looks typical. It is whether the learner can access instruction, communicate, participate, regulate, belong and make progress.

1.1 Autism is not one classroom profile

Autism is a diverse group of conditions related to brain development. Autistic learners may differ in social communication, interaction, patterns of interest or activity, transitions and sensory responses. Abilities and support needs vary substantially and can change over time and across settings. [1]

Domain	Possible classroom implications
Communication	Speech may be absent, limited or fluent. Comprehension, processing speed, pragmatic language and self-advocacy may differ from expressive speech.
Social interaction	A learner may prefer solitary work, parallel participation, structured interaction or high social contact. Social motivation should not be judged from eye contact alone.
Sensory processing	Noise, light, touch, smell, movement, temperature or crowding may affect attention, comfort, behaviour and endurance.
Predictability	Unexpected changes, vague instructions and unclear endpoints may increase cognitive load.
Interests and repetition	Focused interests, routines and repetitive movement can support motivation, learning, regulation and enjoyment.
Executive functioning	Starting, planning, switching, organizing, prioritizing and estimating time may require external scaffolds.
Motor and written output	Fine-motor, gross-motor, posture, coordination or handwriting demands may mask academic knowledge.
Co-occurring needs	ADHD, anxiety, sleep difficulties, epilepsy, learning disability, pain and other conditions may affect classroom functioning.



1.2 Observable behaviour is data, not a verdict

The same observable action can have very different meanings. A learner who puts their head down may be exhausted, in pain, overloaded by noise, avoiding a task they do not understand, regulating visual input, or disengaged for another reason. A learner who does not respond immediately may need processing time, may not have understood, or may be unable to speak in that moment. Interpretation should remain a hypothesis until evidence supports it.

USE SPECIFIC DESCRIPTION

"When the room became louder, Sam covered both ears, stopped writing and moved under the desk."

AVOID CHARACTER JUDGMENTS

"Sam was defiant, dramatic or attention-seeking."

1.3 Support needs can be uneven

A student can solve advanced academic problems and still need support to start work, tolerate transitions, ask for help, manage group work, eat during the school day or recover from sensory overload. Avoid global labels such as "high functioning" or "low functioning". Describe the specific task, context and support required.

EDUCATOR REFLECTION

When a learner succeeds in one context and struggles in another, ask what changed in the task, environment, communication, demand, support, health or predictability before concluding that the learner "can do it if they want to."



SECTION 2

The GARC 10-Point Educator Practice Framework

A classroom operating model for translating inclusion into repeatable daily practice.

- Use the framework to organize individual planning, classroom review and staff coaching.
- Prioritize access and participation before adding more adult prompting.
- Measure whether supports improve meaningful outcomes.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Good autism practice is not a list of tricks. It is a coordinated system of communication access, environmental design, explicit teaching, regulation support, belonging and review.

Principle	Educator translation
1. Know the learner	Use current information, direct observation and learner voice; avoid stereotypes.
2. Guarantee communication access	Honor speech, AAC, writing, visuals, gesture and other reliable communication.
3. Increase predictability	Make time, sequence, expectations, change and task completion visible.
4. Design for sensory access	Reduce avoidable sensory barriers and provide legitimate regulation options.
5. Teach explicitly	Show what success looks like; model, scaffold, practice and fade support deliberately.
6. Use flexible instructional design	Offer multiple ways to access content, participate and demonstrate learning while keeping the learning goal clear.
7. Support regulation before compliance	Recognize stress early, reduce unnecessary demand and teach usable coping/self-advocacy skills.
8. Build belonging and social safety	Prevent bullying, respect differences and structure peer participation without forcing performance.
9. Coordinate with the learner, family and team	Share high-value information, align strategies and clarify responsibilities.
10. Review outcomes and reduce dependence	Track progress, learner experience and adult support; keep what helps, change what does not, and fade prompts that are no longer needed.

2.1 A support should answer five questions

1. What barrier or goal are we addressing?
2. What exactly will the adult or environment do differently?
3. How will the learner know or use the support?
4. What outcome will tell us it helps?
5. When will we review, adapt or fade it?



2.2 Support intensity can change by task

Level	Example
Environmental	Seat choice, reduced visual clutter, written instructions, predictable routine, access to quiet space.
Instructional	Modelled examples, chunked tasks, graphic organizers, explicit vocabulary, extra processing time.
Communication	AAC available, yes/no or choice formats, visual supports, alternative response methods.
Interpersonal	Check-in with a trusted adult, peer partner, co-regulation, planned help-seeking.
Specialist / individualized	Individual program developed with relevant professionals and learner/family input.



SECTION 3

Belonging, Relationships, Strengths and Learner Voice

Learning improves when the student is known as a person, not managed as a collection of needs.

- Build psychological and social safety before expecting risk-taking in learning.
- Use strengths and interests as access points without turning every interest into a reward system.
- Give the learner meaningful influence over supports and goals.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Belonging is an educational condition. A learner who expects embarrassment, coercion or misunderstanding will use energy on self-protection that could have supported learning.

3.1 Relationship is not the same as constant interaction

A supportive educator is predictable, respectful and responsive. Connection may look like shared humour, accurate use of the learner's communication system, remembering an interest, offering space without withdrawal of support, or accepting a quiet form of participation. Do not make eye contact, touch or verbal small talk prerequisites for a positive relationship.

3.2 Strengths should change the plan

Strength or interest	Possible educational use
Deep topic knowledge	Use as prior knowledge, a research topic, example set or bridge to less familiar content.
Visual reasoning	Use diagrams, models, written sequences, graphic organizers and visual exemplars.
Memory for detail	Build retrieval practice and precision tasks while also teaching big-picture connections.
Pattern recognition	Use categorization, data, coding, mathematics, music, language patterns or scientific comparison.
Persistence with preferred tasks	Teach transferable work routines and self-monitoring from an area of competence.
Honesty / directness	Clarify classroom conventions without punishing a communication style that is not intended to be rude.

3.3 Make learner voice accessible

Student voice is not limited to a formal meeting or fluent verbal explanation. Ask through the communication format the learner can use: AAC, rating scales, written choices, visuals, photographs, sorting, interviews with processing time, observation of approach/avoidance patterns, or supported conversation.

- ☐ Which classroom situations are easiest?



- ☐ Which are hardest or most tiring?
- ☐ How should adults offer help?
- ☐ What should adults stop doing?
- ☐ Which breaks feel helpful rather than punitive?
- ☐ How do you want to answer questions?
- ☐ What do you want classmates to understand - and what should remain private?
- ☐ What is one goal that matters to you?

CONSENT AND PRIVACY

A learner's diagnosis, support needs and personal history should not be disclosed to peers or other adults simply for convenience. Follow local privacy rules and involve the learner/family in decisions about what information is shared.



SECTION 4

Communication, AAC and Classroom Interaction

Make communication possible before judging participation, behaviour or knowledge.

- Use the learner's reliable communication system across academic and non-academic situations.
- Reduce language load when stress or task complexity is high.
- Teach classroom interaction explicitly without demanding a single social style.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Communication is a right and a learning access requirement. AAC is not a last resort and should not be withheld because a learner can sometimes speak.

4.1 Communication has two sides

Educator responsibility	Learner access
Make language understandable	Use concrete wording, visual support, examples, written directions and manageable sentence length.
Allow sufficient processing	Pause after questions; avoid immediately rephrasing three different ways.
Provide response options	Speech, AAC, typing, pointing, selecting, drawing, demonstration or another valid method.
Confirm meaning	Check understanding instead of assuming agreement from silence, echolalia or a repeated phrase.
Honor refusal and help-seeking	Teach and accept ways to say no, stop, break, help, too loud, not sure or later.
Protect communication devices	Keep AAC available, charged and within reach; do not remove it as punishment.

4.2 Replace vague instructions with visible success criteria

MORE ACCESSIBLE	LESS ACCESSIBLE
"Open page 24. Read paragraphs 1-3. Highlight two causes. Then show me the two highlights."	"Get started, focus, and do the first part properly."

4.3 Echolalia, delayed response and atypical language

Repeated or scripted language can have communicative functions. A delayed response may reflect processing time, language formulation or stress. Literal interpretation can make idioms, sarcasm and implied requests difficult. Educators should seek meaning, give time and teach non-literal or context-dependent language when it is relevant to access.



4.4 Participation is more than speaking in front of the class

Learning goal	Possible valid participation formats
Recall / explain	Speech, AAC, typed response, short written response, matching, selecting, visual sequence.
Discuss ideas	Prepared contribution, chat/text, shared document, partner response, teacher-facilitated AAC.
Present learning	Recorded video/audio, slide deck with narration or AAC, live presentation with reduced audience, poster or demonstration.
Ask for help	Help card, hand signal, private digital message, AAC button, written note, scheduled check-in.

PROMPT DEPENDENCE

If an adult asks, repeats, points, gestures and physically guides every response, the learner may appear successful while becoming dependent on adult prompts. Plan prompt fading from the beginning.



SECTION 5

Sensory Access and the Physical Learning Environment

Reduce avoidable sensory load so attention and regulation are not consumed by surviving the room.

- Observe actual triggers and supports rather than assuming every autistic learner has the same sensory profile.
- Offer accommodations proactively, not only after distress occurs.
- Include non-classroom spaces in sensory planning.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Sensory support is an access adjustment, not a reward for good behaviour.

5.1 Conduct an environment walk-through

Environment feature	Questions to ask
Sound	Is there HVAC hum, scraping chairs, bells, hand dryers, echo, shouting, music or simultaneous conversation? Can the learner anticipate loud events?
Light	Is there flicker, glare, bright daylight, projection contrast or highly reflective surfaces?
Visual load	Are walls, slides, worksheets and boards so crowded that important information is hard to find?
Touch / proximity	Does seating force close contact? Are queues crowded? Are surprise touch or shared materials frequent?
Movement	Can the learner change position, stand, move or use planned movement without being framed as noncompliance?
Smell / food	Are cleaning products, perfumes, food smells or science/art materials unusually strong?
Escape / recovery	Is there an agreed low-stimulation space the learner can access without public negotiation?

5.2 Accommodations should be individualized

- ☐ Alternative seating or location
- ☐ Noise-reduction headphones/ear defenders where safe and appropriate
- ☐ Reduced visual clutter
- ☐ Access to sunglasses/hat where permitted
- ☐ Advance warning before alarms, drills or noisy activities where possible
- ☐ Permission for movement or different posture
- ☐ Quiet entry/exit route
- ☐ Alternative cafeteria or assembly arrangement



- ☐ Sensory tools chosen with the learner and relevant professionals
- ☐ Short recovery time after high-load periods

5.3 Do not confuse regulation with distraction

Movement, doodling, pacing, chewing, fidgeting, repetitive movement or looking away may sometimes support attention or regulation. Judge the strategy by whether it helps the learner access the goal and whether it is safe, not by whether it looks conventionally attentive.

SAFETY EXCEPTION

Some sensory accommodations need context-specific safety review, for example during science practicals, traffic training, emergency evacuation or activities requiring auditory awareness. Adapt rather than automatically prohibit.



SECTION 6

Instructional Design and Universal Design for Learning

Design lessons that reduce barriers before individual rescue becomes necessary.

- Keep the learning goal clear and distinguish it from the format used to reach it.
- Use multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression.
- Scaffold difficult tasks without replacing them with unrelated easier work.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Accessibility is strongest when built into lesson design and then individualized where necessary.

6.1 Separate the goal from the barrier

If the learning goal is...	A barrier may be...	Possible access change
Explain causes of an event	Handwriting speed	Typed, AAC or oral response; graphic organizer.
Solve multi-step equations	Copying from the board	Provide printed/digital equations so effort stays on mathematics.
Compare two texts	Large reading volume	Accessible text format, chunking, text-to-speech if allowed, highlighted sections.
Demonstrate scientific reasoning	Group negotiation	Assigned roles, written turn structure, partner choice or individual evidence collection.
Learn vocabulary	Open-ended note taking	Explicit definitions, visuals, examples/non-examples and retrieval practice.

6.2 UDL as a planning lens

CAST describes Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a framework for designing learning experiences that reduce barriers and support learner agency. Version 3.0 emphasizes multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression, while addressing exclusionary barriers. [3]

UDL question	Educator prompt
Engagement	How can learners understand the purpose, make meaningful choices, experience appropriate challenge, belong and sustain effort?
Representation	How can key information be perceived, understood and connected to prior knowledge through more than one format?
Action & expression	How can learners navigate materials, communicate, organize and demonstrate learning using accessible tools and methods?



6.3 Scaffold, then fade

1. Model the task or show an exemplar.
2. Break the task into visible steps.
3. Prompt only as much as needed for success.
4. Pause before adding another prompt.
5. Record which prompts are necessary.
6. Fade prompts gradually while maintaining accuracy and emotional safety.
7. Teach the learner to use tools or self-prompts so support transfers away from the adult.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS, ACCESSIBLE ROUTE

Reducing unnecessary language, writing or sensory barriers is not the same as lowering the academic goal. Document what the learner is expected to learn and which supports remove irrelevant barriers.



SECTION 7

Executive Functioning, Routines and Transitions

Make planning, time, starting, stopping and switching visible and teachable.

- Externalize information that other learners may hold mentally.
- Prepare for change rather than repeatedly reacting to change-related distress.
- Build independence through tools, not through sudden withdrawal of support.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

A learner who knows the content can still be unable to start, sequence or submit the task without executive-function support.

7.1 Common executive-function barriers

Barrier	Observable classroom pattern	Support
Task initiation	Looks at page but does not begin	Show first action, use a start cue, reduce setup steps, provide model.
Working memory	Forgets multi-step directions	Written/visual sequence; one step visible at a time.
Time estimation	Runs out of time or rushes	Visible timer, time markers, interim deadlines.
Switching	Distress when moving between tasks	Advance warning, finish point, transition cue, preview next task.
Planning	Strong ideas but disorganized output	Planning template, checklist, exemplars, chunked milestones.
Materials management	Frequently loses items	Consistent storage, labeled system, digital backup, end-of-lesson checklist.

7.2 A predictable lesson architecture

1. Arrival / settle: what materials are needed and where to start.
2. Learning goal: what we are learning, not only what we are doing.
3. Instruction: key information in accessible formats.
4. Guided practice: model and supported attempt.
5. Independent / collaborative practice: clear task and endpoint.
6. Review: how to check success.
7. Transition: what happens next and what to do if unfinished.



7.3 When plans change

Some change is unavoidable. Predictability does not mean removing all change; it means making change understandable and manageable. State what is changing, what is staying the same, when it will happen, who will be there, what the learner can do if it becomes difficult, and when the normal routine resumes.

CHANGE SCRIPT	NOT ENOUGH
"Assembly replaces science today. Same classroom until 10:20. Then we walk to the hall with Ms. R. You can use headphones. Science returns tomorrow."	"Plans changed. You need to be flexible."



SECTION 8

Distress, Behaviour, Co-Regulation and Positive Support

Understand what behaviour may be communicating and reduce preventable escalation.

- Look for physical, communication, environmental and emotional drivers.
- Respond early to stress signals rather than waiting for crisis behaviour.
- Use functional, least-restrictive and dignity-preserving support.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

The first question is not "How do we stop the behaviour?" but "What is happening, what function might this serve, and what can we change or teach?"

8.1 Behaviour is influenced by context

NICE recommends considering communication difficulties, physical disorders or pain, mental-health needs, environmental factors such as lighting and noise, changes in routine, exploitation or abuse, and lack of predictability when behaviour becomes challenging. [2] In school practice, this means that a behaviour plan should not begin and end with consequences.

Possible driver	What the team might investigate
Task not understood	Instruction clarity, language level, modelling, prerequisite knowledge.
Task too difficult or too easy	Skill match, pace, challenge, length and available support.
Communication barrier	Ability to ask for help, break, clarification, more time or refusal.
Sensory overload	Noise, crowding, light, touch, transitions and cumulative load.
Physical discomfort	Pain, illness, constipation, hunger, sleep, medication effects or other health factors requiring appropriate referral.
Anxiety / uncertainty	Unexpected change, evaluation, social unpredictability, previous negative experience.
Social consequence	Escape from difficult interaction, access to adult support, peer response or avoidance of embarrassment.

8.2 Regulation before reasoning

During high distress, lengthy verbal explanations, repeated questioning and public correction can increase load. Use the learner's agreed crisis plan: reduce language, lower unnecessary demand, preserve personal space, support safe exit/recovery and avoid turning the moment into a lesson about consequences. Reflection and skill teaching belong after recovery.

8.3 Positive support planning

1. Define the behaviour in observable terms.



2. Identify context, antecedents, communication and possible physical/mental-health contributors.
3. Identify what the behaviour may achieve or avoid.
4. Change preventable triggers or make the task more accessible.
5. Teach an alternative communication or coping response that serves the same function.
6. Reinforce useful replacement skills and successful regulation.
7. Monitor outcomes, including whether the learner feels safer and more understood.

RESTRICTIVE PRACTICES

Restraint, seclusion or other restrictive practices should never be routine classroom management. Where local law or policy permits emergency use, follow the strictest applicable authorization, training, documentation, safeguarding and post-incident review requirements, with prevention as the priority.



SECTION 9

Assessment, Feedback and Demonstrating Learning

Measure the intended knowledge or skill without allowing unrelated barriers to dominate the result.

- Distinguish curriculum goals from access methods.
- Use accommodations that preserve the construct being assessed.
- Interpret inconsistent performance in context.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

A fair assessment is not necessarily identical for every learner. It is designed so the result reflects the intended learning as accurately as possible.

9.1 Ask what the assessment is actually measuring

Assessment demand	Potential hidden barrier	Possible adjustment if permitted
Timed written test	Processing / motor speed	Additional time, typing, reduced copying.
Oral questioning	Language formulation under pressure	Written/AAC response, preview of question format, processing time.
Group project	Social negotiation unrelated to content goal	Structured roles, individual contribution evidence, smaller group.
Long instructions	Working memory / language load	Chunked written instructions, checklist.
Noisy exam room	Sensory load	Low-distraction environment, approved sensory supports.
Presentation	Public speaking anxiety unrelated to content	Recorded presentation, smaller audience or supported format if regulations allow.

9.2 Feedback should be actionable

Feedback such as "try harder", "be more detailed" or "participate more" often fails because it does not specify the next action. Effective feedback identifies what met the criterion, what is missing, and the next manageable step. Visual exemplars and annotated models can reduce ambiguity.

9.3 Avoid grading disability characteristics

- ☐ Do not reduce academic marks because of eye contact unless eye contact is genuinely part of the defined learning objective.
- ☐ Do not treat handwriting speed as evidence of subject knowledge when handwriting is not the construct.
- ☐ Do not penalize the use of AAC or another approved communication method for being different from speech.



- ☐ Do not equate quiet participation with lack of preparation or interest.
- ☐ Document accommodations so interpretation remains consistent across staff.

ASSESSMENT RULES VARY

Formal examinations and high-stakes assessments may have strict accommodation approval processes. Plan early and verify the applicable rules rather than assuming classroom adjustments automatically transfer to external exams.



SECTION 10

Peer Inclusion, Group Work, Bullying and Social Safety

Create structured opportunities for connection without making social performance a condition of belonging.

- Teach peers inclusive routines without disclosing private information unnecessarily.
- Structure group work so participation is clear and fair.
- Treat bullying, exploitation and social exclusion as safety issues.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

The goal is access to authentic peer relationships and participation - not forced imitation of a preferred social style.

10.1 Group work needs architecture

Barrier	Design response
Unclear role	Assign concrete roles with visible responsibilities.
Fast conversation	Use written turn-taking, shared document or structured response rounds.
Peer dominance	Specify how decisions are made and how each contribution is included.
Sensory load	Use smaller group, quieter location or shorter collaboration periods.
Difficulty entering conversation	Provide sentence starters, signal cards or a planned turn.
Unequal workload	Use individual accountability and teacher check-ins.

10.2 Peer-mediated support should preserve dignity

Evidence reviews identify peer-mediated instruction and intervention among practices with support for autistic learners. [6] Implementation should avoid creating a permanent helper-child relationship or making the autistic learner a class project. Peers need clear tasks, adult supervision, mutuality and opportunities for genuine shared interests.

10.3 Bullying risk requires active prevention

- ☐ Create clear reporting routes that do not depend on fluent verbal disclosure.
- ☐ Take repeated "jokes", exclusion, coercion, theft, online targeting and manipulation seriously.
- ☐ Do not assume the autistic learner misunderstood if a pattern of harm is present.
- ☐ Monitor unstructured settings such as transport, corridors, cafeteria and online group spaces.
- ☐ Avoid public behaviour systems that expose accommodations or reinforce stigma.
- ☐ Restore safety and belonging after incidents, not only apply discipline to the aggressor.



SOCIAL TEACHING

Teach hidden rules only when they genuinely improve safety, access or mutual understanding. Do not teach masking as the default price of belonging.



SECTION 11

Attendance, Fatigue, Masking and Sustainable Participation

Look beyond visible classroom compliance when school participation becomes exhausting or unstable.

- Notice cumulative load across the whole day and week.
- Interpret attendance decline as a signal requiring assessment, not simply motivation.
- Build a sustainable participation plan with the learner and family.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

A learner who appears calm in school may still be using unsustainable effort to cope. Outcomes should include wellbeing and recovery, not only visible compliance.

11.1 Hidden load can accumulate

Some autistic learners consciously or unconsciously suppress movements, copy social behaviour, monitor facial expression, rehearse responses or tolerate sensory discomfort in order to appear to cope. Regardless of terminology, educators should take seriously reports that school is exhausting even when distress is not obvious in class.

11.2 When attendance changes

Investigate	Examples
Academic access	Repeated failure, overwhelming volume, inaccessible tasks, unclear expectations.
Sensory environment	Transport, corridors, dining hall, assemblies, classrooms, alarms.
Social safety	Bullying, exclusion, coercion, conflict, fear of particular peers/adults.
Health / mental health	Pain, sleep, anxiety, depression, gastrointestinal problems, medication effects or other needs requiring appropriate clinical assessment.
Transitions	New teacher, timetable, room, year group, exam period or return after absence.
Recovery capacity	Whether the learner has meaningful breaks and enough low-demand time to recover.

11.3 Sustainable re-engagement

1. Agree a small number of non-negotiable safety and access supports.
2. Identify the least difficult entry point rather than immediately restoring the full previous load.
3. Make the day predictable and specify where recovery can occur.
4. Use the learner's preferred communication for check-ins.
5. Coordinate expectations across staff so the learner is not repeatedly negotiating the same accommodation.



6. Review progress frequently and increase demand only when participation is sustainable.

DO NOT MEDICALIZE EVERY ATTENDANCE PROBLEM

School environment, teaching design, relationships and bullying can be causal or maintaining factors. Health assessment may also be necessary. Both can be true at the same time.



SECTION 12

Family Partnership and Multidisciplinary Collaboration

Coordinate support so the learner does not have to survive inconsistent systems.

- Use family knowledge without expecting families to carry the whole implementation burden.
- Clarify what each professional contributes.
- Share only information needed for legitimate educational and safeguarding purposes.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

The strongest plan has one set of priorities, clear owners and compatible strategies across the people who support the learner.

12.1 Productive family-school communication

Useful	Less useful
Specific pattern: "Math transition was difficult after the fire drill; visual schedule helped."	Global label: "Bad day."
Action: "We will trial written instructions for two weeks."	Advice dump: ten new strategies at once.
Learner voice: "She asked for the quieter lunch space."	Adult-only conclusions without learner input.
Balanced information including success	Daily reports focused only on problems.
Clear escalation of health/safety concerns	Using ordinary communication channels for emergencies.

12.2 Multidisciplinary roles

Professional / role	Possible contribution
Teacher / special educator	Curriculum access, instruction, assessment, classroom data, coordination.
Speech-language professional	Communication assessment/support, AAC, language access, pragmatic communication as relevant.
Occupational therapist	Participation, sensory-motor access, functional routines, environmental adaptation within scope and jurisdiction.
Psychologist / behaviour specialist	Assessment, mental-health or learning formulation, functional assessment, staff consultation depending on role.
Counsellor / wellbeing staff	Accessible emotional support, school participation and referral pathways.
Nurse / health staff	Relevant health plans, medication procedures, seizures, allergies, health escalation.
Family / caregivers	History, preferences, home patterns, priorities, health information and longitudinal knowledge.



Professional / role	Possible contribution
Learner	Goals, preferences, lived experience, consent/assent, what actually helps.

12.3 Meetings should end with ownership

- ☐ Top 1-3 outcomes agreed
- ☐ Actions written in observable terms
- ☐ Owner for each action
- ☐ Start date
- ☐ Data or evidence to review
- ☐ Learner's view documented
- ☐ Family's priorities documented
- ☐ Review date booked
- ☐ What staff should stop doing is explicit where relevant



SECTION 13

Health, Safeguarding, Privacy and Risk

Protect health and safety without turning disability support into surveillance or loss of dignity.

- Recognize when a classroom problem may be a health problem.
- Follow safeguarding procedures promptly and accessibly.
- Use proportionate risk planning that preserves ordinary educational participation.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Safety planning should enable participation, not become a reason to exclude the learner from ordinary learning experiences.

13.1 New behaviour can be health information

Sudden or marked changes in behaviour, communication, attention, eating, sleep, continence, movement, self-injury or participation may be associated with pain, illness, seizures, medication effects, mental-health problems or other health needs. Educators should document observations accurately and use the school's health/referral pathway rather than assuming the change is simply "autism."

13.2 Safeguarding access

- ☐ Ensure the learner has a reliable way to report discomfort, bullying, abuse or unsafe touch.
- ☐ Teach body-safety and consent concepts in an accessible format appropriate to age and understanding.
- ☐ Do not use compliance training that teaches the learner to obey every adult automatically.
- ☐ Take changes in behaviour around a particular person or place seriously and follow local safeguarding procedures.
- ☐ Avoid conducting an investigative interview beyond your role; preserve factual observations and report through the authorized pathway.

13.3 Dignity and privacy in support

Need	Dignity-preserving practice
Personal care	Private setting, trained authorized staff, consent/assent practices, clear documentation.
Medication	Follow school health policy; do not discuss medication publicly.
Behaviour data	Collect only data needed for a defined purpose; store and share under applicable privacy rules.
Diagnosis disclosure	Share on a need-to-know basis under local policy; involve learner/family where possible.
Safety supervision	Use the least intrusive level compatible with the identified risk and review regularly.

EMERGENCY PLANNING

A good plan identifies the risk, prevention strategies, early warning signs, communication method, authorized response, emergency threshold, family contact route, documentation and post-incident review.



SECTION 14

School-Wide Implementation, Data and Quality Improvement

Move from isolated good teachers to a reliable institutional approach.

- Define school-wide autism-inclusive practices that every learner can expect.
- Use implementation data without reducing students to behaviour counts.
- Build staff capability, accountability and review cycles.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

A school is inclusive when good support survives timetable changes, staff absence, new teachers and transitions between year groups.

14.1 Minimum school-wide standards

- ☐ Autism and disability awareness training for relevant staff
- ☐ Accessible communication options in key settings
- ☐ Predictable transition procedures
- ☐ Sensory/environmental review of major spaces
- ☐ Anti-bullying process accessible to non-speaking and communication-diverse learners
- ☐ Individual emergency/health plans where indicated
- ☐ Clear restrictive-practice governance and review
- ☐ Formal transition handoff between staff/year groups
- ☐ Family and learner participation in planning
- ☐ Data review that includes participation, learning, wellbeing, attendance and incidents

14.2 Measure the outcome, not only adult activity

Adult activity measure	More meaningful learner outcome
Number of visual schedules produced	Learner starts/transitions with less distress or fewer prompts.
Number of staff trained	Observed use of agreed practices and improved access.
Number of behaviour charts completed	Reduction in preventable triggers; increased functional communication and safety.
Number of family messages sent	Shared priorities are implemented consistently; fewer repeated misunderstandings.
Minutes of 1:1 support	Level of independence and whether adult proximity is still necessary.

14.3 A simple Plan-Do-Review cycle

1. PLAN: define the learner-centered problem and baseline.



2. DO: implement one or two specific changes with staff clarity.
3. CHECK: review learning, participation, regulation, attendance, learner voice and unintended effects.
4. ADAPT: keep, change, fade or stop the support based on evidence.
5. SCALE: only after a strategy is working and staff can implement it reliably.

QUALITY PRINCIPLE

A strategy that works only when one exceptional staff member is present is not yet a reliable system. Document the essential steps so support transfers across adults and settings.



SECTION 15

GARC Educator Tools, Templates and Checklists

Reusable pages for planning, classroom review, communication, regulation, assessment and team coordination.

- Copy or adapt these tools within the school while preserving the purpose of each tool.
- Complete them with the learner wherever possible.
- Review and retire tools that are no longer useful.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

A tool should reduce uncertainty and improve action. If it becomes paperwork without benefit to the learner, simplify or stop using it.

15.1 Learner Access Passport

Field	Notes
How I communicate	
How I understand instructions best	
Strengths / interests	
Things that make learning easier	
Things that make school harder	
Sensory supports	
How I ask for help / break / stop	
Early stress signs	
What helps me recover	
How I prefer adults to give feedback	
Important health / safety information	
What I want teachers to know about me	



15.2 Classroom Accessibility Scan

Area	Yes / No / Action
Daily schedule is visible and understandable.	
Changes are communicated before they happen where possible.	
Instructions are available in more than one format when needed.	
The learner has a reliable response method.	
AAC or assistive technology is available and charged.	
Noise and visual clutter have been reviewed.	
A low-stimulation recovery option exists.	
Movement/posture needs can be accommodated safely.	
Tasks have visible start, steps and finish points.	
Help-seeking and break requests are explicitly supported.	
Group work has clear roles.	
Bullying/reporting routes are accessible.	



15.3 Lesson Accessibility Planner

Planning question	Your plan
Learning goal - what must students learn?	
What is not essential to the goal but could become a barrier?	
How will key information be represented?	
How can students respond or demonstrate learning?	
Vocabulary / hidden assumptions to teach explicitly	
Visual / written supports	
Sensory considerations	
Transition into and out of the task	
What support can be faded?	
How will I know the learner accessed the goal?	



15.4 Visual Schedule and Change Planner

Time / order	Activity	What happens	Support / change note	Finished
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				

If something changes

- ☐ What is changing: _____
- ☐ What stays the same: _____
- ☐ When normal routine returns: _____
- ☐ Who can help: _____
- ☐ What the learner can do if the change becomes difficult: _____



15.5 Task Analysis and Independence Builder

Step	Learner action	Current prompt	Next fading step
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			

Outcome

- ☐ Accuracy is acceptable
- ☐ Learner knows when task is complete
- ☐ Prompts are decreasing
- ☐ Skill is transferring to another adult/setting where appropriate



15.6 Prompt Hierarchy and Fading Log

Date / task	Independen t	Visual / written	Gestural	Verbal	Model	Physical*	Next step

*Physical prompting must follow local policy, consent/assent expectations and professional guidance. Use the least intrusive prompt necessary and never use coercion.



15.7 Communication and AAC Participation Map

Classroom situation	How the learner can communicate	Partner responsibility	Barrier / action
Answering teacher question			
Asking for help			
Requesting break / stop			
Group work			
Social time			
Assessment			
Emergency / pain / unsafe situation			



15.8 Sensory Environment Checklist

Setting	Potential load	Current support	Change to trial
Main classroom			
Corridor / transition			
Cafeteria / lunch			
Assembly / hall			
Playground / break			
Transport			
Science / art / PE			
Toilets / changing			



15.9 Regulation and Distress Support Plan

Stage	What it looks like	Adult response	What to avoid
Regulated / ready			
Early stress			
Rising distress			
High distress / crisis			
Recovery			

Reliable communication during distress

The learner can indicate help / stop / break / pain / unsafe by:



15.10 Functional Observation Record

Use this tool to record patterns, not to diagnose motive. A functional assessment may require trained professionals and multidisciplinary review.

Date / context	What happened before?	Observable behaviour	What happened after?	Possible function / unmet need to investigate

Questions before changing consequences

- ☐ Could the learner be in pain, unwell, sleep-deprived or experiencing another health issue?
- ☐ Was communication accessible?
- ☐ Was the task understandable and achievable?
- ☐ Was the environment overwhelming?
- ☐ Was there unexpected change?
- ☐ Was there bullying, embarrassment, conflict or loss of control?



15.11 Assessment Accommodation Planner

Assessment	Construct / learning goal	Barrier	Approved accommodation / access method	Evidence after use

CHECK REGULATIONS

For formal examinations, use only accommodations permitted and approved under the applicable rules. Start the approval process early.



15.12 Group Work and Peer Inclusion Planner

Element	Plan
Shared learning goal	
Group size / peers	
Learner role	
How turns / decisions work	
Communication support	
Sensory / location support	
Adult role	
How independence will be protected	
How we will know participation was meaningful	



15.13 Bullying / Social Safety Response Record

Field	Record
Date / setting	
Learner report in their own words or communication	
Observed facts	
People involved	
Immediate safety action	
Safeguarding / anti-bullying pathway used	
Family / learner communication	
Environmental or supervision changes	
Follow-up date	
Has safety and participation improved?	



15.14 Home-School High-Value Communication Page

Date	Meaningful change / success / concern	Action or question	Owner / follow-up

AVOID SURVEILLANCE

Do not create a daily deficit report simply because the learner is autistic. Share information that is necessary for safety, continuity, progress or agreed goals, and protect the learner's privacy.



15.15 Student Voice and Goal Planner

Prompt	Learner response
School is easiest when...	
School is hardest when...	
I learn best when...	
Adults help me best by...	
Please stop...	
A break that helps me is...	
I want classmates to understand...	
One thing I want to get better at...	
One thing I want more choice about...	



15.16 Transition / New Teacher Handoff

Transfer item	Current information
Reliable communication methods	
Successful instructional supports	
Sensory/environmental supports	
Early stress signs and recovery plan	
Independence level / prompts to avoid	
Strengths and interests	
Peer / social safety information	
Health and safety plan references	
Current goals and data	
Learner's own message to the new team	



15.17 Substitute / Temporary Staff Quick Sheet

- ☐ Use the learner's usual communication method.
- ☐ Keep the normal routine visible where possible.
- ☐ Do not remove AAC, sensory tools or agreed accommodations.
- ☐ Give processing time after instructions/questions.
- ☐ Do not force eye contact or physical contact.
- ☐ Use the agreed break/recovery process.
- ☐ If unsure, ask the designated staff member rather than improvising consequences.
- ☐ Report any safety or safeguarding concern through the school pathway.

Today's essential information

Item	Details
Schedule changes	
Trusted adult	
Break / quiet space	
Communication / AAC	
Health / safety alert reference	
End-of-day handoff	



15.18 30-Day Educator Action Plan

Week	Priority	Specific action	Evidence / outcome
Week 1	Know the learner	Complete learner snapshot; identify top two barriers.	
Week 2	Access	Implement one communication or sensory adjustment consistently.	
Week 3	Instruction	Redesign one recurring lesson/task using UDL and prompt fading.	
Week 4	Review	Ask learner/family/team what changed; keep, adapt or stop.	

One change I will stop doing

One support I will make consistent across staff



15.19 90-Day Review Dashboard

Review question	Status / evidence
Is the learner participating in more of the intended curriculum?	
Is communication more reliable across settings?	
Has adult prompting reduced where independence is a goal?	
Are distress incidents less frequent, shorter or better supported?	
Has attendance or lesson endurance improved?	
Are bullying / social safety concerns resolved or improving?	
Does the learner say the plan helps?	
Does the family report improved consistency?	
Which support should we keep?	
Which support should we change or stop?	



Appendix A - Role-Specific Quick Guides

Classroom / subject teacher

- ☐ Know the communication and access plan before the learner enters the lesson.
- ☐ Show the learning goal and task endpoint.
- ☐ Reduce unnecessary ambiguity.
- ☐ Use the least intrusive prompt needed.
- ☐ Record patterns that affect learning and share high-value information with the team.

Teaching assistant / learning support staff

- ☐ Support access to the teacher and peers rather than becoming the learner's permanent communication gatekeeper.
- ☐ Wait before prompting.
- ☐ Sit back or move away when support is not needed.
- ☐ Teach the learner to use tools, routines and self-advocacy that reduce adult dependence.
- ☐ Coordinate with the teacher so responsibility for instruction remains shared.

School leader

- ☐ Make inclusion a whole-school system, not the responsibility of one specialist.
- ☐ Ensure staff training includes practical classroom implementation.
- ☐ Audit sensory, bullying, safeguarding and restrictive-practice systems.
- ☐ Protect planning time for multidisciplinary coordination.
- ☐ Review outcome data beyond incidents and test scores.

Counsellor / wellbeing staff

- ☐ Adapt language and session structure to communication needs.
- ☐ Do not assume fluent speech means easy emotional insight.
- ☐ Use visual or written emotion scales where helpful.
- ☐ Coordinate with health services for risk beyond school scope.
- ☐ Protect confidentiality within legal and safeguarding limits.

Specialist / therapist working in school

- ☐ Link recommendations to real classroom routines.
- ☐ Model strategies for staff rather than delivering isolated advice.
- ☐ Specify when and how support should be faded or generalized.
- ☐ Measure functional participation, not only clinic-room performance.
- ☐ Include learner and family priorities.



Appendix B - Common Myths and Better Questions

Myth / shortcut	Better question
"They make eye contact, so autism is mild."	What specific tasks or environments require support?
"They can speak, so they do not need communication support."	Can they understand, self-advocate and communicate under stress or complex demand?
"They did it yesterday, so refusal today is behavioural."	What changed in health, load, environment, task or predictability?
"Breaks reward avoidance."	Does the break prevent escalation and support successful return?
"Independence means no help."	What tools allow the learner to do more with less human prompting?
"Everyone must do the task in the same way for fairness."	What is the actual learning goal, and which access methods preserve it?
"Good behaviour means the plan is working."	Is the learner learning, participating, communicating and sustaining wellbeing?



Appendix C - Glossary

Term	Plain-language meaning
AAC	Augmentative and alternative communication; methods that supplement or replace speech, including symbols, boards, devices, sign and text.
Accommodation / adjustment	A change to environment, process, timing or format that improves access without necessarily changing the intended learning goal.
Assistive technology	Tools or systems used to support access, communication, participation or learning.
Co-regulation	Support from another person that helps the learner return toward a manageable level of arousal or organization.
Executive functioning	Processes involved in planning, starting, stopping, switching, organizing, working memory and self-monitoring.
Functional assessment	A structured process for understanding the variables and functions associated with behaviour; methods and qualification requirements vary by setting and jurisdiction.
Masking / camouflaging	Terms used for efforts to hide, suppress or compensate for autistic traits or differences in order to meet social expectations.
Prompt fading	Deliberate reduction of adult prompts as a learner gains control of a skill.
Regulation	The changing ability to manage arousal, attention, emotion, sensory input and behaviour in context.
Stimming	Repetitive movement, sound or sensory behaviour that may support regulation, expression or enjoyment.
Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	A framework for designing learning environments and experiences to reduce barriers and support learner agency through flexible engagement, representation, and action/expression.
Visual support	A visual representation such as schedule, sequence, label, choice board, map, timer or written cue used to increase understanding or independence.



Appendix D - Selected Authoritative Resources

Source	Useful for	Website
World Health Organization (WHO)	Autism fact sheet; global health and inclusion context.	who.int
NICE	Clinical guidance on autism in children and young people, including environmental adjustments, communication, co-occurring needs and behaviour support.	nice.org.uk
CAST	Universal Design for Learning Guidelines 3.0 and implementation resources.	udlguidelines.cast.org
UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report	International inclusion and education policy context.	unesco.org/gem-report
AFIRM / UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute	Free modules on evidence-based practices for autistic learners.	afirm.fpg.unc.edu

USE LOCAL SOURCES TOO

Education rights, individual plan processes, exam accommodations, safeguarding, privacy, medication administration and restrictive-practice rules vary by jurisdiction. Pair this toolkit with verified local policy and professional standards.



References and Evidence Notes

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4. **Global Education Monitoring Report Team, UNESCO.** Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education - All means all. UNESCO, 2020. <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/inclusion>
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8. **National Institute of Mental Health.** Autism Spectrum Disorder. Health information. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/autism-spectrum-disorder>

EVIDENCE NOTE

This toolkit translates broad evidence and authoritative guidance into practical classroom principles. It does not claim that every strategy is appropriate for every learner. Selection should be individualized, goal-linked, monitored for benefit and reviewed with the learner and relevant team.



GARC Educator Action Summary

Use this final page as a short implementation handoff. Keep the plan focused enough that the whole team can use it consistently.

Current priority	Access / teaching change	Owner	Review date

Learner voice

What helps me learn:

What makes school harder:

How I want adults to help:

Keep / Change / Stop

KEEP because it helps	CHANGE because...	STOP because...

GARC CLOSING PRINCIPLE

The strongest autism-inclusive classroom does not ask the learner to spend all day proving they can tolerate barriers. It identifies the learning goal, removes avoidable barriers, teaches useful skills, protects dignity and builds genuine participation.