



SCHOOL COMMUNITY AUTISM TOOLKIT

A Practical Evidence-Informed Guide for Inclusive, Safe and Supportive Schools

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IMPORTANT SCOPE NOTE

This toolkit is an educational and institutional resource. It is not a diagnostic manual, clinical treatment protocol, legal opinion, or substitute for an individualized education plan, safeguarding policy, emergency procedure, licensed professional assessment, or applicable local law. Schools should adapt the guidance to local regulations, age, setting and individual student needs.

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Language and dignity

This toolkit generally uses the term “autistic student” because many autistic people prefer identity-first language. Preferences differ. Schools should ask students and families which language they prefer and use that preference respectfully. The document avoids framing autism as something to be eliminated or hidden.

Evidence approach

The guidance translates established principles from international disability rights, inclusive education, autism guidance, sensory accessibility and Universal Design for Learning into practical school routines. Key sources are listed in the References section. The GARC framework and checklists are practice tools developed for this publication; they are not an external accreditation standard or clinical instrument.



Foreword

Schools shape far more than academic attainment. They shape belonging, confidence, communication, identity, relationships and the expectations a young person develops about the world. For autistic students, the difference between a school that merely permits attendance and a school that enables participation can be profound.

An autism-inclusive school does not depend on one specialist, one classroom or one intervention. It is created through hundreds of ordinary decisions: how staff communicate instructions, how changes are announced, how sensory demands are managed, how distress is interpreted, how bullying is addressed, how families are listened to, and how students are included in decisions that affect them.

This toolkit is designed for the whole school community. It provides a common language, practical strategies, role-specific guidance, implementation tools and ready-to-use templates. Its core message is simple: understand the individual, remove avoidable barriers, make expectations clear, protect dignity, and build systems that allow the student to participate without having to hide who they are.

FROM AWARENESS TO PRACTICE

Awareness is not the end point. The goal is consistent, observable practice across classrooms, corridors, transport, breaks, activities, meetings and transitions.

Global Autism Research Center (GARC)

School Inclusion & Knowledge Translation Series



Contents and Navigation Map

Section	Purpose
Quick Start	What every staff member should know before applying the toolkit.
1. Understanding Autism in School	A practical, strengths-aware description of autism and common school barriers.
2. The GARC 10-Point Inclusion Framework	A whole-school operating framework for rights, access, participation and improvement.
3. Communication and Processing	Clear language, visual supports, processing time, AAC and comprehension.
4. Sensory Access and the Physical Environment	Noise, light, movement, crowds, clothing, food, safe spaces and environmental adjustments.
5. Teaching, Learning and Assessment	Planning lessons, executive-function support, flexibility, group work and assessment access.
6. Wellbeing, Distress and Safety	Prevention, early signs, low-arousal response, recovery and post-incident learning.
7. Belonging, Peers and Bullying	Peer inclusion, unstructured times, bullying prevention and respectful social support.
8. Transitions, Attendance and Routines	Daily transitions, school moves, special events, attendance barriers and re-entry planning.
9. Family Partnership and Student Voice	Collaborative planning, information sharing, meetings and decision-making.
10. Role-Specific Guides	Action pages for leaders, teachers, inclusion teams, health staff, transport and support roles.
11. Implementation and Self-Assessment	A maturity check, 30-day launch plan, monitoring indicators and review cycle.
12. Ready-to-Use Templates	Student profile, sensory audit, transition plan, meeting record and distress review.
References	Primary sources and recommended professional resources.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

Schools can read it end-to-end, use individual sections for staff development, print role guides for specific teams, or use the templates during student support planning. Start with Quick Start and the GARC 10-Point Inclusion Framework, then prioritize the sections that address the most immediate barriers in your setting.



Quick Start: Ten Things Every Staff Member Should Know

Principle	What it means in practice
Autism is diverse.	Two autistic students may need very different support. Avoid assumptions based on labels, verbal ability, grades or appearance.
Behaviour communicates information.	Look for unmet needs, unclear expectations, sensory load, anxiety, fatigue, pain, social confusion or loss of predictability before assuming defiance.
Clarity reduces load.	Use concrete language, visible routines, explicit instructions and clear beginnings and endings.
Processing time matters.	A student may understand but need additional time to interpret language, organize a response or shift attention.
Sensory access is educational access.	Noise, lighting, crowds, smell, touch, temperature and movement can directly affect participation and learning.
Do not force eye contact or stillness.	Attention and regulation can look different. Stimming and alternative gaze may help a student listen or regulate.
Predictability is protective.	Prepare students for changes; explain what is changing, what stays the same and what happens next.
Distress is not a teaching moment.	When a student is overwhelmed, reduce demands and language, create safety and allow recovery before problem-solving.
Belonging must be designed.	Being physically present is not the same as being included. Monitor breaks, group work, clubs, transport and peer culture.
Ask the student.	Whenever possible, involve the student directly in decisions about communication, sensory needs, breaks, goals and support.

If you only have five minutes

- ☐ Know the student's preferred communication method and how they indicate "yes", "no", "stop", "help" and "break".
- ☐ Know the student's early signs of stress and the agreed low-demand/safe space.
- ☐ Keep instructions short, concrete and visible when possible.
- ☐ Warn about changes and transitions before they happen.
- ☐ Avoid public correction, forced eye contact, unnecessary touch and power struggles.
- ☐ After distress, record what the environment can change next time rather than focusing only on what the student did.

RIGHTS BASE

Inclusive education requires more than placement. Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calls for inclusive education, reasonable accommodation and individualized support. [2][3]



SECTION 1

Understanding Autism in the School Context

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

- Understand autism as a diverse neurodevelopmental condition with varied strengths and support needs.
- Separate observable behaviour from assumptions about intent.
- Recognize that communication, sensory processing, predictability and wellbeing interact.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Support should be individualized, respectful and proportionate. The aim is not to make an autistic student appear less autistic; it is to remove barriers so the student can participate, learn, communicate and feel safe.



1.1 What autism may look like at school

Autism is a diverse group of neurodevelopmental conditions associated with differences in social communication and interaction, patterns of interests or activities, transitions and sensory responses. Abilities and support needs vary widely and may change over time. [1] The school implication is straightforward: there is no universal “autism strategy.” Effective support starts with the individual student and the barriers present in the specific environment.

Area	Possible school impact
Communication	The student may use spoken language, AAC, gestures, writing, typing or a combination. Speech ability does not automatically indicate comprehension, emotional regulation or independence.
Social interaction	The student may communicate or connect differently, prefer smaller groups, miss implied meanings, or need explicit support with collaborative tasks and social expectations.
Predictability and change	Unexpected changes, unclear sequences, substitutions, cancellations or open-ended tasks may increase cognitive and emotional load.
Sensory processing	Sound, light, touch, smell, temperature, movement, crowds or internal body signals may be experienced more intensely or less noticeably.
Focused interests and repetition	Deep interests can support motivation, expertise and connection. Repetitive movement or “stimming” may support regulation and should not be suppressed simply because it looks unusual.
Executive functioning	Starting, stopping, shifting attention, organizing materials, remembering multi-step instructions and estimating time may require explicit supports.
Emotional regulation	A student may have difficulty identifying, communicating or regulating stress in real time. Distress may become visible only after demands accumulate.

1.2 Strengths are real - and so are support needs

A strengths-based approach does not mean ignoring disability or difficulty. It means seeing the full student: interests, abilities, preferred ways of learning, values, relationships and aspirations alongside the barriers they face. Strengths may include deep knowledge, sustained focus on areas of interest, pattern recognition, honesty, creativity, visual thinking, memory, precision or distinctive problem-solving. These are possibilities, not stereotypes.

DO	AVOID
• Ask what helps the student learn and recover.	• Use labels such as “high functioning” or “low functioning” as a substitute for support planning.



DO	AVOID
• Build on interests without making them the only route to participation.	• Assume verbal students need little support.
• Assume competence while providing access support.	• Treat academic ability as evidence that sensory or social barriers are minor.
• Observe patterns across time, people and settings.	• Make the student earn access to regulation tools or breaks.
• Treat communication differences as differences, not disrespect.	• Interpret reduced eye contact or unusual body language as dishonesty.

1.3 Common myths that create barriers

Myth	Better interpretation
“If the student can do it sometimes, they can always do it.”	Performance changes with sensory load, fatigue, anxiety, predictability, health, task complexity and environment.
“A quiet student is coping.”	Some students mask distress or become less communicative when overwhelmed. Quiet compliance should not be assumed to mean comfort.
“More exposure will make them get used to it.”	Repeated exposure without control, support or safety can increase distress. Adaptation should be individualized and never based on forcing endurance.
“Fair means everyone gets the same thing.”	Equity may require different routes, environments, timing, communication formats or levels of support.
“Behaviour plans should focus on stopping the behaviour.”	A better starting point is identifying the purpose or cause, reducing barriers and teaching accessible alternatives.

GARC REFLECTION QUESTION

What are we currently asking this student to tolerate, infer, remember, suppress or navigate that the school could make clearer or easier?



SECTION 2

The GARC 10-Point Autism-Inclusive School Framework

A practical whole-school model for moving from isolated accommodations to consistent institutional practice.

- Use the framework as a common language across leadership, teaching, support and operations.
- Focus on observable systems, not symbolic awareness activities.
- Review implementation with student and family feedback.

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2.1 The framework

Commitment	Institutional meaning
1. Dignity & Rights	Students are treated as rights-holders. Support protects dignity, privacy, autonomy and access.
2. Student Voice	The student contributes to decisions, goals, supports and review in an accessible way.
3. Predictability & Clarity	Routines, expectations, transitions and changes are made visible and understandable.
4. Communication Access	Language, visual information, AAC and processing time are adapted to the student.
5. Sensory Access	Environmental barriers are identified and reasonable adjustments are available without stigma.
6. Flexible Learning	Teaching and assessment allow multiple ways to access content and demonstrate learning.
7. Emotional Safety	Staff recognize early stress signals, reduce escalation and provide safe recovery routes.
8. Belonging & Participation	The student is supported to participate meaningfully in academic, social and extracurricular life.
9. Family & Team Partnership	Knowledge is shared consistently among the student, family and relevant staff with appropriate privacy.
10. Continuous Improvement	The school monitors barriers, incidents, attendance, participation and feedback, then changes systems.

2.2 What “embedded” practice looks like

A practice is embedded when it does not depend on one exceptional staff member. It is documented, understood across roles, applied consistently, reviewed with evidence and resilient when staff or timetables change. The goal is to make good support ordinary.

- ☐ Each autistic student has a concise support profile that is easy for relevant staff to access.
- ☐ Staff know how to communicate changes and what to do when a student becomes overwhelmed.
- ☐ Classrooms use clear routines, visible instructions and flexible ways to participate.
- ☐ A quiet/low-stimulation option is available without requiring public disclosure or punishment.
- ☐ Bullying and social exclusion are monitored in unstructured settings, not only in classrooms.
- ☐ Transport, clubs, events, exams, trips and substitute-teacher days are included in support planning.
- ☐ Families and students have a predictable review route and know who coordinates support.
- ☐ The school reviews data for patterns, not just individual incidents.



2.3 Whole-school responsibilities

Who	Core responsibility
Leadership	Set expectations, allocate responsibility, remove policy barriers, resource training and monitor implementation.
Inclusion/SEND/SEN team	Coordinate profiles, adjustments, transitions, staff guidance and review.
Teachers	Design accessible instruction, observe barriers, communicate clearly and use agreed supports consistently.
Support staff	Promote independence and access rather than over-prompting or speaking for the student.
Counselling/psychology	Support wellbeing, communication and functional understanding within professional scope.
Operations	Include sensory and accessibility considerations in transport, dining, security, facilities and events.
Families	Share knowledge and priorities while remaining partners rather than unpaid case managers.
Students	Contribute preferences, goals, concerns and feedback in accessible formats.

NOT AN ACCREDITATION TOOL

The GARC 10-Point Framework is a practice framework for internal improvement. Use of the framework does not constitute GARC certification, accreditation or external validation.



SECTION 3

Communication and Processing

Make information easier to understand, express and act on.

- Use direct language and visible information.
- Respect AAC and alternative communication.
- Allow processing time and reduce unnecessary verbal load.

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3.1 Communication is more than speech

A student may speak fluently and still struggle to process rapid instructions, implied meanings, emotional language or multi-step directions. Another student may speak little or not at all while understanding far more than others assume. Communication planning should address both expression and comprehension.

3.2 Make instructions accessible

Practice	Application
Get attention respectfully	Use the student's name or agreed cue. Do not require eye contact.
Say what to do	Prefer "Open your book to page 14" over "Can we get started?" when the latter is intended as an instruction.
Limit verbal layers	Give one or two steps, then allow processing before adding more.
Make it visible	Write key steps, use a checklist, model the task or provide an example.
Show the finish	Define when the task is complete, where work goes and what happens next.
Check understanding	Ask the student to show the first step or choose between options rather than repeatedly asking "Do you understand?"

3.3 Helpful communication tools

- Visual schedule or agenda for the day, lesson or activity.
- First-then / now-next format for short sequences.
- Written or pictorial task checklist.
- Choice board for activities, break options or response methods.
- Communication card for "help", "break", "too loud", "I need more time", "please write it down".
- Countdown or visual timer where the student finds it useful.
- Examples of completed work and visible success criteria.
- Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC), including speech-generating devices, symbols, typing or sign, when used by the student.

AAC IS COMMUNICATION

If a student uses AAC, it must remain available throughout the day. Do not remove it as a consequence, delay access until the student "tries to speak", or treat it as a last resort.



3.4 Literal language and hidden meanings

Idioms, sarcasm, ambiguous instructions and indirect requests can create unnecessary uncertainty. This does not mean all language must be stripped of personality. It means staff should recognize when figurative or implied meaning is carrying essential information and make that meaning explicit.

DO	AVOID
• "Please submit the worksheet by 10:30. If you finish early, choose one of the three extension tasks on the board."	• "You know what you should be doing."
• "The assembly is moved to the gym. Your first two lessons stay the same."	• "Everyone else understands this."
• "You can answer by speaking, typing or pointing to your choice."	• "Stop being rude and look at me."
• "I will give you a minute to think, then I will come back."	• Repeating the same question faster and louder when the student has not responded.

3.5 Processing time

After asking a question or giving a direction, pause. The student may be processing the words, managing sensory input, planning a response and shifting attention at the same time. Rephrasing too quickly can restart the processing load. Agree with the student on what helpful wait time looks like and whether written prompts are preferred.



SECTION 4

Sensory Access and the Physical Environment

Treat sensory access as a practical requirement for participation, learning and safety.

- Identify preventable sensory barriers.
- Offer options without stigma.
- Plan for high-load environments before problems occur.

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4.1 Sensory differences in school

Autistic students may be hyper-sensitive, hypo-sensitive or inconsistently sensitive to sensory input. A stimulus that seems minor to others can be distracting, painful or exhausting; a student may also seek movement, pressure or other input to regulate. NICE and autism practice guidance emphasize considering lighting, noise, personal space and visual supports when making environmental adjustments. [4][7]

Sensory area	Possible school sources
Sound	Bells, scraping chairs, projectors, ventilation, group work, hand dryers, music, shouting, echoing corridors.
Light/visual	Fluorescent flicker, glare, bright screens, cluttered displays, moving crowds, visually busy worksheets.
Touch	Uniform fabrics, accidental contact in queues, crowded seating, PE activities, art materials, hair or clothing expectations.
Smell/taste	Cafeterias, cleaning products, perfume, science labs, food textures and mixed foods.
Movement/body	Need for movement, difficulty sitting for long periods, balance/proprioceptive differences, awareness of hunger, thirst or toileting.
Temperature	Overheated rooms, outdoor transitions, uniforms that limit regulation options.

4.2 Reasonable environmental adjustments

- Alternative seating location, including reduced-glare or lower-traffic positions.
- Permission to use headphones/ear defenders where compatible with safety and learning goals.
- Access to a quieter route, early transition or staggered movement through crowded areas.
- Low-stimulation workspace for selected tasks or recovery.
- Flexible clothing/uniform adjustments where policy allows.
- Reduced visual clutter on key materials and clear visual organization.
- Access to movement, fidget or regulation tools that do not create a safety risk.
- Advance notice for drills, alarms, assemblies and high-noise events when possible.
- Alternative lunch location or gradual participation plan if the dining environment is a barrier.

KEY RULE

A sensory support should not be treated as a reward that can be removed for unrelated behaviour. If it supports access or regulation, plan how it remains available consistently.



4.3 Designing a regulation space

Design element	Good practice
Purpose	A place to reduce sensory and social load, regulate and return to participation. It is not a punishment room.
Location	Accessible, predictable, reasonably quiet and supervised according to age and school policy.
Use	Student has an agreed way to request access; staff know when to prompt access before escalation.
Environment	Low clutter, neutral lighting where possible, comfortable seating and selected regulation tools.
Time	Use is individualized. Avoid rigid time limits that force a student back before they are ready unless safety or supervision requires it.
Return	Provide a predictable re-entry step: check readiness, summarize missed information, restart with a manageable task.

4.4 Rapid sensory audit

- ☐ Can students predict when loud alarms, bells or announcements occur?
- ☐ Are quiet alternatives available during lunch, breaks, assemblies and high-noise activities?
- ☐ Can key lighting be adjusted or can the student choose a lower-glare position?
- ☐ Are corridors/queues manageable, or can timing/routes be adapted?
- ☐ Do staff know which sensory tools are permitted and why?
- ☐ Does the student have an agreed plan for high-load days, events or substitute-teacher changes?
- ☐ Are sensory needs included in trips, transport, PE, dining and exam planning?



SECTION 5

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Design learning so students can access the goal without unnecessary barriers.

- Make tasks explicit and structured.
- Use multiple ways to engage, represent content and demonstrate learning.
- Support executive functioning without creating dependence.

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5.1 Plan for access before the lesson

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) encourages educators to provide multiple ways for learners to engage, access information and express what they know. [6] For autistic students, this often aligns with clear structure, visible information, choice of response method and reduced reliance on social inference.

Lesson element	Accessible design
Learning goal	State the goal in concrete language and separate the essential goal from incidental demands.
Start	Show what materials are needed, where to begin and how long the activity is expected to last.
Steps	Break complex tasks into visible stages; allow the student to check off progress.
Example	Provide a model, worked example or success criteria before independent work.
Participation	Offer more than one appropriate way to respond: speech, writing, typing, pointing, demonstration, partner response.
Support	Clarify when and how to ask for help or take an agreed break.
Finish	Show what “done” means and what happens next.

5.2 Executive-function supports

- Use a visible planner or checklist instead of relying only on verbal reminders.
- Break long assignments into milestones with interim dates.
- Use folders, labels, color coding or digital organization consistently.
- Explicitly teach how to start a task, not only what the final answer should be.
- Give warnings before stopping a preferred activity or deep-focus task.
- Allow the student to complete a thought or note a stopping point before switching tasks.
- Preview multi-step projects and define which choices are fixed versus flexible.
- Review missed work after absence without overwhelming the student with a single large backlog.

5.3 Group work and participation

Group work can add multiple hidden demands: rapid turn-taking, ambiguous roles, noise, social negotiation and unclear responsibility. If the learning goal is collaboration, teach those expectations explicitly. If collaboration is not the goal, consider whether a less socially demanding route can demonstrate the same academic learning.

DO	AVOID
• Assign clear roles and show them in writing.	• Grade eye contact, spontaneity or social style unless those are genuinely part of the learning goal.



DO	AVOID
• Allow preparation time before speaking.	• Force public speaking without considering accommodations.
• Offer structured pair work before larger groups.	• Assume refusal to join a group means lack of interest in the subject.
• Use turn-taking supports when needed.	• Leave roles undefined and then penalize the student for not “joining in”.
• Allow a student to contribute through notes, slides, typing or another agreed method.	

5.4 Assessment access

Assessment adjustments should be based on the student’s established needs and the rules of the relevant education system. Examples may include extra processing time, reduced-distraction settings, breaks, assistive technology, alternative response formats or clearer task presentation. Adjustments should improve access without changing the construct being assessed unless the assessment policy explicitly allows modification.

DOCUMENT THE DIFFERENCE

Record whether a support is a routine classroom strategy, a formal accommodation, or an assessment adjustment governed by external rules. This prevents inconsistency and avoids promising an accommodation that an examining body may not permit.



SECTION 6

Wellbeing, Distress and Safety

Recognize stress early, reduce escalation and learn from what happened.

- Distinguish overload from deliberate misconduct.
- Use low-arousal, low-language responses during acute distress.
- Review the environment and support plan after incidents.

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6.1 Think “stress system” before “discipline system”

Distress may be triggered by cumulative sensory load, uncertainty, social conflict, communication breakdown, pain, fatigue, hunger, academic overload, loss of control or unexpected change. NICE guidance recommends considering communication, physical and mental health, environment, routine change and predictability when assessing behaviour that challenges. [4]

6.2 Early signs may be subtle

- Increased pacing, stimming, repetition or questioning.
- Becoming unusually quiet, withdrawn, frozen or less responsive.
- Covering ears, squinting, leaving a space or seeking pressure/movement.
- Faster speech, louder voice, irritability or reduced tolerance for small demands.
- Difficulty starting tasks that are usually manageable.
- Repeated requests for certainty about time, order or what will happen next.
- Increased self-criticism, tearfulness or statements that the environment is “too much”.

6.3 Low-arousal response

Action	What it looks like
Reduce language	Use fewer words, slower pace and concrete statements. Avoid lectures, debate and repeated questions.
Reduce demands	Pause non-essential tasks. Prioritize immediate safety and regulation.
Reduce audience	Move peers away if appropriate; avoid public confrontation.
Increase space	Do not crowd, block exits or touch the student unless required for immediate safety and permitted by policy.
Offer a known option	Use the agreed break space, communication card, water, quiet route or trusted adult.
Allow recovery	Do not require an apology, explanation or debrief while the student is still dysregulated.

SAFETY OVERRIDES ROUTINE

If there is an immediate risk of serious harm, follow the school's emergency and safeguarding procedures and applicable law. This toolkit does not replace crisis-response training. Restrictive practices should never be used as routine behaviour management or punishment.



6.4 After the event: review, do not blame

1. Wait until the student is regulated and able to participate.
2. Reconstruct the sequence: what happened before, during and after?
3. Identify environmental, communication, sensory, social, health and task-related factors.
4. Ask what the student experienced, using their preferred communication method.
5. Identify what staff did that helped and what may have increased load.
6. Change the plan: prevention, early warning signs, communication, environment or recovery route.
7. Share relevant changes with staff who need to know, while protecting privacy.

6.5 Masking and hidden distress

Some autistic students may consciously or unconsciously suppress natural behaviours, imitate peers or hide distress to avoid standing out. A student can appear calm in school and then be exhausted or distressed later. School support should not reward masking by removing help from students who appear compliant. Regular check-ins, safe spaces and family communication can reveal load that classroom behaviour alone may miss. [9]



SECTION 7

Belonging, Peers and Bullying

Inclusion means meaningful participation and social safety, not physical presence alone.

- Monitor the social environment during unstructured times.
- Teach peers respectful inclusion without exposing private information.
- Respond to bullying consistently and investigate patterns.

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7.1 Belonging by design

Autistic students may want close friendships, a small number of friends, interest-based connection or more solitary time. Inclusion should not be measured by how socially typical a student appears. The question is whether the student has safe, respected and chosen ways to participate.

7.2 High-risk contexts for exclusion

- Lunch and recess/break periods.
- Changing rooms, corridors and queues.
- Transport to and from school.
- Group projects and partner selection.
- Clubs, sports and trips.
- Online class groups, messaging and gaming spaces connected to peers.
- Situations involving sarcasm, dares, “jokes”, exploitation or pressure to break rules.

7.3 Practical peer-inclusion strategies

- Offer interest-based clubs and structured activities during breaks.
- Use opt-in buddy or peer-mentor approaches with student consent.
- Teach group norms explicitly to all students rather than singling out the autistic student.
- Create predictable routes for reporting bullying or social confusion.
- Provide adult presence in known hotspots, not only reactive supervision after incidents.
- Teach digital safety, consent, boundaries and how to recognize manipulation or coercion.
- Ensure restorative or peer processes do not pressure a student to face someone who has harmed them before safety is established.

7.4 Bullying: investigate the pattern

Bullying may be direct, relational, online or disguised as friendship. A student may not label an experience as bullying, may interpret language literally, or may fear losing access to a peer group. Staff should look beyond single incidents and consider repetition, power imbalance, exclusion, manipulation and the student’s ability to recognize and report what is happening.

DO	AVOID
• Ask specific, concrete questions about what happened.	• Tell the student to “ignore it” as the main strategy.
• Review patterns across locations, times and peers.	• Assume teasing is mutual because the student sometimes laughs.
• Protect the student from retaliation.	• Require the student to confront peers publicly.
• Document actions and follow up after the initial response.	• Treat repeated social exploitation as a simple friendship disagreement.
• Teach reporting routes in accessible formats.	



SECTION 8

Transitions, Attendance and Routines

Prepare for change before it becomes a crisis.

- Make transitions visible and rehearsable.
- Treat attendance difficulty as a signal to investigate barriers.
- Plan school moves and returns as structured processes.

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8.1 Everyday transitions

Stage	Helpful practice
Before	Give advance warning, show the next activity, clarify what ends and what remains unfinished.
During	Use a consistent cue, allow time to save/pack/finish a thought, and reduce unnecessary verbal prompting.
After	Orient the student to the new task: where to sit, what to do first, what materials are needed.

8.2 Unexpected change

When plans change, tell the student as early as possible. Explain three things: what is changing, what is staying the same, and what happens next. If the student relies on a visual schedule, update the schedule rather than only announcing the change verbally.

CHANGE SCRIPT

"The science teacher is absent today. Your classroom and lesson time stay the same. Mr. Lee will teach the lesson. The experiment is moved to Thursday. I have updated your schedule."

8.3 Starting or changing school

Transition planning can include visits at quieter times, photos or video of key spaces, maps, introductions to important staff, a sample timetable, information about transport and lunch, and a phased or supported start where appropriate. Communication between the previous and new setting is especially important. [8]

- ☐ Named transition coordinator identified.
- ☐ Key support information transferred with appropriate consent and privacy.
- ☐ Student visits the environment before the first full day where possible.
- ☐ Photos/maps of classrooms, toilets, dining areas, safe space and entry/exit routes provided if helpful.
- ☐ First-day sequence and transport plan made explicit.
- ☐ Known staff member available at arrival.
- ☐ Plan for schedule changes, substitute staff and unstructured times prepared.
- ☐ Review meeting scheduled after the first two to four weeks.

8.4 Attendance difficulty

Repeated lateness, partial attendance, refusal or distress around school can reflect accumulated barriers rather than lack of motivation. Investigate sensory load, bullying, fatigue, academic mismatch, unpredictability, transitions, social pressure, health and mental health concerns. A return plan should reduce the barrier that made attendance unsafe or unmanageable, not simply increase pressure to attend.



DO	AVOID
• Ask “What makes school hardest right now?”	• Assume the problem is solely parental or behavioural.
• Map when attendance problems occur and what happens immediately before them.	• Use public rewards or sanctions for attendance without understanding the barrier.
• Use gradual re-entry if appropriate and permitted.	• Return the student to the same conditions unchanged after a period of absence.
• Coordinate missed-work expectations so re-entry does not create a new overload.	• Create a huge catch-up workload on the first days back.
• Maintain connection with the student during absence where welcomed.	



SECTION 9

Family Partnership and Student Voice

Build a support system with the student and family, not around them.

- Use families as knowledge partners without shifting institutional responsibility to them.
- Make meetings accessible and action-oriented.
- Center the student's own preferences and goals.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Support should be individualized, respectful and proportionate. The aim is not to make an autistic student appear less autistic; it is to remove barriers so the student can participate, learn, communicate and feel safe.



9.1 Partnership principles

- Assume the family has valuable contextual knowledge and the school has valuable setting-specific knowledge; both are needed.
- Do not contact families only when something goes wrong.
- Use concrete observations rather than labels such as “non-compliant”, “manipulative” or “lazy”.
- Distinguish between what is known, what is inferred and what still needs to be explored.
- Agree which communication channel is used for routine updates and which is used for urgent matters.
- Protect student privacy; share information only with staff who need it for education, safety or support.

9.2 Questions worth asking the student

- What helps you know what is going to happen?
- How do you prefer adults to give you instructions?
- What parts of the school day are most tiring?
- What sounds, lights, spaces or situations are difficult?
- How can we tell when you need a break?
- What should adults do when you are overwhelmed?
- Which adults at school feel safe to approach?
- What do you want classmates and teachers to understand about you?
- What are you good at or interested in that school should build on?

9.3 Productive review meetings

Stage	Good practice
Before	Share purpose and agenda; invite student/family priorities; gather relevant data; provide accessible format.
During	Start with strengths and goals; review what is working; identify barriers with examples; agree no more than a manageable set of priority changes.
After	Document actions, owners and dates; make sure the student understands what changes; schedule review; share only with relevant staff.

STUDENT VOICE IS NOT SYMBOLIC

If the student communicates differently, adapt the process: written responses, rating scales, pictures, AAC, pre-meeting questions, trusted supporter, shorter meeting, or contributing only to selected agenda items.



SECTION 10

Role-Specific Guides

Translate whole-school principles into the daily responsibilities of different teams.

- Clarify what each role controls.
- Build continuity across teaching and non-teaching settings.
- Use the pages as briefing sheets during onboarding and staff development.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Support should be individualized, respectful and proportionate. The aim is not to make an autistic student appear less autistic; it is to remove barriers so the student can participate, learn, communicate and feel safe.



ROLE GUIDE

School Leaders and Principals

PURPOSE

Create the conditions in which autism-inclusive practice is expected, resourced, monitored and sustained beyond individual staff members.

Core responsibilities

- Set a clear inclusion expectation linked to dignity, access and participation.
- Assign a named operational lead for autism/SEND/SEN coordination.
- Ensure policies on behaviour, attendance, safeguarding, uniform, assessment, trips and complaints allow individualized adjustments.
- Resource staff training and protected planning time.
- Include transport, facilities, lunch, security and extracurricular teams in implementation.
- Review patterns in exclusions, incidents, attendance, bullying and complaints.

Daily practice

- Ask whether barriers are system-level before escalating individual sanctions.
- Protect time for support-plan reviews and transitions.
- Ensure substitute/temporary staff can access essential support information.
- Require major events and timetable changes to include accessibility planning.

Watch for

- Repeated crises around the same location or routine.
- High absence or late arrival among autistic students.
- Adjustments depending on one staff member.
- Families reporting that agreed supports are not implemented.
- Bullying patterns during unstructured times.

First response

1. Stabilize immediate risk or access issue.
2. Identify the system/process causing recurrence.
3. Assign an owner and short deadline for corrective action.
4. Check the change with the student/family and frontline staff.



ROLE GUIDE

Classroom Teachers

PURPOSE

Design instruction that is clear, predictable and flexible enough for the student to access the learning goal.

Core responsibilities

- Know the student's support profile and communication preferences.
- Make the lesson sequence and task expectations visible.
- Separate essential learning objectives from unnecessary social or sensory demands.
- Use agreed accommodations consistently.
- Observe patterns and share useful evidence with the inclusion team.

Daily practice

- Preview changes and transitions.
- Give concrete instructions and processing time.
- Use examples, checklists and visible finish points.
- Offer an agreed way to request help or a break.
- Re-entry after a break should be low-key and non-punitive.

Watch for

- A sudden drop in work quality or participation.
- Repeated distress at the same task type, time or group format.
- Student appears compliant but increasingly exhausted.
- Peer dynamics that interfere with safety or participation.

First response

1. Reduce unnecessary demands.
2. Clarify the task and check sensory/environmental load.
3. Use the student's agreed support strategy.
4. Record the pattern and communicate it for review.

**ROLE GUIDE**

Inclusion Lead / SENCO / SEND Coordinator

PURPOSE

Coordinate individualized support, staff consistency, transitions and review while keeping the student's voice central.

Core responsibilities

- Maintain concise, current support profiles.
- Coordinate reasonable adjustments and formal plans where applicable.
- Translate assessment recommendations into classroom routines.
- Plan key transitions, exams, trips and staff handovers.
- Coach staff and monitor whether agreed strategies are actually used.
- Coordinate with families and external professionals within consent and privacy rules.

Daily practice

- Use observations across multiple settings.
- Check whether support promotes independence rather than over-prompting.
- Track what reduces barriers, not only incidents.
- Ensure all relevant staff receive the minimum information they need.

Watch for

- Contradictory staff approaches.
- Plans that list diagnoses but not actionable strategies.
- Support that disappears during non-classroom activities.
- Frequent “behaviour” concerns without functional/environmental review.

First response

1. Gather the student's perspective.
2. Define the barrier precisely.
3. Agree one or two changes that can be observed and measured.
4. Set a review date and success indicator.

**ROLE GUIDE**

School Counsellors, Psychologists and Wellbeing Staff

PURPOSE

Provide accessible wellbeing support within professional scope and help the school distinguish distress, communication and environmental barriers.

Core responsibilities

- Use communication methods appropriate to the student.
- Adapt sessions for literal language, processing time and sensory needs.
- Coordinate risk and safeguarding processes when concerns arise.
- Support emotion identification and coping without requiring typical eye contact or body language.
- Help staff understand patterns rather than pathologizing difference.

Daily practice

- Offer written options or scales when spoken reflection is difficult.
- Clarify confidentiality and what information must be shared for safety.
- Consider school-based triggers when evaluating anxiety or distress.
- Plan transitions into and out of counselling sessions.

Watch for

- Self-harm, suicidal statements or significant safeguarding concerns.
- Rapid functional decline or prolonged withdrawal.
- Persistent school avoidance linked to distress.
- Possible pain, sleep or health issues outside educational scope.

First response

1. Follow professional and safeguarding procedures.
2. Adapt communication to the student.
3. Coordinate with appropriate health/clinical professionals when indicated.
4. Feed relevant school-environment changes back into the support plan.



ROLE GUIDE

School Nurses and Health Staff

PURPOSE

Make health access predictable, communication-friendly and integrated with the student's school support needs.

Core responsibilities

- Know how the student communicates pain, discomfort, consent and refusal.
- Reduce waiting and sensory load where possible.
- Keep medical and educational boundaries clear.
- Follow medication and health plans exactly.
- Share only necessary information with relevant school staff.

Daily practice

- Explain what will happen before touching or examining.
- Use visuals or written steps where helpful.
- Offer choices that are genuinely available.
- Do not assume unusual behaviour is “just autism” when health may be involved.

Watch for

- New behaviour with no clear environmental explanation.
- Changes in eating, sleep, toileting, energy or pain indicators.
- Repeated visits at specific times or settings.
- Signs of dehydration, overheating or medication side effects.

First response

1. Address immediate health need.
2. Use the student's communication supports.
3. Escalate according to clinical/school procedure.
4. Document school patterns relevant to the support team without over-sharing private health information.



ROLE GUIDE

Front Office, Security and Reception Staff

PURPOSE

Make arrival, entry, visitor processes and unexpected interactions predictable and respectful.

Core responsibilities

- Use clear, direct language.
- Know the school route for contacting the student's trusted staff member.
- Avoid interpreting limited eye contact or delayed responses as suspicious behaviour.
- Maintain privacy when discussing disability-related needs.

Daily practice

- Allow processing time.
- Reduce the number of adults speaking at once.
- Explain what is happening and what will happen next.
- Offer a quieter waiting location where possible.

Watch for

- Student appears lost, frozen, non-responsive or increasingly distressed.
- Unexpected schedule/security change.
- Crowded entry/exit conditions.

First response

1. Reduce verbal load and audience.
2. Contact the named staff member.
3. Move to a predictable, quieter process where possible.
4. Do not use physical contact unless required for immediate safety and allowed by policy.



ROLE GUIDE

Transport Staff

PURPOSE

Provide predictable, safe travel and communicate disruptions early.

Core responsibilities

- Know essential safety and communication information.
- Use consistent boarding/seating routines where practical.
- Coordinate changes in route, driver or pickup point with the school/family.
- Apply behaviour expectations in a disability-aware manner.

Daily practice

- Warn about delays or route changes when information is available.
- Keep instructions brief and concrete.
- Reduce unnecessary sensory load where possible.
- Have a clear plan if the student becomes distressed in transit.

Watch for

- Repeated distress at boarding or specific route segments.
- Bullying, teasing or seat-related conflict.
- New fear of transport.
- Sensitivity to noise, smell or crowding that affects safety.

First response

1. Prioritize vehicle safety.
2. Reduce non-essential verbal demands.
3. Use the agreed communication/contact protocol.
4. Report patterns to the school for a preventive plan.

**ROLE GUIDE**

Lunch, Playground, Clubs and Extracurricular Staff

PURPOSE

Protect belonging and access during the parts of school where structure is often lowest and social demands are highest.

Core responsibilities

- Know how the student spends unstructured time by choice.
- Offer structured alternatives without forcing participation.
- Monitor bullying, social exploitation and exclusion.
- Make club expectations explicit.
- Include sensory needs in dining, sport and performance activities.

Daily practice

- Offer a quiet lunch or break option if needed.
- Use interest-based activities to support connection.
- Clarify rules before games and competitions.
- Provide a predictable route to ask for help.

Watch for

- Student repeatedly isolates despite wanting connection.
- Peers “joking” at the student’s expense.
- Escalation in noisy/crowded spaces.
- The student is persuaded to give away items, money, passwords or personal information.

First response

1. Check safety privately.
2. Clarify what happened with concrete questions.
3. Separate the student from the stressor if wanted/needed.
4. Report patterns through safeguarding/anti-bullying routes.



SECTION 11

Implementation and Self-Assessment

Turn the toolkit into a manageable school improvement cycle.

- 
- Assess current practice honestly.
 - Choose a small number of high-leverage changes.
 - Monitor student experience, not only staff activity.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Support should be individualized, respectful and proportionate. The aim is not to make an autistic student appear less autistic; it is to remove barriers so the student can participate, learn, communicate and feel safe.



11.1 GARC Autism-Inclusive School Maturity Check

Use this self-assessment for internal improvement. It is not a certification, accreditation or validated diagnostic instrument. Score each domain based on the strongest evidence available, including student/family feedback and observed practice.

Score	Meaning
0 - Not in place	No consistent approach; practice is reactive or dependent on individuals.
1 - Emerging	Some good practice exists but it is inconsistent, informal or limited to certain staff/settings.
2 - Established	Defined processes exist, relevant staff understand them, and implementation is generally consistent.
3 - Embedded	Practice is consistent across settings, monitored with evidence, reviewed with student/family input, and resilient to staff change.

Domain	Score 0-3	Evidence / example	Priority?
Dignity & Rights	_____		☐
Student Voice	_____		☐
Predictability & Clarity	_____		☐
Communication Access	_____		☐
Sensory Access	_____		☐
Flexible Learning	_____		☐
Emotional Safety	_____		☐
Belonging & Participation	_____		☐
Family & Team Partnership	_____		☐
Continuous Improvement	_____		☐



11.2 A 30-day implementation sprint

Timing	Priority actions
Week 1 - See the system	Name an implementation lead; complete the maturity check; identify 3 high-friction routines; collect quick student/family feedback; confirm safe-space and distress-response arrangements.
Week 2 - Standardize the basics	Create/update concise student support profiles; align staff on communication, transitions and regulation; confirm that relevant non-teaching teams receive essential guidance.
Week 3 - Improve learning access	Audit two or three classrooms using the sensory and instruction checklists; introduce visible routines/checklists; fix one high-impact environmental barrier.
Week 4 - Review and embed	Review incidents, attendance and feedback; confirm which changes worked; assign owners for remaining gaps; schedule 60- and 90-day review dates.

11.3 Indicators worth monitoring

- Attendance and partial attendance patterns, with reasons rather than totals alone.
- Frequency and location of distress incidents and what preceded them.
- Use of exclusionary discipline, removals from class or emergency responses.
- Bullying reports and social-safety concerns.
- Completion of agreed accommodations across settings.
- Student-reported sense of safety, predictability, belonging and access to help.
- Family-reported consistency and quality of communication.
- Staff confidence in applying agreed strategies.
- Participation in clubs, trips, events and unstructured school life where desired by the student.

MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

A school can complete many training hours and still remain hard to access. Pair staff-development metrics with student-experience and implementation evidence.



SECTION 12

Ready-to-Use Templates

Practical forms that turn guidance into repeatable routines.

- Keep forms concise enough to be used.
- Write supports in observable, actionable language.
- Review them when circumstances change, not only annually.

GARC PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

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Template A - Individual Student Support Profile

Purpose: a concise one- or two-page operational profile for staff who support the student. Keep detailed clinical/educational records in the appropriate secure system; this profile should contain only information needed for day-to-day access, learning and safety.

Student name / preferred name	
Year / grade / class	
Profile date	
Review date	
Key staff contact	
Preferred language / communication	

Strengths, interests and goals

What the student enjoys / is good at

What motivates engagement

Current priorities from the student's perspective

Communication

- ☐ Preferred way to receive instructions: _____
- ☐ Preferred way to answer / communicate: _____
- ☐ How the student communicates "help": _____
- ☐ How the student communicates "break/stop": _____
- ☐ Processing time / prompt style that helps: _____

Sensory and regulation

- ☐ Common sensory barriers: _____
- ☐ Early signs of stress: _____
- ☐ What helps early: _____
- ☐ Agreed safe/quiet space: _____
- ☐ Tools/supports that must remain available: _____

Learning and transitions

- ☐ How to start tasks successfully: _____
- ☐ Supports for multi-step work / organization: _____
- ☐ How to prepare for change: _____
- ☐ Assessment/access arrangements: _____



When the student is overwhelmed

- ☐ Do: _____
- ☐ Avoid: _____
- ☐ Who to contact: _____
- ☐ Safety/health notes staff need to know: _____

PRIVACY NOTE

Do not place unnecessary diagnostic, family or health detail in a quick-reference profile. Follow school privacy and record-handling requirements.



Template B - Sensory and Environment Audit

Setting	Possible barrier to check	Action / owner
Arrival / entry	Crowding, noise, queues, security procedures	
Classroom	Lighting, acoustics, seating, visual clutter, movement	
Corridors	Crowding, bells, transition timing	
Dining	Noise, smell, food texture, seating, queues	
Toilets	Hand dryers, lighting, privacy, access	
Playground / breaks	Noise, social unpredictability, access to structure	
PE / sports	Changing, whistles, touch, competition, clothing	
Assemblies / events	Sound, seating, duration, exits, unexpected changes	
Transport	Noise, seating, route changes, peer dynamics	
Exams / assessments	Room, timing, breaks, equipment, instructions	

Audit questions

- ☐ What is the student trying to avoid or seek?
- ☐ Can the barrier be removed rather than asking the student to tolerate it?
- ☐ Can timing, route, location or format change?
- ☐ Is the support available discreetly and without punishment?
- ☐ Who owns the change, and by when will it be reviewed?



Template C - Transition Plan

Field	Plan
Transition	From: _____ To: _____
Date / period	_____ _____
Student priorities	_____ _____
Key contact	_____ _____
Preferred communication	_____ _____
Known transition stressors	_____ _____
What will stay the same	_____ _____
What will change	_____ _____
Preview materials needed	Photos / map / schedule / social explanation / visit / video / other
Visit / rehearsal plan	_____ _____
First-day support	_____ _____
Transport / arrival	_____ _____
Lunch / break plan	_____ _____
Safe space / trusted adult	_____ _____
Review date	_____ _____



Template D - Support Review Meeting Record

Keep the meeting focused on observable barriers, agreed actions and student priorities.

Item	Record
Meeting date	_____
Student present?	Yes / No / Part of meeting / Contributed in another format
Student priorities	
What is working	
Current barriers	
Family priorities	
School evidence reviewed	Attendance / work / incidents / observation / student feedback / other
Agreed changes	
Who owns each action	
Success indicators	
Next review date	

MEETING RULE

End with no ambiguity: what will change, who will do it, when it starts, how the student will know, and when it will be reviewed.



Template E - Distress / Incident Learning Review

Use after the student is safe and regulated. This is a learning tool, not a blame form.

Prompt	Notes
Date / setting	
What was happening in the 30-60 minutes before?	
Changes / uncertainty	
Sensory load	
Communication demands	
Academic / task demands	
Social factors	
Health / fatigue / hunger factors known	
Early signs observed	
What staff did	
What reduced distress	
What may have increased distress	
Student perspective	
Family/context information	
One prevention change	
One early-response change	
Who needs the updated plan	
Review date	



Template F - 30-Day School Action Plan

Priority	Action	Owner	Due	Evidence

Review questions

- ☐ What changed for students, not only for staff?
- ☐ Which barrier disappeared or reduced?
- ☐ Which support remains inconsistent?
- ☐ What did students/families say?
- ☐ What needs to become policy or routine rather than an individual workaround?



GARC One-Page Practice Summary

THE CORE IDEA

An autism-inclusive school makes the environment easier to understand, access and recover from - while preserving challenge, learning, autonomy and belonging.

Action	Meaning
SEE	Look for barriers, patterns, strengths and early signs of stress.
ASK	Use student voice and family knowledge; do not infer everything from behaviour.
CLARIFY	Make expectations, sequences, changes and finish points visible.
ADAPT	Adjust communication, sensory load, timing, format or environment where needed.
PROTECT	Preserve dignity, privacy, safety and access to communication/regulation tools.
INCLUDE	Design participation in learning, peers, clubs, trips, breaks and transitions.
REVIEW	After problems, change the system and support plan - not only the consequence.

Five non-negotiables

- ☐ No forced eye contact as a condition of listening or respect.
- ☐ No removal of communication systems or sensory regulation tools as punishment.
- ☐ No assumption that distress is deliberate misconduct without investigating context.
- ☐ No important change communicated only verbally when the student needs visual/written information.
- ☐ No support plan that excludes the student's own perspective where participation is possible.



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SOURCE USE

These sources support the general rights, inclusion, sensory, communication and educational-access principles used in this toolkit. Schools should also consult their national/local education law, safeguarding requirements, examination rules and disability accommodation guidance.



About the Global Autism Research Center (GARC)

The Global Autism Research Center (GARC) is a specialized research center within GRS Group focused on advancing autism research, evidence translation, practical guidance, institutional learning and international collaboration. GARC develops research-informed resources that help organizations move from awareness to structured, measurable practice.

GARC knowledge products

- Research reports and evidence studies
- Evidence and policy briefs
- Practical toolkits
- Guidelines and frameworks
- Data, indicators and benchmarking resources
- Research and professional learning resources

THIS TOOLKIT SERIES

GARC Practical Toolkits translate evidence into usable systems for schools, families, universities, workplaces, health settings and community organizations. Each toolkit is designed to be practical, adaptable and suitable for institutional implementation.

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