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# Supporting Children & Young People Experiencing Barriers to Attending School

Information and advice for schools and settings



Advice to support Autistic CYP or those with  
Communication & Interaction Difficulties

**Advisory Teaching Service**  
Communication and Interaction Team



## Understanding differences

This guidance applies to those with a diagnosis and those identified with possible social communication and interaction differences.

The Autism Education Trust (AET) approach is based on Autism as a difference and not a deficit, a different way of thinking.

The AET model explains that Autistic people will experience differences in three key areas:

- Social Understanding and Communication
- Flexible Thinking, Information Processing and Understanding
- Sensory Processing and Integration

Each autistic person will have their own unique profile within the key areas of difference. The key areas of difference influence the way autistic pupils learn and experience their educational settings.

Autistic pupils can find navigating the social world of school confusing and difficult, leading to increased anxiety.

The AET recognises that anxiety that is associated with Autism, will usually be associated with one or parts of:

- Separation
- Uncertainty
- Sensory arousal
- Performance

## Useful websites for further resources:

**Not Fine In School:** <https://notfineinschool.co.uk>

**Square Peg:** <https://www.teamsquarepeg.org/>

**Define Fine:** [definefine.org.uk](http://definefine.org.uk)

**National Autistic Society:**

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/education/attendance-problems/parents>

**School attendance and advice:** [www.gov.uk/school-attendance-absence](http://www.gov.uk/school-attendance-absence)

<https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/schoolsnet/your-pupils/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-send/send->

**Gloucestershire Healthy Living and Learning (GHLL):** [ghll.org.uk/mental-health/](http://ghll.org.uk/mental-health/)

**Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service:** <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/education-and-learning/special-educational-needs-and-disability-send/educational-psychology-service-eps/guidance-to-support-children-and-young-people-experiencing-barriers-attending-school/>

- The Communication & Interaction Team offer AET 'Schools making sense of Autism' (free) and 'Autism and Anxiety' training (cost involved) for school-based staff. For further details contact your school's allocated Advisory Teacher or <https://www.businesssupportservices.org>
- For advice relating to a CYP already known to the ATS, please contact your school's allocated Advisory Teacher .
- To seek advice for a CYP not known to the ATS you may wish to contact us via the ATS Advice Line for a no-names discussion. Details can be found on the ATS website: <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/schoolsnet/your-pupils/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-send/send->

## How school can support

### **Actively promote an 'Autism-friendly' environment and a whole-school approach to acknowledge mental health & wellbeing:**

attend the AET training that ATS delivers, complete regular sensory audits to identify good practice and areas that could be reasonably adjusted.

**Communicate with parents and carers:** develop a close and supportive relationship, which promotes partnership. Share information about the clear systems that are in place to promote good attendance.

**Actively listen:** ask follow up questions to clarify meaning. Check you have understood what has been communicated by CYP and/or parents/carers as information can be interpreted differently.

**Identify push / pull factors early:** what factors might be acting as barriers to attendance (pulling away from school)? What positive factors might encourage or motivate CYP to attend (push to school)?

**Make a plan:** use of the assess, plan, do, review cycle to record and monitor changes, and involve the CYP to ensure a shared approach. When making a plan, consider/include the views of the CYP.

**Promote a key adult relationship & build trust:** help CYP to feel understood and accepted in school. A key adult relationship can help to develop a personalised approach, whilst providing a sense of normality and consistency.

**Promote resilience and perseverance:** identify and build on areas of strength/special interests in order to promote 'push factors' towards school. Provide experiences that gently encourage/acknowledge resilience and perseverance, to promote a sense of achievement and foster confidence and self-esteem. Ensure that CYP feel listened to and understood by adults.

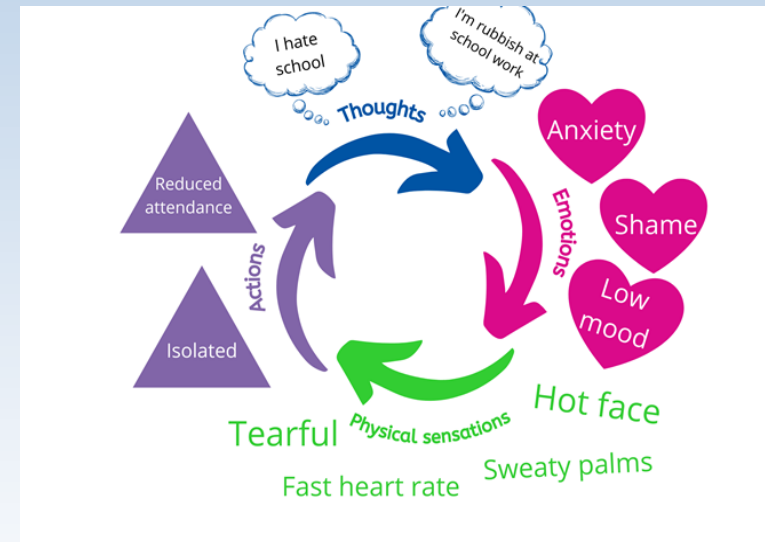
**Collaborate:** ensure a joined up and empathetic approach which takes all views into account. Identify external agencies who can work with school.

## 'Masking' differences

Whilst some autistic CYP appear to cope with the demands of the school day, they can often be masking their differences, resulting in higher levels of stress, and anxiety which can lead to them feeling emotionally overwhelmed.

As a result of masking differences, stress and anxiety can often build throughout the course of a school day, with intense emotions being released at home.

Undetected triggers for increased anxiety at school can lead to lessened attendance and mental health difficulties.



For further information, see: <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/education-and-learning/special-educational-needs-and-disability-send/educational-psychology-service-eps/guidance-to-support-children-and-young-people-experiencing-barriers-attending-school/why-might-children-and-young-people-experience-barriers-to-attending-school/emotional-literacy/#main>

## Contributors to increased stress



Identify what fills up a CYP's 'stress' bucket' during a typical day, causing it to spill or tip over...

Possible factors could include:

- Unstructured times of day (break, lunchtimes).
- Transitions.
- Lack of personal space.
- Sensory overload and/or fear of specific sounds.
- Working cooperatively in groups or team games in PE.
- Misunderstanding sarcasm, 'banter', 'dares'.
- Social issues – friendships, bullying, teasing, love, emotion.
- Unexpected change to the timetable.
- Coping with the curriculum and striving for perfection.
- Being away from the familiar routines, family and home.
- Disliking a particular member of staff or subject.
- Not processing instructions and misunderstanding what is required.

## Observable indicators you may see

### The Iceberg Model.

What you see: the actions/behaviour itself.

What you don't see: why the actions/behaviour might be happening.



- Distress when separating from parent or carers / struggling to leave home.
- Difficulties coming into school with periods of prolonged absence / patterns of absence.
- Expressing a want to attend and engage but struggling to do so.
- Physical symptoms, for example, sweating, sickness or abdominal pain, aching limbs, headaches, not wanting to eat or drink, changes in weight.
- Changes to temperament, for example, presenting as tearful, fearful, frustrated or low in mood.
- Negative commentary about self and own abilities.
- Difficulties concentrating.
- Changes to social behaviour, for example, increased time on their own, declining involvement in clubs / invitations.
- Changes in academic engagement and /or progress.

*It is important to consider whether there are any possible safeguarding concerns when a CYP is absent or displays certain patterns of absence over time. If concerns are identified, ensure that these are reported in line with school safeguarding procedures.*