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## **LISTENING TO STUDENTS ON THE AUTISTIC SPECTRUM**

**To work out how to support children on the autism spectrum, we need to ask them what they need.**

The importance of this is being emphasized by a growing group of education researchers.

Pre-eminent autism researcher Professor Liz Pellicano, based at Macquarie University, says that research in this area must include the voices of autistic children, young people, and adults and those of their families.

The same holds true, she says, of school and caregiver support of autistic spectrum students; including students' perspectives helps find the best means of identifying the areas where support is needed, and the best ways of providing it.

Dr Beth Saggors of Queensland University of Technology agrees, saying it's important to "get their opinion on what's going to help them." A former teacher and an expert on autism, she has undertaken numerous research projects on the autism spectrum in education, and led AutismCRC's Australian Autism Educational Needs Analysis, a world first nation-wide report released in 2016 on the most important steps to support students on the spectrum, including those attending mainstream schools. This report surveyed educators, specialists, parents, and students on the autism spectrum.

This approach is in line with the views of groups of disabled people, including those on the spectrum, who advocate for a voice in decisions that affect them, typified by the motto: "Nothing about us without us".

A key part of this is treating every student as an individual. However, common themes emerge from the experiences of students on the spectrum. So, what are some of the insights their experiences provide?

Students on the spectrum in studies led by Dr Saggors indicated some of the activities and aspects of school life that pose the most difficulties for them, and some of the things that would be useful.

### **Coping with bullying or teasing**

Students on the spectrum saw traditional bullying as a big obstacle to their inclusion, particularly name-calling and insults. The risk of bullying was highest during unstructured time, such as lunch breaks, sport events and transitions between activities. So it's important to set up safe zones and structured activities for any students who feel at risk.

Sometimes, students also had trouble telling the difference between teasing and attempts to build friendships, making it harder to make friends; this highlights the value of explicitly teaching them how to navigate social situations.

### **Managing workload and planning for assignments**

This issue was commonly identified by students on the spectrum, indicating the importance of providing them with support for planning, time management, and organisation skills. Indeed, students suggested help with organising themselves would be especially helpful.

A structured but flexible and caring approach emerged as the most conducive to students feeling comfortable in class and engaging academically. Some further measures students highly valued were receiving rewards for jobs well done, incorporating special interests into projects, and receiving one on one help from an adult.

Other simple things that can help are breaking tasks down into smaller bits, colour coding, using other visual supports to help with organisation, and planning together to help set achievable goals. In group work, it helps to give clearly defined jobs and roles.

### **Handwriting, being neat, writing quickly enough, and copying information from the board**

Students often experienced handwriting as a great physical challenge, distracting them from learning. Simply being able to type would go a long way here, as would getting copies of things teachers write on the board.

### **Staying calm and focused in noisy and cramped spaces, or when other kids annoyed them**

People on the spectrum process and screen information from their senses differently, and many report excessive noise as especially distressing.

Students suggested that listening to music of their choice, or the chance to have a break and to spend some time away from other people would be helpful—as would quiet places to complete assessments.

### **Coping with change and transition**

Transition is usually thought of as a major life change, such as leaving school – and these times are indeed difficult for most people on the spectrum. People spend 25% of every day in a period of transition, which is simply to say a change in activities—whether it's a play break or change of classes at school, or leaving the office to go home.

Students on the spectrum need particular support during these periods. Simple supports can go a long way; students surveyed said that being reminded of upcoming changes could make a big difference.

If you'd like more information on how to support students on the spectrum, and on the inclusion of autistic people's experiences in research:

[Educational Needs Analysis Student Perspectives](#) (video)

Beth Siggers et al. (2015). [Australian autism educational needs analysis – What are the needs of schools, parents and students on the autism spectrum?](#) Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism, Brisbane. (free access)

Beth Siggers et al. (2017) '[Understandings and Experiences of Bullying: Impact on Students on the Autism Spectrum](#)', *Australasian Journal of Special Education*.

Beth Siggers et al. (2011). '[Your Voice Counts: Listening to the Voice of High School Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)', *Australasian Journal of Special Education*.

Liz Pellicano. (2018) '[A new era for autism research, and for our journal](#)', *Autism*.

Liz Pellicano. '[Autism advocacy and research misses the mark if autistic people are left out](#)', *The Conversation*. (free access)

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