

Autism Policy

Fairmead School



Wellbeing Statement: At Fairmead School we take a holistic approach to the wellbeing of our students and staff. All policies are written with this in mind and consider the physical and mental wellbeing of our students, staff and our school community.

Signed by: Mrs T Felstead

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Autism Policy Statement

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them.

Autism is described as a spectrum condition, which means that while autistic people share certain characteristics, their condition will affect them in different ways. Autistic people may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours.

Autistic Students at Fairmead School usually have an additional diagnosis of Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD). This policy sets out the support provided for our autistic students through an awareness of the following considerations:

- a. Structure / organisation of activities / resources.
- b. Sensory.
- c. Understanding.
- d. Curriculum.
- e. Teaching and Learning.
- f. Communication.
- g. Behaviour support.

Practice and guidelines of Fairmead School's autism policy

1. Structure / Organisation of Activities / Resources

1.1. In key classes across Fairmead School where most or all students are on the Autism Spectrum, a highly structured approach is followed, based on the principles of TEACCH www.teacch.com/ of classroom organisation, personalised timetables, individual work stations, physical activity and a commitment to engaging with the interests of the student in order to enable them to access the learning experiences. In classes where there are fewer autistic students, it should be remembered that they may still require high levels of structure and predictable routine and these needs must be catered for within the wider classroom setting.

1.2. Particular attention at Fairmead School is given to ensuring that we are:

- Supporting our school community with autism through structure.
- Maintaining positive approaches and expectations.
- Developing empathy skills for the school's autistic community.
- Adopting a low arousal approach.
- Creating and maintaining links between the Fairmead School students, their wider support networks and the community.

1.3. The curriculum and processes of the day are modified to ensure everyone knows what is going to happen and what is expected of them. The use of personal and class timetables enables students to feel secure and to cope with change that may or may not have been predicted. This also aids the development of flexibility of thought by reducing dependence on rigid routines, enabling students to plan for change and adapt to different experiences. Staff can support this by using visual resources to enable students to know what is expected of them and what is going to happen throughout the day. Classes or individual students should use an appropriate visual timetable which they are supported to access independently. Staff should also use transition visuals to support students when moving around the school or to other activities.

1.4. Coping with unstructured time: Autistic students may need structure to continue throughout the day; they may find it difficult to cope with the idea of unstructured time and periods when they are required to occupy themselves. It is essential to teach this vital skill, but this does not happen simply by giving students unstructured time. Structured reward time is perfectly acceptable; giving choices between concrete activities is also useful but saying you can do what you like is unhelpful. Students will need direction and support to access play / leisure activities and staff must be mindful both of students retreating into preferred obsessional activities which may be isolating and counter-productive (which could include electronic devices), or students struggling to access activities alongside others.

2. Physical Environment

2.1. Autistic Students learn best when the environment is calm and ordered in such a way to reduce anxiety and aid concentration. If students become over stimulated easily, there should be as few distractions as possible with specific areas designated for specific activities within the classroom and across the school.

Visual cues to support understanding of this are useful. There are clear expectations on the visuals displayed in the school environment, these which ensure consistency and will aid both independence and confidence of students.

2.2. Classroom displays should consider the need for the environment to be calm and not excessively stimulating to impact students' focus on the task at hand. However, within reason it is important to challenge the boundaries and tolerances of autistic students to develop flexibility of thought and change within the environment.

2.3. Attention should be paid to the potential for sensory processing difficulties which may result in increased anxiety and challenge for individual students. This may mean that lighting, décor and furnishings may need to be adapted and staff should pay attention to potentially aversive or distracting stimuli, for example noise levels, colour schemes, odours, lighting and clutter. Similarly, the need for security and safeguarding in some classes means doors are magnet locked, although in some classes it is appropriate to encourage and build on independence skills and allow greater flexibility and autonomy for students where appropriate.

2.4. Full use of the outside spaces and break-out areas is expected for those students who may require additional space to manage their own behaviour as well as for those who require sensory stimulation (see Sensory Considerations below). For those students who use the break-out spaces as a time-out space, it is important to follow the procedures agreed with the Behaviour lead.

3. Sensory Considerations

3.1. Students may have additional sensory processing difficulties; this may mean that they need extra time to process information if sensory distractions are present. Staff should be mindful of potentially aversive or distracting stimuli, for example noise levels, colour schemes, odours, lighting and clutter. Information should be given with clarity in the medium best suited to the individual with care taken not to overload or bombard.

3.2. Autistic students may require additional sensory stimulation or sensory reduction techniques to aid concentration and enable them to access the curriculum. At Fairmead School we support students to meet sensory needs in an appropriate way and engage the support of the occupational therapist team where this is named on their EHCP. Fairmead School staff should build these considerations into their planning and ensure that the curriculum and routines of the day are flexible enough to meet these needs. This may mean that additional physical activity is appropriate at certain times of the day or that students participate in desensitisation programmes as planned for either by the occupational therapist or by us where we have sought their advice on a particular case.

3.3. Fairmead School staff should be mindful that sensory integration difficulties could have a significant effect on the ability of a student to access the curriculum. It is the responsibility of staff to be creative in finding ways to overcome this, not only through desensitisation but also through adaptation of activities and resources to ensure that the learning objective can be met. Sensory integration difficulties must not be allowed to become a barrier to learning.

4. Understanding

4.1. Approach the teaching of autistic students from an empathetic perspective. Knowing what it is that motivates or interests them but importantly what may increase anxiety levels. To make every effort to understand and relate to the experience of the autistic student will underpin our attempts to develop communication and reduce anxiety. This requires staff to remain calm and as far as possible to act in a predictable manner. Fairmead School staff should always respond to challenging situations in an analytical manner, asking what is at the root cause of the behaviour to proactively plan to prevent it in the future.

5. Curriculum

5.1. The curriculum is tailored to best meet the needs of all the students, enable them to engage with learning activities and develop flexibility of thought. As students progress throughout key stages three and four, where possible the scaffolding is refined or removed as students prepare for life in a world, which is not yet fully autism aware. However, the commitment to physical activity, a sensory curriculum, individualised learning pathways and a functional curriculum remain at the core of the curriculum for autistic students-

5.2. Fairmead School staff should use the curriculum as a vehicle for developing the core values of Independence and Interdependence.

6. Teaching and Learning

6.1. Fairmead School staff should keep their understanding of autism at the forefront of their minds when planning lessons and supporting learning. This means that consideration should be given to:

- The length of activities and the ability of students to concentrate on the learning objective.
- The construction of groups and the balance between individual and group work.
- Sensory issues which may mean accessing learning activities is difficult.
- The need for physical activity across the day.
- The importance of making activities functional and meaningful. Autistic students may not respond to work for work's sake - there needs to be a clear purpose to the task.
- The value of focusing on what interests the students and construct tasks around this.
- The importance of structure and routine across the day and during activities as well as the need for continuity and consistency of staffing, resourcing and environment.
- The importance of visual support to aid communication and support routine and structure.
- The inclusion of activities which encourage the development of flexibility of thought, challenging students' routines in a managed way to support students in developing the ability to cope when things do not go to plan.
- The importance of developing social understanding, not only in supporting students to know how to act appropriately in social situations but to understand why this response is appropriate. Teaching social understanding supports students to develop their own social ability.

6.2. When creating key skills or EHCP targets, Fairmead School staff should select targets which support the development of the core learning values of independence and interdependence as well as considering

which area of the dyad of impairment the target is intended to support. The dyad of impairment identifies the two areas in which an autistic person typically experiences the greatest difficulties, these are:

1. Restrictive and repetitive behaviours.
2. Social communication and social interaction.

7. Communication

7.1. Fairmead School staff should remember that experiencing communication difficulties is a key part of being autistic. In addition to this, students at Fairmead School are likely to have an additional diagnosis of moderate learning difficulties. This makes the development of effective communication essential.

7.2. Autistic students may require visual support to enable them to both understand what is being asked of them and to effectively communicate their needs and wishes. Even students with well-developed language skills may struggle to use this language in a functional way. They may also find it hard to follow verbal instructions unless they are broken down into small steps and / or supported with visual clues. Below are six key principles to support effective communication:

1. Always ensure their preferred means of communication are available (PECS books, communication aids etc.).
2. Keep verbal instructions to a minimum – use signs and symbols to support them.
3. Slow down and keep quiet - Many students need time to process information – allow them time to process questions and answers and do not be afraid to sit in silence awaiting a response. Repeating the instruction or saying it louder will only cause the student to struggle to process the original information.
4. Always expect acceptable communication - our students will lose skills if they are not constantly reinforced – don't fall into the trap of responding to behaviours of concern if you know the young person can communicate more effectively – remember we are preparing them for life and not everyone will be able to interpret their needs in the way we can when we know them well!
5. Build in as many opportunities for communication as possible – this may mean sabotaging the environment (putting things out of reach etc.). Staff should manufacture communicative exchanges – if things must be asked for, this should be easy! This should continue to be balanced alongside supporting emotional wellbeing.
6. Allow time for young people to process the information received by them and to engage in the communication exchange.

7.3. Remember that autistic students may well only gain a literal meaning from what you say and not understand a phrase or metaphor. For example, asking a student to 'take a seat' may leave them wondering where to take it, rather than the simpler instruction of 'sit here'.

8. Behaviour Support (See also Behaviour Policy)

8.1. Where necessary, Fairmead School's students have a behaviour support plan (PHP). These detail potential behaviours of concern which have been previously displayed, and the appropriate prevention and responses of them. Behaviours which concern can take many forms and are usually always a form of communication. Fairmead School staff must always ask why a behaviour has occurred and take steps to introduce measures that may prevent this behaviour from re-occurring. This may take time and may not always be initially successful, but consistency and continuity are essential to support students to better manage their own behaviour.

8.2. Below are some general principles to help to support autistic students to manage their behaviour:

- a. Ensure students always have an effective method of communication available.
- b. Ensure you understand their sensory needs and enable these needs to be met where necessary.
- c. Ensure the environment, curriculum and approach are modified (as outlined above) to reduce anxiety levels.
- d. Keep language to a minimum and use symbols to support what you are saying.
- e. Adhere to the behaviour support plans, including strategies for de-escalation and prevention.
- f. Reward positive behaviour and deliver a reward if you have planned this.

9. Professional Training and Development and Staff Information Resource

9.1. There is a great deal of expertise within the Fairmead School staff, if you require further information about something relating to autism, the Head of School and autism lead, Nicky Barratt can support. There are also many Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities relating to autism. Nicky Barratt, will keep you informed of these by regular communications.

9.2. All staff can access the autism library in school.

9.3. Suggested Websites for further information:

- The National Autistic Society: A comprehensive site with excellent explanations, ideas for support and links to local organisations. www.autism.org.uk/
- Autism Education Trust: A great website to support professionals www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/
- The Challenging Behaviour Foundation: Lots of good advice and case studies. www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/
- The Sensory Integration Network: Good for information about Sensory integration difficulties and advice about therapy and support. www.sensoryintegration.org.uk/
- Autism Independent UK Another comprehensive site with good explanations and case studies. www.autismuk.com/
- Meaningful Speech: Lots of information on the stages of Gestalt Language Development www.meaningfulspeech.com/blog/Stages-of-GLP