



A Framework for Autism-Friendly Schools Informed by Autistic Students

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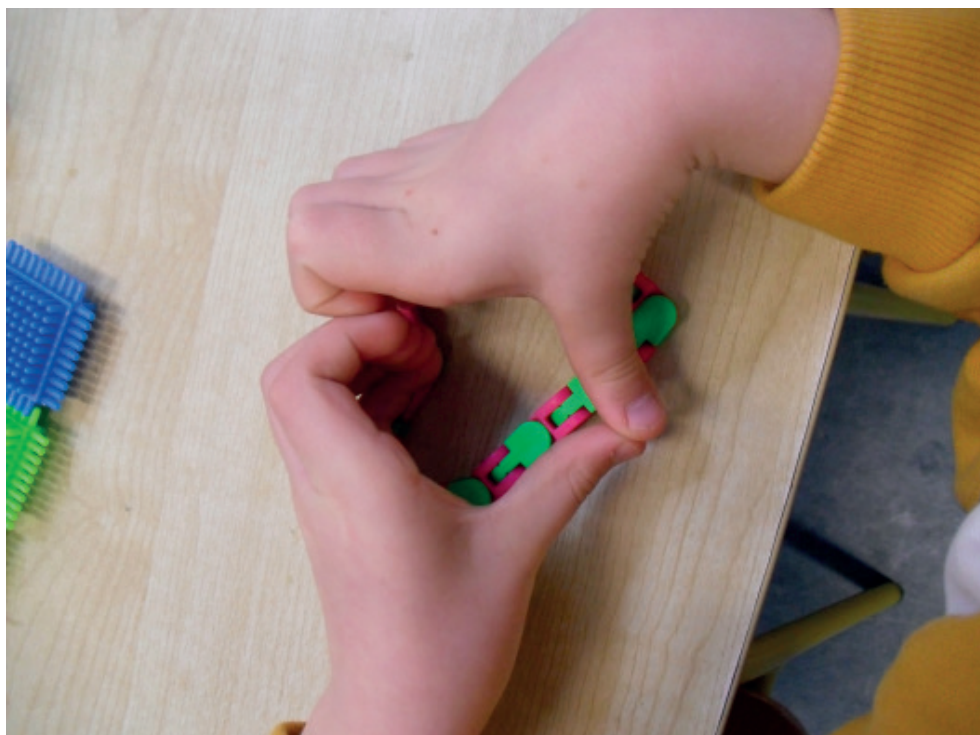


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'The right to inclusive education encompasses a transformation in culture, policy and practice in all educational environments to accommodate the differing requirements and identities of individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility'

(United Nations, 2016)



'I love school and teacher'.

(Six-year-old male student in mainstream primary school class)



This framework is grounded in findings from the Autism-Friendly Schools Research Project, funded by Research Ireland. The Research Summary Report of Findings can be found at www.dcu.ie/autismfriendlyschoools

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The full reference for this framework is:

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We encourage schools to implement the Framework adopting all of the principles. The actions proposed are suggestions as to how schools can embed the principles at their school but schools can also add their own context specific actions. We kindly ask schools to let us know if they are adopting the Framework at their school by emailing sinead.mcnally@dcu.ie and maryrosesweeney@rcsi.ie

This framework for an Autism-Friendly School is grounded in the findings of a comprehensive research study conducted over a 2-year period between 2023 & 2025. The study captured the missing voices of primary and post-primary school-aged autistic children about their experiences of inclusion in education in the Republic of Ireland. Parents and school staff also informed the study. A summary report, including policy recommendations, and a number of peer reviewed publications (in progress) have emerged from this research, in addition to the framework. The purpose of the framework is to serve as a practical resource for schools to help them to embed an autism-friendly culture in their school. Ten principles as set out below have been developed from the themes emerging from the study. These principles could be adopted by any primary or post-primary school with minimal cost. Each of the principles are underpinned by a series of specific actions. These actions are examples of how the ten principles could be embedded within schools but they are not exhaustive, as each school will have their own specific contexts and can add further actions to the list provided.



Principle 1

School Management should visibly articulate an autism inclusive ethos. The importance of friendship, inclusion and feeling connected to the school should be a core value of the school that is communicated at regular intervals in all routine communications, opportunities and forums.

Principle 2

School Management should ensure that all school staff have the required training, knowledge and skills required to support autistic students fully in their school.

Principle 3

School Management should actively work to minimise barriers to full participation of autistic students in their school.

Principle 4

School management should ensure that all staff understand the critically important role of teachers and school staff, such as Special Needs Assistants, in supporting autistic students to thrive.

Principle 5

School Management should facilitate timely communications/meetings with autistic students and their parents to discuss urgent issues arising for them.

Principle 6

Schools should adopt a strengths-based approach to autism and autistic students.

Principle 7

Specific learning needs and supports should be identified and addressed at the earliest opportunity.

Principle 8

School management should ensure that the physical school environment feels safe, secure and comfortable for autistic students.

Principle 9

School management should be alert to the experiences of bullying among autistic students. They should put in place processes to prevent and urgently respond when this arises.

Principle 10

School management should ensure that autistic students & their families have the information they need in relation to the supports available for their health and social care with the school and beyond.

Principles for an Autism Friendly School

Principle 1

School Management should visibly articulate an autism inclusive ethos. The importance for all students to feel included, connected and to have friends should be a core value of the school that is communicated at regular intervals in all routine communications, opportunities and forums.

Actions:

1. This ethos should be highlighted in all letters, emails, flyers and other written communications to families in advance of attending the school.
2. The School should display signage on the main entrance of the school indicating that they are an autism-friendly school.
3. This ethos should be articulated to all school staff at regular intervals.
4. This ethos should be communicated to all students in the school with examples of what inclusion actually means e.g. included in yard play, invited to birthday parties, playdates, sports teams.
5. This should be communicated at all school events e.g. school Meetings, parent-teacher meetings, school musicals, plays, debates.
6. A mechanism for peer networking for autistic students should be established in the school or across a number of schools in their area.

Principle 2

School Management should ensure that all school staff have the required training, knowledge and skills required to support autistic students fully in their school.

Actions:

1. On-site professional development should be provided to teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills needed to enable their autistic students to thrive.
2. Staff should be directed to professional development opportunities (visit www.dcu.ie/autismfriendlyschools for a list of resources and programmes).



Principle 3

School Management should actively work to minimise barriers to the full participation of autistic students in their school.

Actions:

1. All autistic children should be invited to submit information in written, video or audio format (or other format as appropriate to them) entitled “*About Me*”, in advance of each school year highlighting any barriers that they feel that they are encountering/ may encounter in the next school year. A designated staff member should meet with individual students and a designated family member at the start of each school year to discuss and devise solutions to minimise these barriers. On-going dialogue throughout the year should be facilitated where required.
2. Reasonable accommodations and supports should be discussed and provided (e.g. toilet breaks, movement and sensory breaks should be provided as required).

Principle 4

School management should ensure that all staff understand the critically important role of teachers and other school staff in supporting autistic students to thrive in school.

Actions:

1. The critically important positive role that teachers play each day in the classroom in supporting autistic students should be highlighted by school management in routine communications/forums throughout the school year e.g. staff meetings, newsletters, in-service professional development.
2. Teachers should also understand the potentially adverse impacts they can have on autistic students inadvertently by their tone, voice, demeanour, emotions, perceived lack of understanding of the student’s needs. This should also be regularly emphasised by school management throughout the school year e.g. at staff meetings, CPD programmes, and in-service training.
3. Students should not be compelled to do activities if physical difficulties (e.g. motor skills) make it difficult for them to perform these activities proficiently in front of their peers. This should be discussed and agreed as part of the “*About Me*” document submitted at the beginning of each school year. A range of different types of yard activities should be encouraged to facilitate inclusion for all.

Principle 5

School Management should facilitate timely communications/meetings with parents and autistic students to discuss urgent issues arising for them.

Action

1. Schools should, on a case-by-case basis and in line with school's policies and procedures, agree a channel for timely communication for autistic children and their family members at the beginning of each academic year to avoid escalation of issues.

Principle 6

Schools should adopt a strengths-based approach to autism and autistic students.

Actions

1. All children should be facilitated to spend time working on a project that they are passionate about. They should be afforded an opportunity to share this passion with peers and encouraged to showcase to the school and wider community (e.g. during science week, international book day, or other events of interest to students across the school year)
2. Additional classes (suggested 1 to 2 hours per week) should be provided by a teacher in the school to encourage autistic students with talents and interests in particular subject areas e.g. maths, physics, IT. This will enhance their skills but will also provide peer networking opportunities and to build confidence.
3. Information about programmes that nurture subject-specific interests should be shared with autistic children and their parents (visit www.dcu.ie/autismfriendlyschools for more details)



Principle 7

Specific learning needs should be identified and addressed at the earliest opportunity.

Actions:

1. This could be captured in the “*About Me*” information document submitted at the start of each academic year.
2. Specific plans should be put in place by the appropriate designated personnel in the school to support autistic students with their specific learning needs. Practical examples could include the provision of a laptop where writing is causing distress.
3. School management/schools should provide an opportunity for autistic children and their families to communicate with them about their child’s capacity to do homework. This should be a dynamic conversation and managed discretely by the school.
4. Autistic students and their parents should be provided with links to websites with further information and supports which they can avail of in relation to their specific learning needs, such as the <https://www.middletonautism.com/lisa-home-page>

Principle 8

School management should ensure that the physical school environment feels safe, secure and comfortable for autistic students. This should include scoping of the following areas

Actions:

1. The classroom set-up: this should include conversations about noise levels and provision of reasonable adjustments to enhance level of comfort/reduce levels of discomfort.
2. Sensory rooms & quiet spaces (indoors and outdoors): these should be made available within the supervised areas of the school to enable the students to relax and re-set.
3. Uniforms: conversations about uniforms should take place to facilitate reasonable adjustments to enhance comfort or reduce discomfort. These considerations should be included in the learner’s support file and care plans and should be managed discretely.

Principle 9

School management and all school staff should be aware of the potential for autistic students to experience bullying at school, and robust processes should be in place to prevent and urgently respond if/when this arises.

Actions:

1. A specific channel of communication should be available to autistic students and their families to allow them to report incidents of bullying with a designated staff member available to discuss this with them in a timely manner.
2. A stated policy of zero-tolerance of bullying should be articulated to all students as part of routine communications.
3. The school's anti-bullying policy and procedures should be developed in partnership with students and be updated in line with emerging evidence of the most effective strategies for supporting autistic students.

Principle 10

School management should ensure that autistic students/their families have the information and supports that they need in order to link in with the relevant health and social care professionals, as required.

Actions

1. A link to the following website with a list of supports and contact points should be shared with autistic students and their families in advance of each school year <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/autism/assessment-and-support/where-to-get-support/>
2. School management and all school staff should be alert to the increased prevalence of anxiety among autistic students and put in place strategies to support them such as yoga, relaxation time at lunch time, and after-school classes.
3. In-class supports for managing anxiety and restlessness should be facilitated for those who require them.



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