

How to create autism friendly classrooms using strategies that help all pupils



David Burns

Mainstream Secondary School Edition

Introduction - a new approach

Not long ago I spoke with a parent whose child refused to go to school because he was so unhappy trying to cope with adapting to a system. He had an autistic mind and although he was academically able, he found the environment of school difficult to navigate. To explore options the mother had asked him what his idea of a perfect school would be. The conversation ended when he replied in no uncertain terms, "To be home-schooled!"

At first glance it looks like this was a clever answer to avoid exploring a valid question about all the things he might like at school that would help him and the parent could be forgiven for thinking the discussion and conversation ended with her son's straight answer. He was just too intelligent and could outsmart her questioning. So why bother asking next time?

However, if we remain inquisitive there's more to this answer than first appears. In fact, it's very insightful. You see, her son wanted school to be like home. Now that's a huge clue to what he felt he needed but couldn't quite articulate. So, what would it be like if school was like home?

Just as with homes, the environment and culture will differ from one school to another. Also, every family makeup is varied and it's no different for schools. There are able and disabled children. There are those with and without special needs. There are those who love practical tasks and those who enjoy academic challenges. Normal is that we are all different.

Consequently, this booklet is a little different. I know the title might suggest we need to look at autism and understand it and try and work out special strategies for certain children. But here's the surprise - I know we're not all health professionals to understand all the various text book descriptions of 'conditions' or 'disorders' so we need something for everyone. (By the way, many autistic people don't think they have a condition or disorder – we have autistic minds which means we connect with the world a little differently and one autistic person is different to another.)

The ideas and strategies I have chosen to share have been borne out from real experience. Since I am autistic I can share 'from the inside' what would have supported me as a child and teenager to navigate the education system because going to school was most traumatic. The process of coping with the enormous change in my surroundings and learning new unspoken rules caused me, and many others, great anxiety. What would have been useful? How can we help?

This is actually quite easy because we can adopt strategies in mainstream schools that help all children as well as those who are autistic. We don't have to become autism experts on day one – just understand what will help and apply it to all. Many children won't even have a diagnosis when we meet them but that doesn't make them less autistic or afraid. Our opinions as to whether a child is autistic or not are just that – opinions. What we actually need to do is unconsciously support them by default by applying strategies for the whole class.

This booklet is a starting place and presents such a list of strategies for all children. They will, by default, help those with autistic minds as well as everyone else. We don't have to learn a whole set of separate ideas to apply to certain pupils – they'll benefit everyone. How good is that?

David Burns

Be a Friendly Professional

I often say to teachers, **"Love your pupils"**. I know on face value that might seem politically incorrect and unprofessional but most teachers understand what I'm getting at. We need to care about our children. Their lives matter. Love defines what we believe, what we think and what we do. If you don't like children then don't join the teaching profession. That may sound blunt but it's better for you and the school and it's better for the children. Find another career. But if you love children, care enough to want to help and believe you can make the difference then you are perfect for the job! When things are tough then your attitude and commitment to the child will ensure you carefully consider the options that are in their best interest. Oh, and one important thing to do to be friendly is to smile – **smiles open the way for children to approach us.**

Know the child

This has to be the best advice I can give. **Every child in our care is different.** Getting to know them – their strengths, their struggles, what they like and don't like is all tied in with building a connection or relationship so that they can join us on the journey of education. Ask yourself, *"What do I need to give to help this person achieve their best?"*



Remember you are an adult and they are children



Gosh, isn't it hard sometimes? Why don't they understand? Well, sometimes it's because they are children. **Their ability to understand is growing.** We literally tower above most children and that means they look to us for guidance, help, protection and inspiration. They can become afraid of us or respect us. **Teachers can look like giants!**

Choose not to shout in the classroom

Some children are sensitive souls and when we shout they shrink away a little bit more. They become afraid to approach us and we create a wall. Shouting affects all the other children in the class too – someone somewhere will feel scared, anxious or stressed. **They may become nervous and decide they don't want to come near us.** They'll be apprehensive coming to our lessons and lag behind others, failing to complete some of the tasks because they won't come to us for help. You see, shouting isn't the same as raising a voice or being assertive. Respect and fear are not synonymous.

Be gentle

Many children find people who are assertive and strong willed difficult to communicate with. **A gentle approach when talking to a child on a one-to-one basis is much more likely to create engagement and connection.** We're not talking about weakness or a lack of leadership but a way to communicate and a method to help us and children work well together.



Find ways to encourage and reassure

Yesterday's achievements won't motivate a child for the rest of their life. Last week's successes might not inspire their approach tomorrow. Children forget what yesterday felt like, they find other things discourage and they get stuck. The person who encourages and reassures is the one who oils the wheels, keeps things running and changes the mood and feelings to something positive. The child who thinks they 'can't' may change their mind when a teacher says **"I believe you can because I know how good you are at 'xyz'. Let me help you get started."**

Be prepared for lessons

I know this is basic stuff and all universities teach it, demonstrate it and expect it. What I'm thinking about here is not the practical lesson plans but learning that behaviour has a cause and knowing something may happen as a result of something else. What can we do to be prepared? Talk to colleagues, learn about how to reduce confrontation and create openness and continue to be inquisitive about new ideas and practices. Read about autism and attend awareness events. **Talk to parents** – they often know so much which can help us.

Use plain language and give examples with instructions – take them with you

So we're on a journey in every lesson and we've got to take everyone with us. Some children need to see each step and others need to see the destination before they will follow. This isn't a mystery tour – **the aim is to help a child to learn using any means possible.** I regularly use the illustration about drawing a circle. We all know how to draw a circle but to complete the task some of us need more detail – how big should the circle be, what colour pen do we use, where should I draw it and why are you asking me to do this? **Better still, show me what you want.**

Have boundaries

All this stuff about being gentle, encouraging and reassuring might give the impression teachers should be a walkover or a soft touch. **Anything but!** All our children need to feel safe and protected. It's necessary to decide what's important and what's trivial. There must be consequences for poor behaviour though each consequence can be different for each child. That's controversial but let me explain. **Consequences need to teach a child and dissuade them from poor behaviour.** It should start to bring about change. Sometimes poor behaviour is a sign of unmet needs and they need help so we initiate support while showing why certain behaviour is inappropriate. At other times it's clear there's a running feud between two children and both need to be challenged and sanctioned in a way that is appropriate to each. By knowing the child you'll understand what might work best because detentions don't work for everyone. When things go wrong, we can help by explaining why and how to avoid the situation. Bearing in mind the application of rules may be difficult to understand in different situations we can expect that things may go wrong again. **It's so important to be consistent and avoid changing rules or adopting them on different days.** It's easy to be too harsh or exaggerate a problem but let's be fair and maintain boundaries. Interestingly, children with autism will be consistently inconsistent.



Judge carefully, observe and investigate

Whether it's poor behaviour or low achievement we need to look beyond what is in front of us and see what the underlying cause is. Is it bullying? Is it a home circumstance? Is it an unseen disability like autism? For example, many undiagnosed children with autism get into trouble as they aren't able to apply rules in every situation, cannot express themselves well, find group work difficult and excel in one area while 'failing' in another. I was such a child – great at science and mathematics but just didn't get English comprehension exercises - and I ended up in trouble most weeks.

Make adjustments and be flexible

If children fail to understand and learn it's not because they have a 'learning disability'. **All children can learn but they need things explained in a way that's suitable for them.** Examples, illustrations and visual aids are brilliant. Learning to be flexible in our approach and explain the same thing several times using different techniques will ensure everyone can join in the learning process. **And if they don't get it we don't blame them – we try a different way.**

Be evidence orientated and believe there's more to come

It's easy to assume something we're told about a child and that they won't be able to do something even though there's no proof. In a safe and caring environment it's possible to try so many things and introduce a child to something new. **Even those children who display poor behaviour can change when the environment is supportive.** Try to remember that risk assessments need to be realistic and offer ways to reduce a risk from materialising - they're not an excuse to exclude or never try to integrate a child with activities everyone else enjoys. That child in front of us will become an adult and there's so much we and they will learn about who they are and what they can do. **Believe there is more to come.**

Use handouts

One way to introduce clarity of instruction and processing time is to prepare tasks on handout sheets or computer files which can be downloaded. Many children benefit from tasks that are written down because such an approach can reinforce our explanations as well as help a child to refer back to the instructions whenever they need to. **It helps parents to assist with homework tasks** and instructions can be written and illustrated to indicate the important bits or key areas of learning.



Give time to process

They say the human brain is more complex than any computer but if that's so why do computers seem to process instructions much faster? The answer is simple – **people have so many other things going on in and around them which means their brains have to process a multitude of things all at once.** Giving everyone time to process a question rather than introducing a rapid question and answer session will automatically help children with dyslexia, autism and ADHD without even trying to think about those disabilities. **Include time for processing because speed is not always an indication of ability or talent.** For example, we might explain that we're going to look at a particular topic and try and learn 'why' something happens so we can answer the question, "Why does this happen?" As we help children to understand and introduce the 'why' gradually in conversation they have time to think and answer because they know what the question is at the start. Similarly we might ask them to think for a few moments about a question before we ask for an answer.

Break large tasks into smaller ones

Along with handouts comes the benefit of being able to split out large tasks into smaller steps. Some children find large tasks overwhelming and have difficulty starting or finishing so a series of steps will help them to see where they need to head to complete the task. It's a bit like showing them the journey's route before they set off rather than asking them to arrive at a place called Timbuktu. It means we can help at different stages and understand how a child is progressing, what they find difficult and what they can do with ease. After all, don't adults break large projects into smaller parts?

Help to facilitate when group work is required

We should consider if group work is essential and if it is, we need to ensure we facilitate participation. We cannot leave the group to its own dynamic as the extroverts will dominate. Does the group really need six people or can a group consist of just two? **What will work best for each child?**

Include quiet times

Schools are by default noisy busy places and some children find the environment difficult to cope with and even become stressed and anxious. **That can lead to further behaviour we might not want to see.** So, incorporating a quiet time in the lesson or a place to go at break can really help to alleviate over stimulation. Some lunch-time activities such as a chess club or a reading club are a perfect opportunity to learn something in a quieter environment which can be more easily enforced. **They offer a place to escape – don't we all need that sometimes?**



Learn patience

All the above things require patience and patience is hard when children themselves can be impatient. So, we all need to learn patience together – teachers and pupils. In learning patience we'll find there are plenty of opportunities to be patient to hone this important skill. The child who stutters, the child who is upset, the child who is afraid or the child who doesn't understand – **these are opportunities to show patience.**

Don't get offended too easily

Sometimes what is said is honest observation and a child may not even understand offence has been caused. **Plain speaking needn't upset us and we can choose to be less hasty to judge.** In this politically correct world, some children find conversation a minefield. They do not know the unspoken rules or see the body language around them – **we have to tell them.** In my home we speak plainly and straight to the point because it helps those of us with autism though others might think we're being blunt or rude.

Involve parents and carers

There is a resource of ideas, support and insight we can tap into – **parents and carers**. Sometimes it's difficult to reach a parent by telephone but a quick email may be all that is needed. How we approach a parent is important too as we need them on board. So starting a conversation or email with, "I'd really like to help Johnny to learn more about how to ask questions at the most appropriate time," is less confrontational than "Johnny always interrupts the class and he needs to stop!" The former doesn't close down the importance of asking questions and focuses on helping rather than prohibiting. I often ask parents to tell teachers when something goes well because we need to know what helps as well as what doesn't. **The aim is to work together and share our knowledge and experience to help children learn.**

Introduce role models and buddying up

Some children seem to invite trouble or seem to become isolated from everyone else. A great way to help a child is to team them up with an individual or group who can help them and the sooner we can do this the better the outcome can be. Many children, autistic or otherwise, are vulnerable and easily influenced by others to misbehave because they cannot apply the rules in every situation. However, we can use that **vulnerability to influence in a positive way by introducing individuals who can help them do what's right and also support them when they are unhappy, anxious or afraid.** Helping our class to learn to become a group of people who care about each other is a great idea.

Eating out

It's great to eat together but some children find the whole experience of eating with others something they just don't enjoy. The different smells, textures and sights make for an unwanted experience and there are certain foods **they just cannot tolerate**. I still loathe the mashed potato – it's a texture sensitivity I've not grown out of and though everyone else in my family loves it I stay well away. That's key too – **sometimes children need a place to eat away from others** where it's less noisy, no one can criticise their perceived fussiness and they can relax a little more.

Organise activities at break time

If we're finding confrontation or isolation at break times one way to change things is **to organise activities where each person can take part**. It needs dedication and supervision but can be a good way to ease tensions before the next class. Activities can be varied and those children who tend to end up isolated can be specifically invited and given a job or responsibility they are **comfortable with**. If there is confrontation, unkind remarks or bullying we deal with it very quickly because these activities need to be a place of safety and fun. Oh, and by the way, it's perfectly okay for a child to want to be on their own - but it's not okay for a child to feel left out.

Children can be unkind – don't ever ignore it

Bullying takes all sorts of forms and some children may be more affected by 'minor' things and teasing. Nevertheless, we must take a **child's treatment by others seriously** if we want them to be able to ask for help. Families deal with sibling rivalry so we ought to learn from their example. It's easy to believe the articulate child but the introverted quiet one who finds it hard to explain can be overlooked or falsely blamed by others who enticed them to 'break' the rules. **Some children are more vulnerable than others** and just because they cannot answer a question does not mean they are at fault.

Help them make choices

It's great to have choice and most people prefer to see more than one dish on a restaurant menu. **However, making choices can be really difficult for some children.** Sometimes we need to narrow choices down or help certain children to make a choice as it might not be something they do at home or in other classes. Sometimes the approach can be around discussion and other times it might be about leading them towards a choice that will make good use of their strengths and abilities. Furthermore, whatever they choose **needs to be affirmed and encouraged.** After all, isn't part of learning developing a skill to make good choices?

Be aware of personal space and sensitivity

Everyone is different. Some people like to be close to others and some prefer distance. There's a natural space each person feels comfortable with and it's the same with pupils and teachers. **Enter that space without invitation and it can spark anxiety, emotional shutdown, fear or aggression.** Similarly, everyone has a different response to sound, smell, light, texture, temperature and touch. Some children are very sensitive to these things and the environment might be the reason why they are struggling or the cause of certain behaviour. That's why it's important to 'know the child' and adjust things around them.

Manage change



Some of our class really don't like change. They get accustomed to the seating arrangement, the order of things and how things are done. That means we have to **consider introducing change carefully and with advance warning** so that there are no surprises and we can manage anxiety.

Eye contact is useful but not essential

This is just something worth remembering. Different cultures frown on eye contact and sometimes it can produce aggression. **The aim is to draw attention to what is being taught and that may involve an invitation to look at something or to listen.** Some children find prolonged eye contact physically painful so if we need a child to look at us we can help them by teaching them to look at chins, noses and foreheads rather than eyes.

Don't delay support

If a child has a special need or disability a parent won't wait for a diagnosis before stepping in to help when they struggle – they just do it because they love their child, see the need and jump in. It's the same with great teachers. **If we really want to help a child we don't delay or put support** on hold while we try and become experts in a 'condition' or wait for more professional guidance (which can take months!). **A child's life isn't a movie we can pause and come back to tomorrow so in the meantime let's all roll up our sleeves, get stuck in and help.**

Lastly, believe in inclusion

Inclusion isn't something we do – it's something we believe. If we believe in inclusion then that will naturally filter down into everything else.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David champions the need to support families and schools in helping children with autistic minds grow and develop into adults who embrace their lives and enjoy the world, contributing in their own unique way. He's not a fan of making everyone conform to 'sameness' but does know the value of learning how to connect with others.

An autistic adult, David is a member of Mensa and is the author of *"Do Lemons Have Feathers?"* published by Jessica Kingsley. He has a unique way of finding solutions and different approaches to issues we face probably because he is autistic. David speaks at events, support groups and universities.

David lives in Sussex with his wife and has four grown up children.

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WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING

"A refreshingly simple but effective guide to supporting children with a range of strengths and challenges that all teachers should read and remember."

Julie Wharton, Senior Lecturer Additional Educational Needs, University of Winchester

"I wish this booklet was available when my sons on the autism spectrum were younger and my eldest a school refuser. Small reasonable adjustments to support the child on the spectrum make a huge difference when supporting them in the classroom. This booklet offers lots of small insightful useful solutions that everyone can use when educating children on the autism spectrum in the classroom and at home."

Dr Anna Kennedy OBE,
www.annakennedyonline.com

"If you are a teacher please read this – it won't take you long, but if you take on board what David is suggesting, and implement suggestions when appropriate, you could change the educational experiences of autistic children considerably for the better."

Dr Luke Beardon, Senior Lecturer in Autism, Sheffield Hallam University

"In the world that I and thousands of others live in as parent/carers I am continuously striving and asking for Inclusion and Autism Awareness for all across every sector. David Burns has made this journey a whole lot easier with his already very well received books and information leaflets. Sadly I know too many families whose children in mainstream education are legally not having their needs met and I truly believe that if EVERY school were to read and take on board his recommendations then the world would be a better place for the children and the families as a whole."

Maria Cook, Autism Ambassador for London Gatwick Airport and Chairperson Autism Support Crawley



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