The Neurodivergent Classroom

Autism at a Glance

Autism describes a different way of processing social information, sensory input, routines and interests. In class, transitions, unclear situations and sensory load can drain a lot of energy.



What you may notice in class

- Vague tasks are harder than difficult ones.
- Transitions and sudden changes are draining.
- Sometimes an answer takes several seconds to come.
- Group work or picking a partner can be really stressful.
- Sensory input builds up, and the overload shows later.
- Repetitive movements help them self-regulate.
- A deep special interest often shines through.
- Younger kids find open-ended play and sudden changes especially hard. (elementary school)
- Older students find it harder to join in when expectations and group roles are unclear. (middle and high school)

Strengths

- Works precisely and carefully on the right topics.
- Sticks with their interests for the long haul.
- Has a sharp eye for details and patterns.
- Brings deep knowledge to the right tasks.
- Can focus for a long time on the right tasks.

What helps

- Say exactly what you mean, without sarcasm.
- Give early, visible notice of transitions.
- Keep worksheets clear and visually calm.
- After a question, give them time to answer.
- Use special interests as a way into new material.
- Let them self-regulate in ways that work.
- Agree on breaks and a quiet place to work.
- Put changes in writing and give plenty of notice.
- Give them a clear, agreed role in group work.
- With younger kids, use visual schedules and give roles clear names. (elementary school)
- With older students, put expectations, roles and changes in writing. (middle and high school)

What tends not to help

- Sarcasm, hints or vague instructions.
- Surprise transitions and last-minute changes of plan.
- Banning all self-regulating movements outright.
- Mistaking sensory overload for lack of motivation.

Words that carry

“I’ll tell you exactly what’s coming next.”

“Take your time to answer.”

“Let’s find a spot where you can work well.”

“Here’s your plan for the next task.” (elementary school)

“Before we start, let’s go over expectations and roles.” (middle and high school)

Where to find support

National Autistic Society (UK)
autism.org.uk
Large autism charity with practical guidance for schools and families.

Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) autisticadvocacy.org
US organization run by and for autistic people.

Autism CRC: inclusive education
autismcrc.com.au/best-practice/inclusive-education/about
Australian research center with evidence-based resources for teachers.

Local organizations
Many countries have their own autism organizations, ideally ones led by autistic people. Your school or the family can point you to one.

More in the Teacher Portal: neurodivergentclassroom.com/teacher-portal/autism/

Sources: WHO: ICD-11 for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics · AFIRM: Visual Supports Brief Packet · WHO: Autism fact sheet · Landesinstitut Berlin-Brandenburg: Empfehlungen KOMPAKT No. 1 (in German) · Cope, Remington: The Strengths and Abilities of Autistic People in the Workplace