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Building trusting relationships

Building trusting relationships with students and their families takes time and is based on mutual commitment. Such relationships have benefits for everyone as they:

- increase shared knowledge of student diversity and individual differences
- support two-way dialogue about the reasonable adjustments provided in response to the students' requirements, strengths and aspirations
- strengthen effective communication and other 'soft' skills (for example, active listening, empathy, compassion)
- lead to effective teacher–parent partnerships for collaboration
- facilitate the child's move to the new school and classroom
- support the child's peer interactions, with teacher guidance
- improve the students' wellbeing at school
- help to prevent stressful situations that can trigger anxiety for teachers, students and parents.

Video: How to build trusting relationships with students and their families

Build a relationship with your student

What are some things to consider when developing a trusting relationship with a student on the autism spectrum?

- Find out about the student's strengths and interests.
- Find out about the student's sensory preferences and sensitivities.
- Observe the student in their interactions with peers and adults.
- Schedule brief and regular activities that draw on the student's topics of interest.
- Use visual aids (photos, objects, videos) to support discussion with the student.
- Ask the student about their favourite activities at school.
- Show interest in their activities after school.
- Use a communication book or learning portfolio with sections on 'What I have learnt', 'What I tried hard to achieve' and 'What I need support with'.
- Encourage the student to take on roles in class with your gentle guidance.
- Express in explicit ways your pride for their hard work, effort and curiosity for learning.
- Establish a plan with the child their family about when and how to take breaks.

How can I support these students in their schooling experience in the community?

- Make a list of the community places your students visit often with their families.
- Drawing on that list, plan for community activities throughout the year related to the Australian Curriculum.
- Create social stories about familiar community activities.
- Practise behavioural routines and expectations in the classroom to prepare students for community contexts.

Developing relationships with families

What can I do to build a relationship with the families of these students?

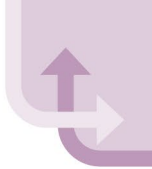
- Send a personal email to families introducing yourself and your teaching philosophy and your values, emphasising your high regard for effort and resilience rather than performance.
- Offer options to communicate with you: by email, phone, in person, communication book.
- Schedule sufficient time for meetings with specific discussion topics.
- Acknowledge families as the experts on the child.
- Use active listening in your spoken communication.
- Have an observer in meetings with families to reflect on your communication skills, and be receptive to their feedback.
- In your communication with families, show genuine interest in their child's daily life, their habits, interests and hopes for the school year.
- Take notes on what has worked really well and what did not.
- Talk about activities within the school, seeking to understand their concerns and expectations.
- Talk about activities in the community, aiming to support their child's equal participation in these events.
- Express your interest in meeting with any allied health professionals that support the student so that you can use similar strategies for engagement and learning.
- Invite constructive feedback as part of your self-reflection as an educator.



Engaging students in family consultations on their learning adds value to collaborative decision-making.

The parent brings that unique expertise that the teacher doesn't have. And for the teacher, it's important in that very first meeting to really acknowledge that expertise that the parent brings, because then that creates a really nice foundation for them to communicate and share the power of knowledge.

— Dr Sofia Mavropoulou, Senior Lecturer in Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology



Things to consider when working with students on the autism spectrum

- Social learning is as important as academic learning. Both form part of a holistic learning process.
- Heightened anxiety in students reduces their capacity for social participation and therefore affects their learning.
- Intentional and systematic observation of students' responses to activities is a key step for effective teaching.
- Monitor social interactions with peers to check that students are not being bullied or excluded from activities.
- Use the students' interests to teach them new skills.
- Spend time familiarising the students' peers with their ways of working and communication system or approach.
- Support students' peers with opportunities to work together in pairs or groups with students on the autism spectrum.
- Schedule time for reflection on learning activities with the student to guide self-regulation.
- Create a circle of trusted peers with shared interests for specific group activities.
- Schedule time for mindful body-awareness activities.
- Create a visual aid to help the student keep track of their progress towards achievement of big social or academic goals.
- Set up a work system for learning activities that sets out the steps to be completed, the materials required, highlights the completion of activities and states what happens next.
- Set up routines with embedded visuals for unexpected changes to the routines.
- Organise whole-class activities to raise awareness of human diversity (including autism).

I like educators to be aware that parents give you their child with great trust, it's a privilege. We are given people's centre of the world for six hours a day. It's a trusting relationship.

— Rachel Scheuboeck, Manager, Inclusive Practice, Special Education Resource Unit,
Department of Education South Australia