https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/starting-school/

Creating an inclusive school

Why create an inclusive school?

There is evidence of strong links between feeling positively connected to school – where children feel accepted, respected, and included – and a range of outcomes such as academic success, high self-esteem, positive affect, optimism, hope, life satisfaction, and positive long-term life outcomes. A sense of belonging and connectedness at school supports an inclusive school culture. Schools that build supportive classroom cultures establish positive learning experiences for all students throughout their schooling experience. Using inclusive teaching approaches such as Universal Design for Learning will engage and support the needs of all learners in the classroom, including autistic students.

When teachers are inclusive for autistic students, they're inclusive for everybody.

— Dr Emma Goodall, autistic advocate and educator

What is Universal Design for Learning?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a comprehensive framework that is used to support teachers to address diversity of learning in the classroom. It was developed by researchers at the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) and is based on decades of neuroscience research, leading to the understanding that learners are different in many ways and need a range of teaching approaches and resources to be successful.

UDL supports teachers to design learning environments and teaching approaches that are accessible for all children. The guiding principles of UDL support you as a teacher to set learning goals and plan curriculum-based activities, assessment, teaching strategies, and resources to meet individual learning needs.

The UDL framework has three guiding principles you can use to provide multiple ways of engaging children, representing knowledge and demonstrating understanding.

Video: Implementing Universal Design for Learning in the classroom

Principle 1: Multiple means of engagement

As teachers, working with children in the first year of schooling, knowing your students' strengths, challenges and interests helps you to identify multiple ways to motivate and engage students in learning.

Young children with diagnosed or undiagnosed autism may have differences or difficulties socialising and communicating with other children. They may have particular interests and fixations on topics and are likely to have sensory needs that impact on their participation in the first terms of school. For example, children may be frightened of loud noise, may find bright lights overwhelming, or they may get anxious with large groups of children. These sensory issues do not mean that the child cannot learn and participate in the classroom, but they may have an impact on their learning if not addressed.

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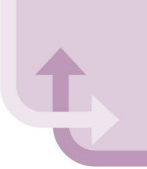
You can make a positive difference in the early education years by providing multiple means of engagement in the classroom.

How might this look in a classroom?

- Provide choices in learning activities and topics, or where and how children learn.
- Find out what your students are interested in and be flexible in how you engage them in the curriculum.
- Structure learning by breaking down the steps. Use visual prompts to support students to understand and follow expectations.
- Support the sensory needs of autistic students. Develop an understanding of the range of sensory needs that they may have.
- Provide options to use: noise-cancelling headphones in some noisy environments; eyeglasses, sunglasses or hats for areas with bright lights.
- Recognise behaviour triggers early. If students become anxious, they may need to move or fidget with an object or tool of their choice.
- Provide responsive spaces for students who need a safe and calming space at times due to sensory overload, anxiety. These types of spaces can also provide stimulation for students who need to be active with their hands, body and feet.
- Have discussions with your student's family about possible behavioural triggers that indicate the students need to have time and space to be calm.


Create a reward chart based on the student's interest.

Provide students options if they need to fidget with an object.

Principle 2: Multiple means of representation

Representation refers to the ways that educators present information to children. Neurodivergent students need to be able to access and understand the information presented to them. Students in the first terms of school will benefit from structure, routines and explicit instructions that meet the needs of children on the autism spectrum. You might find these strategies good for the whole class.

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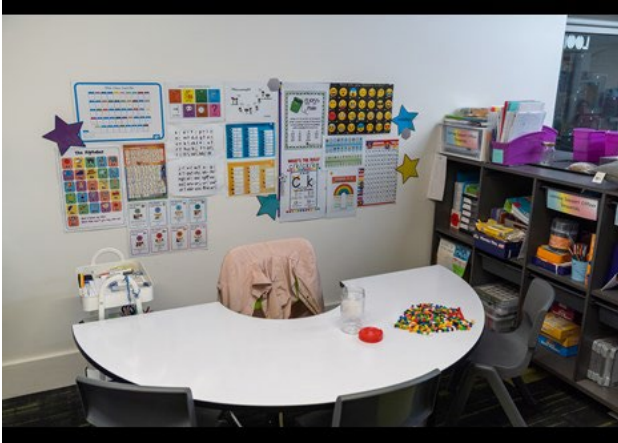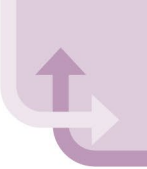
Create and display visual schedules for students

Concrete materials support learning abstract concepts.

How might this look in a classroom?

- Use visual strategies or structures to present information, support timetabling and scaffold instruction and learning. There are many good ideas here to support you to use visual schedules in your classroom.
- Organise the classroom with visual prompts to colour code resources and help students navigate learning tasks.
- Use different approaches and teaching techniques, such as role-modelling to practise behaviours and skills.
- Use explicit teaching, concrete materials, independent learning and peer support for addressing learning needs.
- Embed supporting social communication and building peer relationships in classroom learning and playground support.
- Scaffold activities for students by breaking activities down into manageable steps and provide supplementary resources to support learning.
- Be aware of your language and communication, such as pace and choice of words.
- Make use of digital technology including interactive and assistive communication devices.

Principle 3: Multiple means of action and expression

Offer students different options to demonstrate what they know and what they can do. Supporting students with different opportunities to use their strengths and to engage in the classroom can make a positive difference. Providing students with choices in how they communicate and interact with class activities and each other will ensure a more inclusive and successful environment for everyone.

How might this look in a classroom?

- Plan the use of flexible assessment, such as additional time, and adjustments, such as technology and quiet space.
- Support students with organisation to start, continue and complete tasks.
- Provide alternative ways to communicate, such as hand signs, images/symbols, and augmentative or assistive technologies.

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Augmentative and alternative communication systems support students with language difficulties.

Create a responsive classroom environment

Not every classroom is specifically designed to respond to the needs of all students. There are simple changes that can be made to make the classroom environment a comfortable and calming space for all.

What simple changes could you make to make your classroom a more inclusive space? Audit your space with the Assess your classroom environment tool.

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