

THE TRUSTED ADULT

*Transcript and Practical Notes from Geoff Hannan's International
Training Programme for Teaching Assistants Supporting Autistic
Children in the Classroom*

*Based on over 45 years of improving outcomes for children with
additional learning needs.*

"The most important educational intervention an autistic child can
receive is a trusted adult who truly understands them."

Dedicated to my wonderful grandson, Oscar.

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Introduction

You may never be the person who writes a school's policies, decides the curriculum or leads staff meetings. You may never determine educational budgets or shape national educational policy. Yet you may become the person a child remembers for the rest of their life.

Every day, teaching assistants quietly change children's futures. They notice the child who has become anxious before anyone else does. They celebrate the smallest success that others may overlook. They patiently explain something for the fifth time without making a child feel they have failed. They help children discover not only new knowledge but new confidence in themselves as learners. Their work is rarely dramatic, often goes unnoticed and is seldom recognised publicly. Yet its influence can last a lifetime.

For autistic children, this role is often even more significant. Many autistic learners arrive at school carrying an invisible weight. They may be working hard simply to make sense of the world around them. Busy classrooms, changing routines, unfamiliar language, sensory distractions and the complex social expectations of school can all place considerable demands upon them before the first lesson has even begun. What may appear to others as a normal school day may require enormous mental effort simply to navigate.

When adults understand this, everything changes. The role of the teaching assistant is no longer simply to help a child complete work or manage behaviour. It becomes something far more important. The teaching assistant helps create the conditions in which learning becomes possible. Through calmness, consistency, patience and understanding, they help reduce anxiety, build confidence and create the emotional security from which learning can flourish.

This course has been developed with that purpose in mind. It is not a behaviour management manual, nor is it another collection of classroom activities or quick-fix strategies. Instead, it is a practical guide to becoming the trusted adult who helps autistic learners feel safe, think clearly, develop confidence and grow in independence. It has been designed for busy teaching assistants who want practical ideas that can be used immediately while also understanding why those ideas work.

At the heart of this course lies one simple belief:

Children learn best when they feel safe, understood and successful.

Everything that follows grows from this principle. You will learn how to recognise the early signs of anxiety before learning is interrupted, how small changes in your language can reduce confusion and increase understanding, and how carefully planned routines can free a child's mind for learning. You will discover when to help, when to wait and when to step back so that confidence and independence can develop naturally. Above all, you will see that the quality of your relationship with a child is not separate from learning. For many autistic learners, it is the foundation upon which learning is built.

You do not need to know everything. You do not need to be perfect. You do not need to have all the answers. The children you support are not looking for perfection. They are looking for someone who is calm, predictable, patient and willing to understand them. They need someone who notices when they are becoming overwhelmed, who celebrates genuine success, who believes in them and who remains alongside them when learning feels difficult. That person is you.

As you go through this course, remember that lasting educational change rarely comes from one dramatic intervention. It grows from hundreds of small moments repeated consistently over time: a warm greeting at the classroom door, waiting a few extra seconds for a child to think, explaining something in a different way, recognising the first signs of anxiety, reducing unnecessary demands or celebrating a success that yesterday seemed impossible. Individually these moments may appear ordinary. Together they transform educational experiences.

Trust grows through these everyday interactions. Trust reduces anxiety. Reduced anxiety allows children to think more clearly. Clear thinking leads to success. Success builds confidence, and confidence gradually develops into independence. This simple sequence lies at the heart of everything you will hear in the content that follows.

Never underestimate the importance of your role. You are not simply helping a child complete today's lesson. You are helping them build the confidence, resilience and self-belief that will shape tomorrow's opportunities. The knowledge they gain is important, but the confidence to keep learning may be the greatest gift you ever help them develop.

If this course helps you understand one child a little better, helps one lesson feel calmer, helps one anxious learner experience success or helps one teaching assistant feel more confident in their role, then it will have achieved its purpose.

Thank you for the work you do. It matters far more than you may ever realise. Welcome to **The Trusted Adult**.

Section 1

Understanding Autism in the Classroom

The most important thing to understand about an autistic child is that they are a child first. Autism shapes how they experience the world, but it does not define their worth, their potential or their capacity to learn.

When many people first hear the word *autism*, they immediately think about behaviours. They think about difficulties with communication, repetitive movements, sensory sensitivities or social interaction. While these characteristics may be part of an autistic child's experience, they tell us very little about what it actually feels like to be that child sitting in a classroom every day.

As a teaching assistant, your role is not simply to recognise autistic characteristics. Your role is to understand the learner behind them. Every behaviour, every hesitation, every success and every challenge takes place within the context of a child who is trying to make sense of the world around them. The more we understand that experience, the more effectively we can support learning.

Autistic children experience the world differently, not incorrectly. Their brains may process information in ways that differ from those of many of their classmates. They may notice details that others overlook, remember information with remarkable accuracy, develop deep interests in particular topics and think about problems from highly original perspectives. At the same time, they may find rapid

change, unclear instructions, sensory distractions or complex social situations far more demanding than others do.

It is important to remember that no two autistic children are the same. Autism is not a checklist of behaviours, and there is no such thing as a "typical" autistic learner. One child may communicate fluently but struggle with sensory overload. Another may have limited spoken language but demonstrate exceptional visual thinking. One child may seek routine above all else, while another may enjoy novelty when it is introduced carefully and predictably. The role of the teaching assistant is not to make assumptions but to become a careful observer of the individual child.

One of the most important ideas in this course is that behaviour is communication. When an autistic child refuses a task, walks away, becomes distressed or appears distracted, they are telling us something. They may be anxious. They may be overwhelmed by noise. They may not understand the instructions. They may need more processing time. They may simply be exhausted by the effort of coping with everything happening around them. Behaviour is often the final chapter of a story that began much earlier.

Many autistic children also experience differences in attention. When something captures their interest, they may concentrate with extraordinary intensity and learn an astonishing amount about that subject. At other times, switching attention from one activity to another may require considerable mental effort. Rather than seeing these interests as distractions, outstanding teaching assistants recognise them as valuable pathways into learning. A child's fascination with tractors, trains, animals, maps or space can become the bridge through which mathematics, reading, writing and science are taught.

Anxiety is another important part of many autistic children's educational experience. This anxiety is not a sign of weakness, nor is it something children simply choose to feel. It often develops because the school day contains many uncertainties: changing routines, unfamiliar language, sensory distractions, busy classrooms, social expectations and the fear of making mistakes. When anxiety increases, learning becomes more difficult because the brain naturally gives priority to coping with the environment rather than understanding new ideas.

This is why relationships matter so much. For many autistic learners, one calm, consistent and trustworthy adult can transform the school day. The presence of someone who understands them, notices when they are becoming overwhelmed and responds with patience rather than frustration creates emotional safety. When children feel safe, they become more willing to take risks, attempt difficult work and recover from mistakes. The trusted relationship becomes the foundation upon which successful learning is built.

As a teaching assistant, you should never underestimate the influence you may have. The child is unlikely to remember every worksheet they completed or every spelling test they took. They are far more likely to remember how you made them feel. They will remember whether you believed in them, whether you remained calm when they were struggling, whether you celebrated their successes and whether you treated them with dignity when things went wrong.

Throughout this course you will notice that the emphasis is rarely on changing the child. Instead, the focus is on changing the way we teach. We simplify language, reduce unnecessary cognitive demands, establish predictable routines, use children's interests to increase motivation and build learning through carefully planned success.

None of these approaches lowers expectations. Instead, they remove barriers that make learning unnecessarily difficult.

The most successful teaching assistants are not those who know the greatest number of strategies. They are those who remain curious. They observe before they intervene. They ask themselves, *"What is this child trying to tell me?"* rather than, *"How do I stop this behaviour?"* They recognise that every child is different and that understanding always comes before action.

As you continue through this course, remember one simple principle that sits at the heart of everything we will explore:

The child is never the problem to be solved. The child is the person to be understood.

When we begin with understanding, we teach differently.

When we teach differently, children experience school differently.

And when children experience school differently, their opportunities to learn, grow and succeed are transformed.

Section 1 Reflection Tool

Getting to Know the Learner

Before trying to change anything, spend time observing. Use this checklist over several days. There are no right or wrong answers. The aim is simply to understand how this child experiences school.

General Wellbeing

- ☐ Does the child appear happy when they arrive at school?
- ☐ Do they seem relaxed or anxious at the start of the day?
- ☐ Are there particular times when they appear more settled?
- ☐ Are there particular times when they appear more anxious?

Notes:

Relationships

- ☐ Which adults does the child naturally seek out?
- ☐ Which adults seem to help the child feel calm?

- ☐ Does the child work better with familiar adults?
- ☐ How does the child respond to praise and encouragement?

Notes:

Communication

- ☐ Does the child understand spoken instructions easily?
- ☐ Do they benefit from visual prompts?
- ☐ How much processing time do they appear to need?
- ☐ Do they ask for clarification when unsure?
- ☐ How do they communicate when they need help?

Notes:

Attention and Learning

- ☐ Which activities hold the child's attention longest?
- ☐ What appears to distract them?
- ☐ Do they prefer practical activities, visual activities or written work?
- ☐ How do they respond to new learning?
- ☐ When do they seem most engaged?

Notes:

Interests

- ☐ What topics does the child enjoy talking about?
- ☐ What activities motivate them?
- ☐ Which resources capture their interest?
- ☐ How might these interests be used in future learning?

Notes:

Anxiety and Regulation

- ☐ What are the earliest signs that the child is becoming anxious?
- ☐ What situations seem difficult?
- ☐ What helps them become calm again?
- ☐ Are there sensory factors that affect them (noise, lighting, crowds, touch, smells)?

Notes:

Independence

- ☐ What can the child already do independently?
- ☐ When do they ask for help?
- ☐ When do they wait for prompts?

☐ Which tasks could they probably complete with less support?

Notes:

Strengths

Every child has strengths. Spend as much time noticing these as you do identifying areas of need.

☐ What does this child do particularly well?

☐ What makes them smile?

☐ When do they appear most confident?

☐ What achievements should be celebrated?

Notes:

My Reflections

After observing the child for one week, consider the following questions.

1. What have I learned about this child that I did not know before?

2. What seems to help this child learn most successfully?

3. What barriers might I be able to remove?

4. What will I do differently next week?

Remember

Observe before you intervene.

Seek to understand before you seek to change.

Look for strengths before you look for difficulties.

Relationships are built through hundreds of small moments of understanding.

Section 2

Becoming the Trusted Adult

Children may forget what we taught them today, but they will remember how we made them feel while they were learning.

Every school has teaching assistants who are remembered long after children have left. Years later, former pupils may not remember every lesson they completed or every spelling test they took, but they often remember the adult who believed in them, encouraged them and helped them feel safe when school was difficult. For many autistic children, that trusted adult becomes one of the most important people in their educational journey.

Being a trusted adult is not about becoming a child's friend or allowing them to avoid challenge. It is about creating a relationship built upon trust, consistency and respect. When children know that an adult understands them, remains calm during difficult moments and genuinely wants them to succeed, they are far more willing to take risks, ask for help and persevere when learning becomes challenging.

Trust is not built through one dramatic event. It grows slowly through hundreds of everyday interactions. Greeting a child warmly each morning, remembering something they enjoy, keeping a promise, waiting patiently while they process a question and responding calmly when they make a mistake all send the same powerful message:

You are safe with me.

For many autistic learners, that feeling of safety is the foundation upon which learning is built.

One of the greatest gifts a teaching assistant can offer is consistency. School can sometimes feel unpredictable for autistic children. Adults change, routines alter, classrooms become noisy and expectations shift from lesson to lesson. A calm, reliable adult becomes an anchor within that changing environment. Knowing that someone familiar will respond in a predictable way reduces uncertainty and allows the child to focus more of their energy on learning.

Being calm does not mean never showing emotion. It means responding thoughtfully rather than reacting impulsively. Children quickly notice when adults become frustrated, impatient or anxious. Equally, they notice adults who speak quietly, move calmly and remain reassuring even when situations become difficult. Emotional regulation is often contagious. A calm adult helps create a calmer child.

Listening is another important part of becoming a trusted adult. Listening does not simply mean hearing words. It means paying attention to behaviour, facial expressions, body language and changes in mood. Some autistic children communicate their needs easily through speech. Others communicate through actions, gestures or behaviour. Outstanding teaching assistants learn to listen with both their ears and their eyes.

Patience is equally important. Many autistic learners need additional time to process information before responding. Adults sometimes mistake this silence for confusion or inattention and quickly repeat the question or provide the answer. In doing so, they remove the opportunity for the child to think. **Waiting a few extra seconds**

communicates confidence. It tells the child, *"I believe you can work this out."* Often, those few seconds are all that is needed.

Trust also grows through honesty. If plans need to change, explain why. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it. If you do not know the answer to a child's question, say so. Children value adults who are genuine. Honest relationships feel predictable because children know they can rely on what the adult says.

Perhaps one of the most important qualities of a trusted adult is the ability to notice success. Many autistic learners receive frequent reminders about what they find difficult. Outstanding teaching assistants deliberately look for what is going well. They notice effort before perfection, progress before comparison and determination before results. A child who has written one sentence independently after weeks of support deserves recognition. A child who asks for help instead of becoming distressed has achieved something significant. These moments are the building blocks of confidence.

Being a trusted adult also means knowing when not to help. It is natural to want children to succeed, but helping too quickly can unintentionally create dependence. Sometimes the greatest act of support is to wait, to encourage, to offer a gentle prompt and then allow the child to experience the satisfaction of solving the problem for themselves. Confidence grows not because adults do things for children, but because children gradually discover what they can do for themselves.

There will be difficult days. Every teaching assistant experiences lessons that do not go to plan, moments when children become anxious or times when progress seems slow. During these moments it is important to remember that trust is not built when everything is easy. It is built through the way we respond when things are difficult.

Remaining calm, protecting the child's dignity and continuing to believe in their potential often has a greater long-term impact than any individual lesson.

Above all, never underestimate your influence. You may spend only a few hours each day with a child, but those hours matter. The encouragement you give, the patience you show and the confidence you communicate can shape the way a child thinks about themselves for years to come. Many adults can teach facts. Far fewer help children believe that they are capable of learning those facts. That is the quiet power of the trusted adult.

As you continue during this course, remember that strategies, resources and lesson plans are all important. However, they become truly effective only when delivered through a relationship built on trust. Before children can confidently explore new ideas, they must first feel confident in the person who is guiding them.

Every worksheet will eventually be forgotten.

School days come to an end.

But the way a child felt in your presence may remain with them for the rest of their life.

That is the responsibility—and the privilege—of becoming a trusted adult.

Section 2 Reflection Tool

Becoming the Trusted Adult

The trusted adult is not someone who is perfect.

They are someone who reflects, learns and continually strives to improve.

Use this checklist at the end of each week to reflect on your own practice.

There are no scores and no right or wrong answers.

Simply ask yourself:

"Am I becoming the adult this child needs?"

Building Trust

- ☐ Did I greet the child warmly each day?
- ☐ Did I make time to talk about something that interested them?
- ☐ Did I keep my promises?
- ☐ Did the child appear pleased to see me?
- ☐ Did I help the child feel safe?

Reflection

What helped to build trust this week?

Being Calm

- ☐ Did I remain calm during difficult moments?
- ☐ Did I lower my voice rather than raise it?
- ☐ Did I respond rather than react?
- ☐ Did I help the child regulate before returning to learning?
- ☐ Did my calmness influence the child positively?

Reflection

How did my behaviour affect the child today?

Listening and Observing

- ☐ Did I notice early signs of anxiety?
- ☐ Did I allow enough processing time?
- ☐ Did I observe before intervening?
- ☐ Did I try to understand the reason behind behaviour?
- ☐ Did I avoid making assumptions?

Reflection

What did I learn about this child that I did not know before?

Encouraging Learning

- ☐ Did I give clear instructions?
- ☐ Did I reduce unnecessary demands?
- ☐ Did I celebrate genuine success?
- ☐ Did I encourage the child to think for themselves?
- ☐ Did I finish the session positively?

Reflection

What learning success made me smile today?

Developing Independence

- ☐ Did I wait before offering help?
- ☐ Did I encourage the child to solve problems?
- ☐ Did I reduce prompts where appropriate?
- ☐ Did I praise effort rather than simply giving answers?

☐ Did the child achieve something independently today?

Reflection

Where did I step back and allow the child to succeed?

Professional Reflection

☐ Did I work well with the class teacher?

☐ Did I share useful observations?

☐ Did I continue learning from today's experiences?

☐ Did I remain patient throughout the day?

☐ Did I remember that relationships come before learning?

Reflection

What would I like to improve next week?

My Trusted Adult Reflection

Take a few minutes to think about the week as a whole.

This week I am proud that I...

The child seemed happiest when...

The biggest challenge was...

Next week I will...

Remember

You do not need to be perfect.

You simply need to be present.

Be calm.

Be patient.

Be consistent.

Be curious.

Be encouraging.

Above all, be the trusted adult who helps the child believe:

"I am safe here."

"I can learn."

"I can succeed."

Section 3

Preparing for Learning

The most successful lessons often begin before a single word has been spoken.

Many people think that learning begins when the teacher starts explaining the lesson. In reality, learning begins much earlier than that. It begins as the child walks through the classroom door. It begins with the environment they enter, the adult who greets them, the routines they recognise and the feelings they experience during those first few minutes.

For many autistic learners, these opening moments are particularly important. They may still be processing the noise of the corridor, the excitement of playtime or the uncertainty of moving from one activity to another. Their minds may still be occupied with what happened earlier that morning or with concerns that have nothing to do with today's lesson. Before asking a child to learn something new, we must first ask a simple question:

"Are they ready to learn?"

Readiness is not simply about sitting quietly or looking towards the front of the classroom. A child may appear settled while feeling overwhelmed inside. Equally, another child may be moving around the classroom while successfully regulating themselves and preparing to concentrate. **Looking beyond appearances is one of the most important skills a teaching assistant can develop.**

Preparing for learning means reducing unnecessary demands. Resources should be ready before the lesson begins. The child should know where they are sitting and what they need to do first. Instructions should be clear and uncomplicated. If equipment has to be found, books searched for and several verbal instructions remembered before learning can even begin, valuable mental energy has already been used.

The environment also matters. Busy displays, constant noise, frequent interruptions and unnecessary movement all compete for a child's attention. While schools cannot remove every distraction, thoughtful preparation can significantly reduce them. Sometimes moving a child to a quieter position, reducing visual clutter on the table or preparing resources in advance makes a remarkable difference to the quality of learning that follows.

One of the simplest ways to prepare a child for learning is through routine. When lessons begin in a familiar way each day, children no longer need to work out what is happening. They know what comes first, what comes next and what is expected of them. Routine reduces uncertainty and allows more of the child's attention to be directed towards learning.

Many teaching assistants underestimate the importance of the first conversation they have with a child each day. A warm greeting, a smile, mentioning something the child enjoys or asking about an event they were looking forward to immediately strengthens the relationship. These small interactions communicate safety and belonging before any academic demands are placed upon the learner.

Preparation also means thinking ahead. Before the lesson starts, ask yourself what might become difficult for this child. Are there unfamiliar words? Will the task require lots of writing? Might

background noise increase? Will the child need movement before concentrating? Thinking ahead allows you to prevent problems rather than respond to them later.

It is equally important to prepare yourself. Children notice the emotional state of the adults around them. If you feel rushed, anxious or distracted, children often sense this immediately. Taking a few moments to organise resources, review the lesson and approach the child calmly helps create the emotional climate in which learning can flourish.

Outstanding teaching assistants know that preparing for learning is not separate from teaching. It is teaching. The calmer the beginning, the more successful the lesson is likely to become. The first few minutes often determine the tone of everything that follows.

Remember that your aim is not simply to prepare the classroom.

Your aim is to prepare the child.

When children feel calm, know what is expected and trust the adult beside them, they are ready to learn.

Section 3 Reflection Tool

Preparing for Learning

Think about the beginning of each session this week.

The Learning Environment

- ☐ Was the learning space calm and organised?
- ☐ Were resources ready before the child arrived?
- ☐ Were unnecessary distractions reduced?
- ☐ Did the child know where to begin?

What worked particularly well?

Emotional Readiness

- ☐ Did I greet the child warmly?
- ☐ Did I notice how they were feeling?
- ☐ Did I give them time to settle?

☐ Did I reduce anxiety before expecting learning?

What signs told me the child was ready to learn?

My Preparation

☐ Did I know the lesson objectives?

☐ Had I anticipated possible difficulties?

☐ Did I remain calm throughout the session?

☐ Was I prepared before the child needed me?

What could I prepare better next time?

Reflection

The best thing I did before learning started was...

The greatest barrier to learning today was...

Tomorrow I will...

Tomorrow Morning

Before the lesson begins:

- ✓ Smile and greet the child by name.
- ✓ Check that all resources are ready.
- ✓ Reduce one unnecessary distraction.
- ✓ Give the child time to settle before introducing work.
- ✓ Ask yourself:

"Is this child ready to learn?"

Only when the answer is "yes" should new learning begin.

Section 4

The Learning Cycle

Children learn best when every lesson follows a familiar rhythm. Predictability reduces anxiety, confidence increases and learning becomes more successful.

Every successful lesson tells a story.

It has a beginning that prepares the child.

A middle that develops understanding.

An ending that celebrates success.

Unfortunately, many lessons begin too quickly. Children enter the classroom, books are opened, instructions are given and learning is expected to happen immediately. For many autistic learners, however, their minds are still busy processing what happened before they entered the room. They may still be thinking about playtime, a noisy corridor, a change in routine or an earlier conversation. Their attention has not yet fully arrived in the lesson.

Outstanding teaching assistants understand that children need time to move into learning. They know that preparing the brain is just as important as introducing new knowledge. This is why every lesson should follow a familiar sequence that children come to recognise and trust.

The Learning Cycle begins with regulation. Before any teaching takes place, take a moment to observe the child. Do they seem calm?

Are they anxious? Do they need a few moments to settle, a drink of water, a movement activity or simply a reassuring conversation? A child who feels emotionally secure is far more ready to learn than a child who is overwhelmed.

Once the child is ready, begin by revisiting something they already know. This may be reading familiar words, recalling yesterday's mathematics, practising number bonds or discussing something they learned last week. Starting with success reminds the child that they are capable. It builds confidence before introducing something new.

Only then should new learning begin. Keep explanations short and clear. Demonstrate each step. Show the child exactly what you are thinking. Do not assume they will work out hidden steps for themselves. **Many autistic learners benefit enormously when adults make their thinking visible.**

After demonstrating, work alongside the child. Complete examples together, ask simple questions and encourage the child to explain their thinking. Shared success builds confidence and reduces anxiety.

As confidence grows, gradually reduce your support. Encourage the child to complete more of the task independently while remaining close enough to help if genuinely needed. Resist the temptation to step in too quickly. Children develop confidence when they experience the satisfaction of solving problems themselves.

Every lesson should end positively. Before moving on, spend a few moments reflecting on what has been achieved. Ask the child what they are proud of. Tell them what you noticed they did well. Celebrate effort as much as success. The aim is for every child to leave believing:

I learned something today.

Perhaps the most important feature of The Learning Cycle is consistency. Children quickly learn its rhythm. They know that every lesson begins calmly, moves gradually into new learning and finishes by recognising success. This predictability reduces uncertainty and allows more of the child's attention to be devoted to learning rather than coping with change.

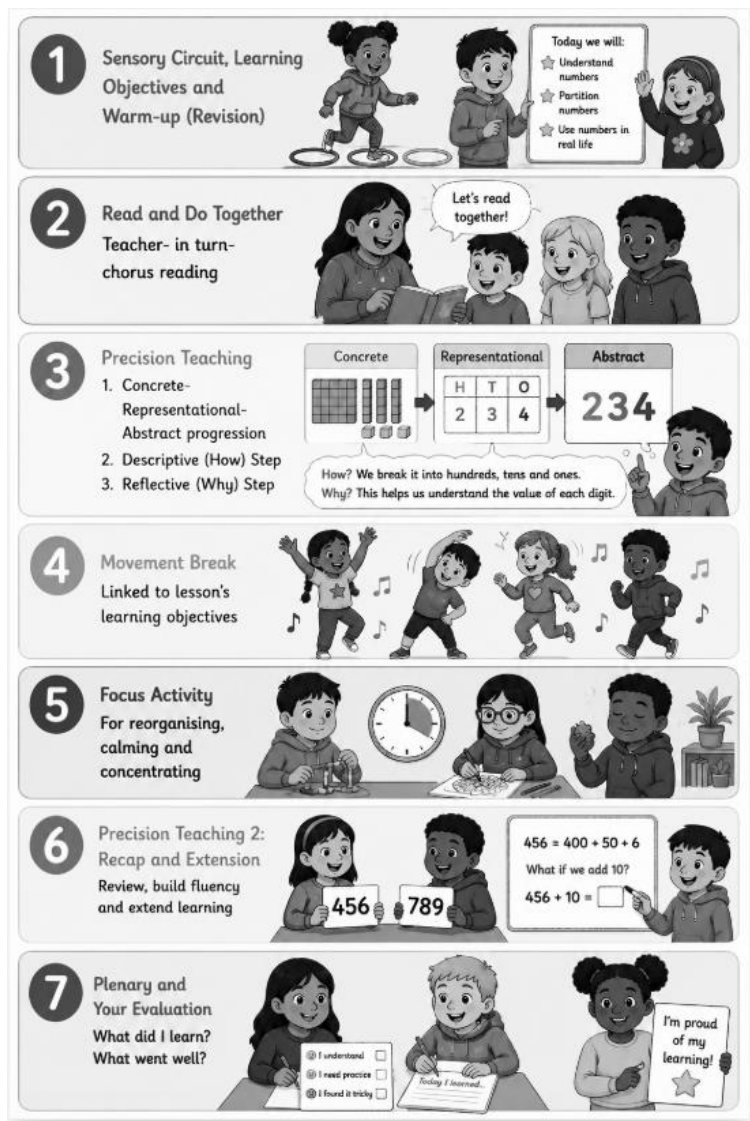
The Learning Cycle is not a rigid script. Some children need longer to settle. Others require additional practice before working independently. Occasionally a lesson may need to pause because anxiety has increased. This is entirely appropriate. The structure remains the same, even if the timing changes.

Remember that your role is not simply to complete today's lesson.

Your role is to help the child enjoy learning enough to look forward to tomorrow's lesson.

That is the true purpose of The Learning Cycle.

Example: A Suggested Learning Cycle for Mathematics



What Precision Teaching Means for a Teaching Assistant

Precision Teaching is a structured, evidence-informed approach to teaching that helps a Teaching Assistant identify exactly what a pupil can do, teach one small skill at a time, and measure progress frequently. Rather than assuming that learning has taken place because a lesson has been completed, Precision Teaching focuses on whether the pupil can perform a specific skill accurately, confidently and independently.

For a Teaching Assistant, Precision Teaching means working with clear, measurable learning targets. The TA begins by identifying the pupil's current level of performance through brief assessment and observation. Learning is then broken down into very small, manageable steps so that the pupil experiences regular success rather than repeated failure.

Each teaching session is short, highly focused and carefully planned. The TA models the new skill, provides guided practice, gives immediate feedback and praise, and then allows the pupil to practise independently. Mistakes are viewed as useful information that helps identify what needs to be taught next, rather than as failures.

An essential feature of Precision Teaching is the regular measurement of progress. The TA records how accurately and fluently the pupil completes the target skill, often using brief one-minute practice activities or other timed observations. These results are recorded so that progress can be seen over time. If progress slows or stops, the teaching approach is adjusted immediately rather than waiting until the end of a term.

Precision Teaching also requires consistency. The same language, prompts, routines and reinforcement are used each day so that

learning becomes predictable and secure. This consistency is particularly valuable for many autistic pupils, who often benefit from structured routines, reduced uncertainty and repeated opportunities to practise new skills.

The role of the Teaching Assistant is therefore not simply to provide support, but to become a careful observer of learning. By collecting evidence, analysing performance and making The Consistent Unit Plan

By small adjustments to teaching, the TA ensures that every session builds directly on previous success. This creates a continuous cycle of **assess, teach, practise, measure and adapt**, allowing the pupil to make steady, measurable progress while developing confidence, independence and long-term retention of learning.

Here's a practical Precision Teaching Checklist designed specifically for Teaching Assistants supporting autistic children. It reflects the core principles of Precision Teaching: pinpointing exactly what is to be learned, measuring performance frequently, providing immediate feedback, and making teaching decisions based on progress. **Available online: www.hannans.org.uk/teachingspectrumchildren**

Precision Teaching Checklist

Supporting Autistic Children in the Classroom

Child: _____

Date: _____

Skill Being Taught: _____

1. Pinpoint the Learning Behaviour

- ☐ The learning target is clearly defined.
- ☐ The skill can be observed.
- ☐ The skill can be measured.
- ☐ Everyone supporting the child understands exactly what success looks like.
- ☐ Only one new skill is being taught at a time.

2. Prepare for Success

- ☐ Child is calm and emotionally regulated.
- ☐ Sensory needs have been considered.
- ☐ Environment is free from unnecessary distractions.
- ☐ Resources are prepared before beginning.
- ☐ Child understands what they are expected to do.

3. Teach the Skill

- ☐ Model the skill first.
- ☐ Give a short, clear instruction.
- ☐ Use visual supports where appropriate.
- ☐ Keep language simple.
- ☐ Provide guided practice.
- ☐ Correct mistakes immediately and positively.
- ☐ Praise effort as well as success.

4. Timed Practice

- ☐ Short practice session (30–60 seconds).
- ☐ Child knows they are aiming to improve their own score.

- ☐ Encourage fluency rather than rushing.
- ☐ Repeat several short practice sessions.

5. Measure Performance

Record

Correct responses: _____

Errors: _____

Time: _____

Notes:

6. Give Immediate Feedback

- ☐ Celebrate success.
- ☐ Show improvement compared with previous attempts.
- ☐ Correct errors immediately.
- ☐ End on a positive experience.

7. Make Teaching Decisions

After today's session...

- ☐ Continue practising the same skill.
- ☐ Increase the level of difficulty.
- ☐ Reduce the level of difficulty.
- ☐ Change the teaching strategy.
- ☐ Introduce additional visual supports.
- ☐ Break the task into smaller steps.
- ☐ Practise again tomorrow.

8. Monitor Progress

Today's performance was:

- ☐ Better than yesterday
- ☐ About the same
- ☐ Needs further support

Comments:

9. Independence Check

Can the child now complete the skill...

Situation	Yes	Nearly	No
With adult support	☐	☐	☐
With a prompt	☐	☐	☐
Independently	☐	☐	☐
In another classroom activity	☐	☐	☐
At another time of day	☐	☐	☐

10. Reflection

What worked particularly well today?

What should I change next time?

Precision Teaching Principles – A Quick Reminder

- ✓ Teach one small skill at a time.
- ✓ Measure progress every session.
- ✓ Celebrate improvement, not perfection.
- ✓ Keep practice short and successful.
- ✓ Make decisions using the child's performance—not assumptions.
- ✓ Build fluency through repetition and confidence.
- ✓ Ensure skills transfer into everyday classroom learning.

Section 4 Reflection Tool

Using the Learning Cycle

Reflect on one lesson you supported this week.

Beginning the Lesson

- ☐ Did I help the child feel calm before learning started?
- ☐ Did I notice how they were feeling?
- ☐ Did we begin with something familiar?

How did the child respond?

Teaching Together

- ☐ Were my explanations short and clear?
- ☐ Did I demonstrate before expecting the child to work independently?
- ☐ Did I work alongside the child before helping them to work independently?

☐ Did I give enough thinking time?

☐ Did I encourage the child to explain their ideas?

What worked particularly well?

Independence

☐ Did I allow the child to think before helping?

☐ Did I reduce my prompts?

☐ Did the child achieve something independently?

☐ Did I avoid taking over?

When did the child surprise me?

Ending the Lesson

- ☐ Did the child leave feeling successful?
- ☐ Did we celebrate progress?
- ☐ Did I finish with encouragement?

What success will the child remember from today?

Tomorrow Morning

Before your next lesson:

- ✓ Spend one minute observing before teaching.
- ✓ Begin with something the child already knows.
- ✓ Keep explanations short and clear.
- ✓ Wait five extra seconds before offering help.
- ✓ Finish by recognising one genuine success.

Remember:

Children rarely remember every activity in a lesson.

They always remember how that lesson made them feel.

Section 5

Recognising Anxiety

Anxiety rarely appears suddenly. It grows quietly, often long before behaviour changes. The trusted adult learns to notice the whispers before they become shouts.

Every teaching assistant has experienced moments when a child suddenly refuses to work, becomes upset or walks away from a lesson. It can feel as though these moments come out of nowhere. In reality, they rarely do. Long before behaviour changes, there are usually small signs that tell us the child is finding things increasingly difficult.

Learning to recognise these signs is one of the most valuable skills you can develop.

Many autistic children experience anxiety differently from other children. School places constant demands upon them. They may be coping with background noise, bright lights, changing routines, unfamiliar vocabulary, social expectations and the fear of making mistakes, all while trying to concentrate on learning. Although these challenges may not be obvious to those around them, they require considerable mental effort.

It is important to remember that anxiety is not bad behaviour. **Anxiety is the brain's way of responding to situations that feel overwhelming or uncertain.** A child who becomes distressed is not choosing to make life difficult for the adults around them. More often, they are telling us that life has become difficult for them.

Outstanding teaching assistants learn to recognise the earliest signs that anxiety is increasing. These signs are different for every child. Some become unusually quiet. Others begin talking more than usual. Some fiddle constantly with objects, ask the same question repeatedly or avoid beginning their work. Others become restless, seek reassurance or lose concentration more quickly than normal.

This is why observation is so important. The more time you spend with a child, the more familiar you become with their individual signs of increasing stress. You begin to notice the small changes that others might miss. You know when a smile is becoming forced, when movement is becoming restless or when silence means the child is working hard to cope rather than concentrating on learning.

The greatest mistake adults make is waiting until behaviour has become obvious before responding. By that stage, the child's anxiety has often become so great that learning is no longer possible. The trusted adult acts much earlier. They quietly reduce demands, simplify language, offer reassurance or suggest a short movement break before the situation becomes overwhelming.

One helpful way of thinking about anxiety is to imagine a thermometer.

At the bottom of the thermometer, the child feels calm, safe and ready to learn. As demands increase, anxiety slowly rises. At first, learning remains possible, but it requires greater effort. If demands continue to increase without support, the child eventually reaches a point where their brain is focused on coping rather than learning.

Your aim is not to prevent all anxiety. Learning always involves some challenge. Instead, your aim is to help the child remain within

what we might call their **Learning Zone—the place where they feel challenged enough to learn but safe enough to keep thinking.**

When you notice anxiety beginning to rise, small changes often make a significant difference. You might reduce the amount of language you use, give one instruction instead of three, offer a visual reminder, allow additional thinking time or simply reassure the child that they are doing well. Sometimes sitting quietly beside them is enough to help them feel safe again.

It is equally important to remember that children notice the emotional state of adults. If you become anxious, frustrated or hurried, the child often senses this immediately. Remaining calm does not mean pretending everything is fine. It means showing the child that you are able to help them through a difficult moment. Your calmness becomes something they can borrow until they are able to regulate themselves again.

When a child does become overwhelmed, resist the temptation to continue teaching. This is not the moment for persuasion, correction or lengthy explanations. Learning has paused. Your role is now to help the child feel safe again. Once they have returned to a calmer state, learning can begin once more.

Every child deserves an adult who notices the first signs of anxiety rather than waiting for distress.

That adult is you.

Section 5 Reflection Tool

Recognising Anxiety

Think about one child you supported this week.

Early Signs

☐ Did I notice the child's earliest signs of anxiety?

☐ What were those signs?

☐ Did I respond early?

☐ Did my response help?

What did I notice?

My Response

☐ Did I remain calm?

☐ Did I reduce demands?

☐ Did I simplify my language?

☐ Did I allow extra thinking time?

☐ Did I reassure the child?

Which strategy worked best?

Reflection

Today I learned that this child's anxiety often increases when...

Today I helped the child feel safe by...

Next time I will notice...

Tomorrow Morning

Before your next lesson:

- ✓ Watch the child for the first five minutes before making assumptions.
- ✓ Notice one early sign that tells you how they are feeling.
- ✓ Use fewer words than you normally would.
- ✓ Reduce one unnecessary demand.
- ✓ Remember that behaviour is communication.

A Thought to Remember

Children do not always need us to solve the problem immediately.

Sometimes they simply need us to help them feel safe enough to solve it with us.

Section 6

Making Learning Easier, Not Simpler

Reducing Cognitive Load

"The aim is not to make learning easier. The aim is to make unnecessary thinking disappear so that children can use their minds for learning."

One of the greatest misunderstandings in education is the belief that if a child is struggling, the work must be made easier. Sometimes that is true. More often, however, the problem is not the difficulty of the learning but the number of things the child is being asked to think about at the same time.

Imagine that you are trying to solve a difficult puzzle while someone is talking to you, music is playing loudly, several people are walking around the room and someone keeps giving you new instructions before you have finished the last one. The puzzle has not become more difficult, but solving it certainly has.

For many autistic learners, this is what school can sometimes feel like.

Children may be trying to understand new learning while remembering several spoken instructions, filtering out background noise, coping with bright displays, organising equipment, managing social expectations and worrying about getting the answer wrong.

Each of these demands competes for the same limited mental resources.

As a teaching assistant, one of your most important jobs is not to reduce challenge but to reduce unnecessary demands.

This begins with language. Adults often speak far more than they realise. We explain, remind, repeat, clarify and encourage, all with the best intentions. Yet every sentence places another demand on the child's working memory. Instead of giving several instructions together, try giving one instruction, waiting for it to be completed and then introducing the next. You may find that the child becomes more successful with far less prompting.

The learning environment also deserves attention. Look carefully at the child's workspace. Is it cluttered with unnecessary equipment? Are there several worksheets visible at once? Is the child surrounded by distractions that have nothing to do with the task? A tidy workspace often creates a calmer mind.

Think about the resources you use. A crowded worksheet with small print, unnecessary pictures and too much information can overwhelm children before they even begin. Whenever possible, present one task at a time. **Cover parts of the page that are not yet needed.** Allow the child's attention to focus on one thing rather than many.

Time is another important consideration. Some autistic learners need a little longer to think. Adults sometimes mistake silence for confusion and quickly repeat the question or provide the answer. In reality, the child may simply be processing the information. Waiting patiently often produces far better learning than speaking again too soon.

Children also benefit from seeing what success looks like. Before expecting independent work, demonstrate the task. Show the finished example. Think aloud as you solve the problem. Hidden thinking becomes visible. Many autistic learners find this far easier than trying to work out what adults expect from vague instructions.

Another simple strategy is to reduce the number of choices. Too much choice can become overwhelming. Instead of asking, *"Which activity would you like to do?"* you might ask, *"Would you like to start with the tractor activity or the farm activity?"* The child still experiences choice, but within clear boundaries.

Perhaps the most important question to ask yourself throughout every lesson is:

"What can I remove?"

Can I remove one instruction?

Can I remove one distraction?

Can I remove one unnecessary explanation?

Can I remove one worry?

Small changes often make the greatest difference.

Reducing cognitive load does not lower expectations. The learning remains ambitious. Children continue to tackle challenging ideas, solve difficult problems and develop new skills. The difference is that their minds are free to concentrate on the learning itself rather than everything surrounding it.

Outstanding teaching assistants are constantly looking for unnecessary barriers and quietly removing them before they become obstacles.

That is one of the simplest and most powerful ways to help autistic learners succeed.

Section 6 Reflection Tool

Making Learning Easier, Not Simpler

Think about one lesson you supported this week.

My Language

- ☐ Did I give one instruction at a time?
- ☐ Did I pause long enough for the child to think?
- ☐ Did I avoid over-explaining?
- ☐ Did I check that the child understood before moving on?

What change in my language helped most?

The Learning Environment

- ☐ Was the child's workspace tidy?
- ☐ Were distractions reduced?

- ☐ Were only the resources needed for this task available?
- ☐ Did the child appear calmer because of the environment?

What unnecessary distraction could I remove next time?

The Task

- ☐ Did I demonstrate before expecting independence?
- ☐ Did I break the task into smaller steps?
- ☐ Did I allow enough thinking time?
- ☐ Did I keep expectations high while reducing unnecessary demands?

Which part of the lesson became easier for the child?

Reflection

Today I realised that the child struggled because...

Tomorrow I will reduce cognitive load by...

Tomorrow Morning

Before your next lesson:

- ✓ Give one instruction instead of three.
- ✓ Remove one unnecessary item from the child's workspace.
- ✓ Wait five extra seconds before speaking again.
- ✓ Demonstrate before expecting the child to work independently.
- ✓ Ask yourself:

"Am I making the learning difficult, or am I making everything around the learning difficult?"

A Thought to Remember

Children rarely need more information.

They usually need clearer information.

And sometimes...

They simply need less.

Section 7

Helping Without Taking Over

Growing Independence

“The greatest success of a teaching assistant is not that the child always needs them. It is that, over time, the child needs them less.”

Every teaching assistant wants the children they support to succeed. It is natural to step in when a child is struggling, to offer the answer when they become stuck or to complete part of a task so that they experience success. These actions come from kindness and a genuine desire to help.

However, there is an important question that every trusted adult should ask themselves:

"Am I helping this child succeed today, or am I helping them succeed tomorrow?"

Sometimes the two are not the same.

Imagine a child who is trying to fasten their coat. It would be quicker for an adult to do it. The child would leave the classroom sooner and there would be no frustration. Yet if this happened every day, the child would never have the opportunity to develop the skill themselves. The short-term success would create long-term dependence.

The same principle applies in the classroom.

When a child hesitates before answering a question, it can be tempting to supply the answer. When they struggle to begin a piece of writing, we may suggest the opening sentence. When they pause during mathematics, we may point immediately to the next step. Although these actions solve the immediate problem, they also remove the opportunity for the child to think.

Thinking is hard work.

Learning depends upon it.

Children become independent not because adults always help them, but because adults know when to wait.

One of the greatest gifts you can give an autistic learner is time.

Time to process.

Time to think.

Time to remember.

Time to try.

Many autistic children need longer to organise their thoughts than adults expect. Silence is often uncomfortable for us. We assume the child is stuck and quickly intervene. Yet very often the child is simply thinking. Waiting another five or ten seconds may be all that is needed for them to solve the problem independently.

Helping without taking over also means choosing the smallest prompt that will allow the child to continue. Rather than giving the answer, you might point to a visual reminder, ask a simple question

or encourage the child to recall something they learned yesterday. Each small prompt allows the child to remain the person doing the thinking.

As confidence grows, support should gradually reduce. At first you may model every step. Later you work alongside the child. Eventually you observe from a short distance while remaining available if needed. Independence develops through this gradual release rather than through sudden withdrawal of support.

It is important to remember that independence does not mean leaving children to struggle alone. Knowing when to step in is just as important as knowing when to step back. If anxiety is rising, if the child has misunderstood the task completely or if frustration is becoming overwhelming, timely support protects confidence and keeps learning moving forward.

Praise also plays an important part in developing independence. Rather than praising only correct answers, notice the behaviours that lead to learning. Praise the child for trying a different strategy, checking their own work, asking for help appropriately or persevering when something feels difficult. These are the habits that create lifelong learners.

Mistakes should never be seen as failures. They are evidence that the child is thinking. When children know that mistakes are accepted as a normal part of learning, they become more willing to take risks and attempt unfamiliar tasks. Confidence grows because success is no longer the only acceptable outcome.

One of the most rewarding moments in education is hearing a child say, "I did it myself."

That moment rarely happens by accident.

It is the result of hundreds of thoughtful decisions by adults who chose not to help too quickly.

As a teaching assistant, remember that your purpose is not to become indispensable.

Your purpose is to help the child become increasingly independent.

That is one of the greatest gifts you can ever give.

Section 7 Reflection

Helping Without Taking Over

Think about one child you supported this week.

My Support

- ☐ Did I allow enough thinking time?
- ☐ Did I avoid giving answers too quickly?
- ☐ Did I use prompts instead of solutions?
- ☐ Did I encourage the child to solve problems independently?

When did waiting help the child succeed?

Encouraging Independence

- ☐ Did the child complete part of the task without my help?
- ☐ Did I reduce the number of prompts I gave?
- ☐ Did I praise effort and perseverance?

☐ Did I notice growing confidence?

What independence did I see today?

My Reflection

Today I probably helped too quickly when...

Today I successfully stepped back when...

Next time I will...

Tomorrow Morning

Before your next lesson:

- ✓ Wait five extra seconds before offering help.
- ✓ Give one prompt instead of one answer.
- ✓ Celebrate one thing the child does independently.
- ✓ Ask, "What could you try first?"
- ✓ At the end of the lesson ask yourself:

"Did I do anything today that the child could have done for themselves?"

If the answer is yes, think about how you might encourage them to do it next time.

A Thought to Remember

Children become confident when they discover what they can do for themselves.

Every time you step back at the right moment...

you help them step forward.

Section 8

Using Interests to Unlock Learning

When we teach through a child's interests, we are not changing the curriculum. We are changing the pathway into it.

Every child has interests.

Some enjoy football.

Others love music, animals, stories or art.

Many autistic children develop particularly strong interests that can become a remarkable source of motivation, enjoyment and learning. These interests are sometimes described as "special interests", but they are much more than favourite hobbies. They are often the subjects that make children curious, attentive and eager to learn.

As teaching assistants, we have a choice.

We can see these interests as distractions from learning.

Or we can use them as bridges into learning.

Outstanding teaching assistants choose the second approach.

Think about a child who loves tractors. That interest can become the starting point for mathematics by counting wheels, comparing sizes, measuring distances travelled or calculating how much fuel is needed

for a day's work. Reading can involve books about farming. Writing can include instructions for driving a tractor or keeping a farmer's diary. Science can explore how engines work or how crops grow. Geography can involve maps of farms and fields.

The curriculum has not changed.

The context has.

The same is true for children fascinated by trains, dinosaurs, space, weather, animals, computers or maps. Almost every area of learning can be connected to something the child already enjoys. When this happens, attention increases naturally because the child is learning through something that already has meaning.

Using interests does not mean talking about the same topic all day. The purpose is not to narrow learning but to broaden it. Interests provide a familiar starting point from which new ideas can be introduced. A child interested in trains may begin by reading railway timetables, then move on to time, distance, geography, engineering and eventually history. One interest opens the door to many new areas of knowledge.

Teaching assistants often know a great deal about the children's interests because they spend so much time talking with them. Those conversations are valuable. Listen carefully when children describe their favourite activities. Notice the books they choose, the toys they return to and the topics that make their eyes light up. These observations provide important clues about how future learning can become more engaging.

It is important to use interests thoughtfully. Simply putting a picture of a dinosaur on a worksheet does not necessarily make learning

more meaningful. The interest should genuinely become part of the activity. If the child loves animals, let them count animals, write about animals, research animals or solve problems involving animals. The interest should help the child think, not simply decorate the page.

Interests can also become powerful rewards. After completing a challenging piece of work, a child might spend a few minutes reading about their favourite topic, drawing something they enjoy or sharing a fact they have recently discovered. This helps children see learning as something positive rather than something that simply has to be endured.

At the same time, remember that children are more than their interests. Continue introducing new experiences, new books, new activities and new ideas. Interests should become bridges to a wider world, not walls that keep learning within narrow limits.

One of the greatest joys of working with autistic learners is seeing the depth of knowledge they often develop about the things they love. As adults, we should celebrate this curiosity. It demonstrates persistence, attention to detail and a genuine desire to understand the world.

When we respect a child's interests, we also show respect for the child.

That respect strengthens relationships.

Strong relationships increase motivation.

Motivated children learn more successfully.

Never underestimate the educational power of teaching through something a child genuinely loves.

It may be the shortest route to successful learning.

Section 8 Reflection

Using Interests to Support Learning

Think about one child you support.

Discovering Interests

- ☐ Can I name three things this child genuinely enjoys?
- ☐ Have I asked the child about their interests?
- ☐ Have I spoken to parents about what motivates them?
- ☐ Do I understand why these interests matter to the child?

What excites this child most?

Using Interests

- ☐ Did I include one of the child's interests in today's learning?
- ☐ Did it increase attention?

☐ Did it increase motivation?

☐ Did the child appear more confident?

How did the child's interest improve learning?

Reflection

Today I discovered...

Next time I could use this interest to teach...

Tomorrow Morning

Before your next lesson:

- ✓ Ask the child about something they enjoy.
 - ✓ Use one example linked to that interest.
 - ✓ Notice whether attention lasts longer.
 - ✓ Praise curiosity as well as correct answers.
 - ✓ Finish the lesson by asking the child what they enjoyed most.
-

A Thought to Remember

Children pay attention to what matters to them.

Our job is not to compete with their interests.

Our job is to teach through them.

Section 9

The Language of Teaching

The most effective teaching assistants are not those who say the most. They are those who choose their words most carefully.

One of the greatest tools available to a teaching assistant is not found in a cupboard or on a shelf. It is the language they use every day.

Every instruction, every question, every word of encouragement and every explanation either helps a child understand or unintentionally makes learning more difficult. For many autistic learners, spoken language requires considerable mental effort. They are not simply listening to what we say. They are trying to process it, remember it, understand what we mean and decide what they need to do next.

The more carefully we choose our words, the easier we make learning.

Many adults naturally explain too much. We want children to understand, so we add another explanation, another reminder and another example. Although well intentioned, too many words can overwhelm a child's working memory. By the time we reach the end of our explanation, the child may already have forgotten the beginning.

Good communication is often shorter than we think.

Instead of saying,

"When you've finished writing your name, I'd like you to look at the first question and remember what we did yesterday before you begin because afterwards we're going to talk about the answers together."

Try saying,

"Write your name."

Wait.

"Now read Question One."

Wait.

"Tell me what you think."

Each instruction is clear. Each instruction gives the child time to think before another demand is added.

Another important skill is allowing processing time. Many autistic learners need a little longer to organise their thoughts before answering. Adults often find silence uncomfortable and quickly repeat the question or answer it themselves. Unfortunately, this removes the child's opportunity to think.

A useful habit is to silently count to five after asking a question.

You may be surprised how often the child answers just before you are tempted to speak again.

The words we choose also matter. Some everyday expressions can be confusing because they are not meant literally. Phrases such as *"Pull your socks up," "Keep your eyes peeled,"* or *"Get your skates on"*

may make perfect sense to many children but can be puzzling for others. Whenever possible, use language that says exactly what you mean.

Instead of saying,

"Can you get yourself sorted?"

try,

"Please put your reading book on the table and pick up your pencil."

Specific language reduces uncertainty.

Questions are another powerful teaching tool. Good questions encourage children to think rather than simply guess. Instead of asking,

"Do you understand?"

try asking,

"Can you show me what you need to do first?"

This gives you much better information about what the child has actually understood.

The way we praise children is equally important. General praise such as *"Good boy"* or *"Well done"* is encouraging, but specific praise teaches children what they did successfully.

Instead of saying,

"Well done,"

you might say,

"You kept trying even when that question was difficult."

or

"I noticed that you checked your work before answering."

Specific praise encourages children to repeat successful learning behaviours.

The tone of our voice also communicates important messages. Children notice whether we sound calm, patient, hurried or frustrated. A calm voice reassures children that they are safe and supported. Even when lessons become difficult, your tone can help maintain the child's confidence.

Perhaps the most powerful communication skill of all is listening.

Not simply listening to words.

Listening to pauses.

Listening to behaviour.

Listening to facial expressions.

Listening to silence.

Sometimes what a child does not say tells us far more than the words they use.

The trusted adult speaks thoughtfully, listens carefully and remembers that every conversation is an opportunity to strengthen both understanding and relationships.

Children may forget many of the words we use.

They rarely forget how those words made them feel.

Choose your words with care.

They are among the most powerful teaching resources you possess.

Section 9 Reflection

The Language of Teaching

Think about your conversations with one child this week.

Giving Instructions

- ☐ Did I give one instruction at a time?
- ☐ Did I use simple, clear language?
- ☐ Did I pause before speaking again?
- ☐ Did the child understand what I meant?

Which instruction worked particularly well?

Asking Questions

- ☐ Did I ask questions that encouraged thinking?
- ☐ Did I allow enough processing time?
- ☐ Did I avoid answering my own questions?

☐ Did I listen carefully to the child's response?

What did I learn from the child's answers?

Encouraging the Child

☐ Did I praise effort as well as success?

☐ Was my praise specific?

☐ Did my words increase confidence?

☐ Did I remain calm throughout the lesson?

Which words encouraged the child most?

Reflection

This week I realised that...

Next week I will change my language by...

Tomorrow Morning

Before your next lesson:

- ✓ Give one instruction at a time.
- ✓ Wait at least five seconds after asking a question.
- ✓ Replace one long explanation with a short demonstration.
- ✓ Give one piece of specific praise.
- ✓ Ask yourself:

"Did my words help the child think, or did they simply give the child more to think about?"

A Thought to Remember

Children do not always need more words.

They need words that are clearer, calmer and kinder.

Sometimes...

the most powerful teaching happens during the silence after the question.

Section 10

Observe Before You Intervene

The best teaching assistants are not those who react the quickest. They are those who observe the most carefully.

One of the greatest mistakes adults make is believing they must respond immediately to every difficulty. A child hesitates before beginning their work, so we explain again. A child looks away from the page, so we remind them to concentrate. A child becomes restless, so we ask them to sit still. Although these responses are often well intentioned, they sometimes solve the wrong problem because we have not first understood what is happening.

Outstanding teaching assistants develop a different habit.

They observe before they intervene.

Observation is far more than simply watching. It is the process of gathering information that helps us understand what the child is experiencing. It requires patience, curiosity and a willingness to avoid making quick assumptions. Instead of asking, "*What should I do?*" the trusted adult first asks, "*What is this child trying to tell me?*"

Many behaviours can have several different causes. A child who refuses to begin writing may not be unwilling to work. They may be anxious about making mistakes. They may not understand the instructions. They may be overwhelmed by the amount of writing expected. They may be tired. They may be struggling to hold the pencil comfortably. Until we understand the reason, our support is simply guesswork.

Good observation begins with noticing patterns. Does the child become anxious during writing but remain confident during mathematics? Do they work better in the morning than in the afternoon? Are transitions particularly difficult? Does background noise affect concentration? The answers to these questions help us predict difficulties before they happen and plan support more effectively.

It is equally important to notice strengths. Too often adults spend most of their time looking for problems. Outstanding teaching assistants deliberately look for success. They notice the moment a child begins work independently, asks for help appropriately, remembers yesterday's learning or shows kindness towards another child. These observations are just as valuable as identifying difficulties because they tell us what should be encouraged and celebrated.

Observation also means noticing the learning environment. Sometimes the difficulty is not the child but the conditions in which they are expected to learn. Is the room becoming noisy? Is the worksheet confusing? Are there too many resources on the table? Has the routine changed unexpectedly? Looking beyond the child often reveals barriers that can be removed quickly and easily.

One useful question to ask throughout the day is:

"What changed?"

Children rarely become anxious or distracted without a reason. Something usually changes first. It may be the task, the environment, the language being used or the expectations placed upon them. Finding that change often provides the key to understanding.

Observation is also about noticing progress. Educational growth is often gradual and can easily be overlooked. A child who needed ten reminders last week may need only six today. Another who refused to answer questions may now attempt one or two. These changes may appear small, but they represent genuine development. Great teaching assistants celebrate these moments because they understand that lasting success is built one small step at a time.

Sharing observations with the class teacher is another important part of your role. Teachers cannot see everything while leading a class of thirty children. Your observations may provide information that changes tomorrow's lesson or helps explain why a child has struggled. Clear, objective observations are far more helpful than opinions. Instead of saying, *"He was lazy today,"* you might say, *"He looked at the worksheet for three minutes before beginning and asked for reassurance four times."* Facts help teachers make informed decisions.

Observation should also include yourself. At the end of the lesson, ask whether your own actions helped or hindered learning. Did you speak too much? Did you intervene too quickly? Did you allow enough thinking time? Professional growth begins when we become curious about our own practice as well as the child's learning.

The trusted adult understands that observation is not something separate from teaching.

Observation is teaching.

The more carefully you observe today, the better you can support tomorrow.

Never rush to solve a problem before you have taken time to understand it.

Understanding always comes first.

Section 10 Reflection

Observe Before You Intervene

Reflect on one child you supported this week.

Watching Carefully

- ☐ Did I observe before stepping in?
- ☐ Did I notice patterns in the child's learning?
- ☐ Did I identify what happened before the difficulty occurred?
- ☐ Did I avoid making quick assumptions?

What surprised me this week?

Noticing Strengths

- ☐ Did I notice small successes?
- ☐ Did I praise growing independence?
- ☐ Did I recognise effort as well as achievement?

☐ Did I record positive observations?

What made me smile this week?

Sharing Information

☐ Did I share useful observations with the teacher?

☐ Were my observations factual?

☐ Did my observations help improve future learning?

☐ Did I work as part of the team?

What information was most valuable?

Reflection

Today I realised...

The next thing I want to observe is...

Tomorrow Morning

Before your next lesson:

- ✓ Spend one minute simply watching before intervening.
- ✓ Look for one strength as well as one difficulty.
- ✓ Ask yourself, "*What changed?*" whenever a child struggles.
- ✓ Record one factual observation.
- ✓ Share one useful observation with the class teacher.

A Thought to Remember

Good teaching begins with good observation.

The more carefully you observe...

the less often you need to guess.

Section 11

Working Together

Building One Team Around the Child

"No single adult has all the answers. The greatest progress happens when everyone works together with the child at the centre."

No child is educated by one person alone.

Every successful school day is the result of many adults working together. Class teachers, teaching assistants, parents, school leaders, therapists and support staff all contribute something valuable to a child's learning. Each sees the child in different situations, notices different strengths and recognises different challenges. When these observations are shared, a much richer understanding of the child begins to emerge.

As a teaching assistant, you are an important part of this team.

You may spend more one-to-one time with the child than anyone else in school. You see the small moments that others may miss. You notice when confidence is beginning to grow, when anxiety is slowly increasing or when a new strategy has been particularly successful. These observations are valuable because they help the whole team understand how best to support the child.

Working as a team begins with communication. Good communication is clear, respectful and focused on helping the child succeed. Before lessons begin, take time to understand the teacher's learning objectives. Ask questions if anything is unclear. At the end

of the lesson, share what you observed. Rather than simply saying that a lesson went well or badly, explain what you noticed.

You might say,

"Oscar completed the first three questions independently but became uncertain when the language became more complicated."

or,

"He remained engaged for much longer when we used the farm pictures."

These observations provide information that can improve future planning.

Objective observations are particularly valuable. Describe what you saw rather than what you think it meant. Instead of saying,

"She wasn't trying,"

you might say,

"She looked at the worksheet for two minutes before beginning and asked for reassurance five times."

Facts encourage discussion.

Assumptions can sometimes prevent it.

Parents are another vital part of the team. No one knows a child better than the people who live with them every day. Parents often understand what motivates their child, what causes anxiety and

which strategies have been successful at home. Listening carefully to families helps school staff build a much more complete picture of the learner.

Parents also appreciate hearing positive news. Too often communication between home and school focuses only on problems. A short conversation about a child's success, growing confidence or kind behaviour can mean a great deal to families. These moments strengthen trust and remind parents that school notices the whole child, not simply the difficulties.

Working together also means respecting one another's professional roles. The class teacher is responsible for planning learning and leading the classroom. The teaching assistant contributes through careful observation, skilled support and thoughtful communication. Neither role is more important than the other. They are different responsibilities working towards the same goal.

Sometimes adults will have different opinions about the best way to support a child. This is perfectly normal. The trusted adult remains open-minded, listens respectfully and keeps the child's needs at the centre of every discussion. The question is never,

"Who is right?"

The question is,

"What is most likely to help this child?"

Children quickly notice when adults work well together. Consistent language, shared expectations and similar routines create a sense of security. If one adult expects one thing while another expects

something different, the child must continually adapt. Consistency reduces uncertainty and helps children feel safe.

Remember that the child is also a member of the team. Whenever possible, involve them in conversations about their learning. Ask what helps them concentrate, what makes learning easier and what they are proud of. Children often provide valuable insights that adults may never have considered.

At the heart of successful teamwork lies a simple belief.

Every adult wants the child to succeed.

When adults share observations, respect one another's expertise and work together with kindness and professionalism, children experience a consistent, supportive environment in which they can flourish.

The trusted adult never works alone.

They are part of a team.

And together, that team can change a child's future.

Section 11 Reflection

Working Together

Reflect on your work with colleagues and families this week.

Working with the Teacher

- ☐ Did I understand the lesson objectives?
- ☐ Did I communicate clearly before and after the lesson?
- ☐ Did I share useful observations?
- ☐ Did I work as part of the teaching team?

What useful information did I share?

Working with Parents

- ☐ Did I notice something positive that could be shared?
- ☐ Did I value parents' knowledge of their child?
- ☐ Did I remember that parents are important partners?

☐ Did I think about the child's experiences beyond school?

What could I learn from this family?

Working Together

☐ Did I respect the views of others?

☐ Did I keep the child's needs at the centre?

☐ Did we work consistently?

☐ Did our teamwork help the child succeed?

What did good teamwork achieve this week?

Reflection

This week I learned from another adult by...

Next week I will contribute to the team by...

Tomorrow Morning

Before your next lesson:

- ✓ Check that you understand the learning objective.
- ✓ Decide on one thing you want to observe.
- ✓ Share one positive observation with the teacher.
- ✓ Look for one success to celebrate with the child.
- ✓ Remember that every conversation should help the child, not simply describe the child.

A Thought to Remember

Great schools are not built by great individuals.

They are built by great teams.

And every member of the team has something valuable to contribute.

Section 12

Looking After Yourself

The Most Important Resource in the Classroom

The greatest resource in any classroom is not the technology, the equipment or the curriculum. It is the people. To care well for children, we must also care well for ourselves.

Teaching assistants give a great deal of themselves every day.

They encourage children when learning feels difficult. They celebrate successes that others may not notice. They remain calm when emotions are running high, patiently explain the same idea several times and quietly support children through moments of anxiety, frustration and uncertainty.

This work is deeply rewarding.

It can also be emotionally demanding.

Supporting autistic learners requires patience, concentration, empathy and resilience. There will be days when everything seems to go well and you leave school smiling. There will also be days when lessons do not go to plan, when children become distressed or when progress feels slower than you had hoped. These experiences are a normal part of working with children. They do not mean that you have failed.

One of the most important things to remember is that you do not have to be perfect.

Children do not need perfect adults.

They need adults who are kind, patient and willing to keep learning.

Every experienced teaching assistant has made mistakes. Every experienced teaching assistant has had lessons that could have gone better. Professional growth does not come from never making mistakes. It comes from reflecting on them honestly and using them to become even more effective tomorrow.

Looking after yourself begins with recognising your own emotional wellbeing. Notice how you are feeling. If you arrive at school tired, worried or overwhelmed, acknowledge it rather than ignoring it. Children often notice our emotional state long before we say anything. Taking a few moments to pause, organise your thoughts and begin the day calmly helps both you and the children you support.

Reflection is another important habit. At the end of each day, ask yourself three simple questions.

What went well?

What did I learn?

What will I try differently tomorrow?

These questions encourage growth rather than self-criticism. They remind us that every day provides another opportunity to become a more skilled trusted adult.

Remember that you are part of a team. If you are unsure about something, ask. If you need advice, seek it. If a situation has been

particularly challenging, talk it through with a colleague or the class teacher. Sharing experiences helps us develop professionally and reminds us that we are not expected to solve every problem alone.

Continue learning whenever opportunities arise. Read books. Attend training. Observe experienced colleagues. Ask questions. Reflect on new ideas. The most effective teaching assistants are lifelong learners. Their willingness to keep developing benefits every child they support.

It is equally important to celebrate your own successes. We often remember the difficult moments and forget the many positive ones. Think about the child who smiled because they finally understood a new idea, the learner who completed a task independently for the first time or the anxious child who felt safe enough to ask for help. These moments matter. They are evidence that your work is making a difference.

Never underestimate the influence of small acts of kindness. A warm greeting, a patient explanation, a reassuring smile or a quiet word of encouragement may seem insignificant at the time. Yet these are often the moments children remember most clearly. They are the moments that build trust.

Above all, remember why you chose this profession.

You chose to help children.

You chose to encourage learning.

You chose to make a difference.

Some days that difference will be obvious.

Other days you may not see it at all.

But every calm conversation, every thoughtful observation and every moment of patience contributes to a child's educational journey.

The seeds you plant today may not become visible for months or even years.

That does not make them any less important.

The trusted adult understands that changing lives rarely happens through one extraordinary event.

It happens through ordinary moments, repeated with extraordinary care.

Be proud of the work you do.

It matters.

Section 12 Reflection

Looking After Yourself

Take a few minutes to reflect on your own wellbeing.

Looking Back

- ☐ What achievement am I most proud of this week?
- ☐ Which child made me smile?
- ☐ What have I learned?
- ☐ What would I like to improve?

My proudest moment this week was...

Looking After Myself

- ☐ Did I ask for help when I needed it?
- ☐ Did I take time to reflect?
- ☐ Did I celebrate success?

☐ Did I remember that I cannot solve every problem alone?

What helped me remain calm this week?

Looking Forward

☐ What do I want to learn next?

☐ Which professional skill would I like to develop?

☐ What will I do differently next week?

☐ How will I continue becoming a trusted adult?

One promise I will make to myself is...

Tomorrow Morning

Before you begin your day:

✓ Take one slow, calm breath before greeting the children.

✓ Remember one success from yesterday.

✓ Decide on one professional skill you will practise today.

✓ Ask for help if you need it.

✓ Finish the day by recognising one difference you made.

A Thought to Remember

Children do not need superheroes.

They need caring adults who keep learning.

Every day you choose patience...

Every day you choose kindness...

Every day you choose hope...

You are changing someone's future.

APPENDIX 1

The Twenty Golden Principles of the Trusted Adult

Great teaching is rarely about doing extraordinary things. It is about doing ordinary things exceptionally well, every single day.

The principles in this section bring together everything explored throughout this course. They are not rules that must be followed perfectly, nor are they a checklist to complete. They are reminders of the values and practices that help autistic learners feel safe, confident and successful.

Read them often.

Reflect upon them regularly.

Allow them to guide your thinking.

Above all, remember that becoming a trusted adult is not something that happens in a single day. It develops through hundreds of small decisions made with patience, kindness and professional skill.

1. Relationship Comes Before Learning

Children learn best from adults they trust. Before expecting children to take risks in their learning, help them feel safe in your presence.

Remember: *Trust is the foundation of learning.*

2. Understand Before You Support

Take time to understand the child before deciding how to help. Every learner is unique.

Remember: *The child is never the problem to be solved. The child is the person to be understood.*

3. Observe Before You Intervene

Watch carefully before stepping in. Good observation almost always leads to better decisions.

Remember: *Understanding comes before action.*

4. Anxiety Comes Before Behaviour

Behaviour often tells us that anxiety has already been rising for some time.

Notice the early signs.

Respond early.

Remember: *Behaviour is communication.*

5. Calm Adults Help Children Feel Calm

Children notice our emotions.

Your calm voice, steady manner and reassuring presence help children borrow your regulation until they develop their own.

Remember: *Your calmness is one of your greatest teaching tools.*

6. Prepare the Child Before the Lesson

Learning begins long before the teaching starts.

Prepare the environment.

Prepare yourself.

Prepare the child.

Remember: *Readiness comes before learning.*

7. Make Learning Easier, Not Simpler

Keep expectations high while removing unnecessary barriers.

Reduce distractions.

Reduce confusion.

Reduce unnecessary demands.

Remember: *Challenge the learning, not the learner.*

8. Give One Instruction at a Time

Small steps create confident learners.

Avoid overwhelming working memory.

Pause often.

Allow children time to think.

Remember: *Clear thinking begins with clear instructions.*

9. Wait Before You Help

Thinking takes time.

Children often need a few extra seconds before responding.

Silence is not failure.

Silence is often learning.

Remember: *Patience creates independence.*

10. Never Do for a Child What They Can Do for Themselves

Support should gradually reduce as confidence grows.

Help children discover their own abilities.

Remember: *Today's independence begins with yesterday's encouragement.*

11. Celebrate Small Successes

Progress is often made in tiny steps.

Notice them.

Celebrate them.

Build upon them.

Remember: *Small successes become great achievements.*

12. Use Interests to Unlock Learning

Children pay attention to what matters to them.

Use their interests as pathways into new knowledge.

Remember: *Motivation opens the door to learning.*

13. Speak Less, Communicate More Clearly

Children do not always need more words.

They need clearer words.

Choose your language carefully.

Remember: *Simple language supports successful learning.*

14. Mistakes Are Part of Learning

Children learn through trying.

Mistakes are opportunities to think differently.

Protect confidence while encouraging perseverance.

Remember: *Every mistake teaches something.*

15. Build Independence Every Day

Ask yourself regularly,

"Can I step back a little today?"

Confidence grows when children experience success for themselves.

Remember: *The greatest support is helping children no longer need your support.*

16. Work as One Team

Teachers.

Teaching assistants.

Parents.

Therapists.

Children.

Everyone has something valuable to contribute.

Remember: *The child succeeds when the adults work together.*

17. Keep Learning Yourself

Outstanding teaching assistants never stop learning.

Read.

Observe.

Reflect.

Ask questions.

Grow.

Remember: *The best professionals remain lifelong learners.*

18. Protect the Child's Dignity

Correct quietly.

Encourage often.

Never allow a child to feel embarrassed because they found something difficult.

Remember: *Children should always leave with their self-respect intact.*

19. End Every Day with Hope

No matter how difficult today has been, tomorrow offers another opportunity to succeed.

Children need adults who continue believing in them.

Remember: *Hope is one of education's greatest gifts.*

20. Be the Trusted Adult

Long after worksheets have been forgotten...

Long after lessons have ended...

Long after school has finished...

Children remember how adults made them feel.

Choose to be remembered for your kindness.

Your patience.

Your encouragement.

Your belief in every child's potential.

Remember: *You may never know how much your calm presence changes a child's life.*

If you remember only one thing from this course, let it be this:

Every autistic child deserves at least one adult in school who understands them, believes in them and helps them feel safe enough to learn.

That adult does not have to be perfect.

They simply need to be patient.

Curious.

Consistent.

Kind.

Every day you greet a child warmly...

Every day you wait a little longer...

Every day you notice a small success...

Every day you quietly encourage independence...

You are helping to build a future that may look very different because you were there.

Thank you for choosing to become a Trusted Adult.

The children you support may never fully realise how much you have done for them.

But they will always remember how you made them feel.

And that may be the greatest lesson of all.

A Final Word

As you reach the end of this course, I hope you will have discovered that becoming a trusted adult is not about learning a collection of techniques or following a set of rules. It is about developing a way of thinking. It is about seeing the child before the behaviour, understanding before judging and building relationships before expecting learning. It is about recognising that every interaction, no matter how small, has the potential to strengthen a child's confidence and belief in themselves.

Throughout these sections, we have explored practical ways of supporting autistic learners: preparing children for learning, reducing unnecessary cognitive demands, recognising anxiety, encouraging independence, communicating clearly and using children's interests to increase motivation. These strategies matter because they make learning more accessible. However, none of them is as powerful as the relationship in which they are delivered. Children rarely remember every worksheet they completed or every lesson they attended, but they often remember the adults who helped them feel safe, capable and valued.

There will be days when everything seems to go well. A child who once refused to attempt a task will complete it independently. A learner who struggled to enter the classroom will walk in smiling. A child who found change overwhelming will begin to cope with increasing confidence. These moments are deeply rewarding because they remind us why this work matters.

There will also be days that are more difficult. There will be lessons that do not go as planned, moments when anxiety seems overwhelming and times when progress feels frustratingly slow.

During those moments, remember that meaningful change in education is rarely dramatic. It is usually the result of hundreds of small, thoughtful interactions repeated consistently over time. Every encouraging word, every patient pause, every calm response and every moment of understanding becomes another small brick in the foundations of a child's confidence.

Never underestimate the influence you have. The children you support may not remember every mathematical method you practised together or every reading book you shared, but they will remember how you treated them when learning was difficult. They will remember whether you believed in them, whether you remained calm when they were anxious and whether you celebrated their successes, however small they seemed. These memories shape the way children think about school, about learning and, perhaps most importantly, about themselves.

Being a trusted adult does not require perfection. It requires patience, consistency, curiosity and kindness. It requires a willingness to keep learning, to reflect on your own practice and to recognise that every child is different. The most effective teaching assistants are not those who always have the right answers. They are those who continue asking the right questions, continue observing carefully and continue believing that every child is capable of making progress.

As we close this course, remember that the greatest measure of your success is not how much support you provide today, but how much confidence and independence you help a child develop for tomorrow. The aim is never to make children dependent upon us. It is to help them discover their own strengths, trust their own abilities and believe that they can meet new challenges with increasing confidence.

If this course encourages you to pause before intervening, to notice one more strength, to wait a little longer before helping, to simplify your language, to celebrate one more success or to see one child with fresh understanding, then it will have achieved its purpose. Educational change often begins with a single small decision, and small decisions, repeated consistently, change lives.

Thank you for the care, patience and professionalism that you bring to your work each day. Teaching assistants are often the quiet heroes of our schools. They rarely seek recognition, yet they change children's lives through countless acts of encouragement, reassurance and belief. Every calm conversation, every thoughtful observation and every moment of genuine understanding helps create a school where children feel safe enough to learn and confident enough to succeed.

Above all, remember that every autistic child deserves at least one adult who understands them, believes in them and never loses sight of their potential. For many children, that trusted adult will be you. Although you may never fully know the difference you have made, the confidence you nurture, the independence you encourage and the hope you inspire may remain with that child long after they have left your classroom.

That is the privilege of becoming a trusted adult. It is also one of the greatest gifts you can ever give a child.

APPENDIX 2

SOME KEY TACTICS

Teach Sequencing Skills

There are three simple but powerful sequence scaffolds that can help children strengthen and organise their thinking. These are: Think–Communicate, Think–Communicate–Write, and Read–Think–Communicate. Each sequence provides a clear structure that guides how a child processes information and expresses understanding.

For autistic children in particular, these structured steps can reduce uncertainty, support communication, and gradually extend cognitive skills in a manageable and meaningful way.

The first scaffold, **Think–Communicate**, focuses on helping a child organise their thoughts before expressing them. Many autistic children benefit from having extra time to process information internally. The “think” stage allows them to make sense of what they have heard or experienced, while the “communicate” stage gives them an opportunity to express their ideas verbally, through gestures, or using visual supports. This sequence strengthens language skills, attention, and processing, as it encourages the child to slow down, organise their thinking, and then share it with others. It can be particularly helpful in conversations, questions, or problem-solving activities.

The second scaffold, **Think–Communicate–Write**, adds an additional step that deepens learning. After thinking and talking about an idea, the child then records it in some way—through

writing, drawing, or using symbols. For autistic children, this sequence supports the development of working memory, organisation, and expressive language, as it links thought, speech, and recording. Writing (or representing ideas visually) helps make thinking more concrete and allows the child to revisit and reflect on their ideas. This is especially useful in learning environments, where retaining and structuring information can be challenging.

The third scaffold, Read–Think–Communicate, begins with an external source of information. The child reads or observes, then takes time to process what it means, and finally communicates their understanding. This is particularly valuable for developing comprehension, reasoning, and language skills. Autistic children may find it difficult to interpret text, infer meaning, or explain what they have understood. This structured sequence breaks the process into clear stages, giving them time to understand before being expected to respond. It reduces pressure and supports more thoughtful, meaningful communication.

These three scaffolds are especially beneficial for autistic children because they provide predictability, clarity, and structure. Many autistic learners thrive when tasks are broken into clear, sequential steps rather than being presented as open-ended or unstructured. The scaffolds also support executive function, helping the child to plan, organise, and carry out tasks step by step, rather than becoming overwhelmed. Overall, Think–Communicate, Think–Communicate–Write, and Read–Think Communicate act as supportive frameworks that link cognitive skills together. They help children not only develop individual abilities such as language, memory, and attention, but also learn how to use those skills effectively in sequence. For

autistic children, this can make learning more accessible, reduce anxiety, and build confidence in thinking and communication.

Teach Steps

Now teach ‘Go for Three’ and ‘Go for Five’ Overtly teaching steps and categorisation is especially crucial to autistic children because it helps them process information in a consistent, structured and manageable way. Many autistic learners thrive on routine and predictability, so breaking tasks into clear, sequential steps allows them to understand and complete activities with greater confidence and independence.

Multi-step directions and categorisation also supports cognitive development, improving problem-solving skills and executive functioning, which can be challenging for many autistic individuals. Additionally, using consistent repetition together with visual aids and hands on demonstrations can enhance comprehension and retention, making learning more accessible and engaging.

‘Go for Five’/‘Go for Three’ is a powerful multi-adaptable thinking tool that fosters sequential thinking and analysis. For example, if you have a problem to solve then first think of five possible solutions and then select the best one. You may not be able to find all five possible solutions, but the technique encourages you to look more deeply past the first one or two ideas that might readily come to mind. Better solutions are often found in ideas three and four. ‘Go for Five’ is also a tool for delineating an optimum number of steps and remembering a linear process such as how to plan a task or how to recall something like a mathematical operation. (It’s remarkable how so many of these need five clear steps- probably for the reasons

below.) Encourage learners to use 'Go for Five' frequently and especially in tasks they find more difficult to do or recall. A maths department I was working with discovered that teaching operations and overtly calling out the steps, one... two.... three etc, resulted in learners remembering them better. When they encountered the operation in the future, recall of the process was made easier by being prompted for step one. Why three and fives? Our brains seem to hold information best in odd rather than even numbered groups. With three being optimum for short term cognition (working memory) and five being enough but not too much for medium term retrieval. Just think about how often we use this number quite unconsciously. Politics abounds with five-point plans. There are five key study areas in many school subjects and there many other ways it is used in other walks of life. Now this has been pointed, you will notice how frequently this number is used to group and more easily recall information. Another significant point is that going for a maximum of three/five avoids cognitive overload, again especially important for autistic individuals. Too easily diagrams and flow charts can become overcrowded with too much information and thus difficult to recall. Visual impact and recall seem to be threatened by more than five components before subdivision (hence the number of staves on a sheet of music).

Here are some ways to use 'Go for 5': For developing and remembering process skills: • Three/five steps for doing something. For post-analysis: • Three/ five steps you used/ three or five things that happened. For recalling information: • Chunk facts, details, main points in groups of five to remember them better For developing reflective and speculative thinking: • Think of three/five possible solutions to a problem then chose the one you think is best. • Think

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of three/five reasons why something might have happened and then decide on the most likely. • Think of three/five reasons for doing something and five reasons against doing it then decide whether to do it! • Three/five good things about- three/five bad things about an influence, an action, a situation etc. • Plan three/five things to include in your writing before writing. The Think–Communicate scaffold can be effectively developed using a gradual expansion from Go-for-Three to Go-for-Five, helping children move from simple responses to more extended thinking.

At the Think stage, the child is given time to process a question or experience, which is particularly important for autistic children who may need longer to organise their thoughts. At the Communicate stage, Go-for-Three encourages the child to share three ideas, keeping expectations clear and manageable. For example, when asked what to take on a school trip, a child might respond, “Lunch, water bottle, coat.” Once this feels secure, the adult gently extends the thinking using Go-for-Five, prompting the child to add two more ideas, such as “hat” and “suncream.” This progression strengthens language skills, supports working memory, and 102 helps the child practise extending their thinking without feeling overwhelmed.

The Think–Communicate–Write scaffold builds further by adding a stage where the child records their ideas, either through writing, drawing, or symbols. Here too, the progression from Go-for-Three to Go-for-Five is important. A child might first think about their favourite animal, then communicate three ideas such as “It is a dog, it is brown, it runs fast,” and then write or draw these ideas. Once confident, the adult encourages extension to five ideas by prompting for more detail, such as “It likes playing” and “It has sharp ears.”

This structured sequence helps autistic children link thinking, speaking, and recording, making their ideas more concrete and organised. It also supports executive function by guiding them step by step through the process of generating, expressing, and capturing information. Similarly, the Read–Think–Communicate scaffold begins with engaging with information, such as reading a short passage, and then moves through processing and expression.

Using Go-for-Three, a child reads a simple text about the weather, takes time to think, and then communicates three key points, such as “It is sunny, it is hot, people go outside.” To extend this, Go-for-Five prompts the child to add further details, such as “They wear hats” and “They drink water.” This structure is especially helpful for autistic children, who may find it difficult to interpret and explain what they have read. By breaking the task into clear stages and gradually increasing expectations, the child develops confidence in comprehension, recall, and verbal explanation. Across all three scaffolds, the movement from Go-for-Three to Go-for-Five provides a gentle and supportive way to extend cognitive skills. It allows children to begin with success and then build towards more complex thinking, rather than being expected to produce extended responses immediately. For autistic children, this structured expansion reduces uncertainty, supports attention and memory, and strengthens both communication and executive function. Over time, these repeated, predictable patterns help children become more confident in organising their thoughts and expressing them more fully.

Teach Descriptive-Reflective-Speculative (How/What- Why- If)

Teaching descriptive–reflective–speculative sequencing is a powerful and structured approach that supports cognitive and communication

development, and it is particularly beneficial for autistic children. This sequence breaks down thinking and expression into three clear stages: first describing what is happening, then reflecting on meaning or feelings, and finally speculating about possibilities, causes, or what might happen next. When applied consistently, it provides a predictable framework that helps children organise their thoughts, deepen understanding, and extend their communication in a manageable way.

The descriptive stage is often the most accessible starting point. It focuses on what can be seen, heard, or directly experienced—for example, “The boy is running,” or “The sky is grey.” Many autistic children are strong in noticing details and concrete information, so this stage builds on an existing strength. By encouraging careful observation and clear description, the child develops attention to detail, vocabulary, and expressive language. It also supports recall, because describing requires the child to retrieve and organise information they have just seen or experienced. This stage creates a solid and confident foundation for further thinking.

The next stage, reflection, asks the child to think a little more deeply about what the description means. This might involve considering feelings, reasons, or personal connections—such as “He might be running because he is late,” or “The grey sky makes it feel like it might rain.” Reflection can be more challenging for autistic children, as it moves beyond concrete facts into interpretation and emotional understanding. However, when taught explicitly and practised regularly, it helps develop comprehension, emotional awareness, and reasoning skills. Importantly, it strengthens retrieval

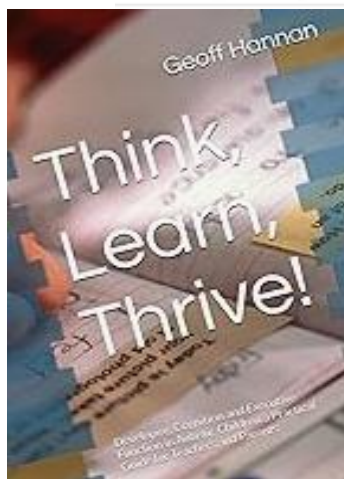
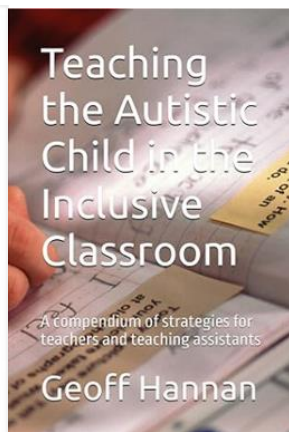
skills, as the child needs to draw not only on what they have seen, but also on prior knowledge and experiences to make sense of it.

The final stage, speculation, extends thinking even further by encouraging the child to predict, imagine, or consider alternatives. For example, “It might start raining soon,” or “He might get to school just in time.” This stage supports flexible thinking, imagination, and problem-solving, which are often areas of difficulty for autistic children. By guiding them step by step into speculative thinking, it reduces the unpredictability that can make open-ended tasks feel overwhelming. Over time, this helps the child become more comfortable with uncertainty and more able to generate multiple ideas or possibilities. When this sequencing is used consistently, it becomes a familiar and reassuring pattern. Autistic children often benefit from structure and predictability, and this approach provides both. They learn that they are not expected to “jump” straight to complex ideas, but can work through thinking in stages. This reduces anxiety and supports executive function, as the child is guided in how to organise, extend, and communicate their thoughts. It also encourages them to produce more than one type of response—moving from simple description to deeper explanation and then to creative or flexible thinking. In terms of communication, this sequence naturally expands the length and quality of a child’s responses. Instead of giving short, factual answers, the child is supported to elaborate, explain, and explore ideas. This helps develop richer language use, including sentence structure, vocabulary, and the ability to connect ideas. For recall and retrieval, the repeated use of the sequence strengthens the child’s ability to access information in a structured way, moving from what they know immediately to what they can infer or imagine. This is particularly helpful in learning

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contexts, where children are often expected to recall information and explain their thinking. Overall, descriptive–reflective–speculative sequencing is powerful because it mirrors how effective thinking naturally develops, but presents it in a clear, teachable structure. For autistic children, it bridges the gap between concrete understanding and more abstract thinking. By consistently applying this sequence, adults can help children build confidence, extend their cognitive skills, and develop more flexible, meaningful communication over time.

Some Other Books by Geoff Hannan



THE GREAT TEACHER'S WORKBOOK

Activities, Strategies and Resources
to Enhance and Develop
Teaching and Learning

By Geoff Hannan and You

