

# Strategies to Support Children with Autism and Other Complex Needs

Resources for teachers, support staff and parents



Christine Macintyre

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Working with young children on the autistic spectrum and supporting them as they learn can be fascinating, challenging, often overwhelmingly difficult, but more than anything else, hugely rewarding.

*Strategies to Support Children with Autism and Other Complex Needs* bridges the gap between explaining what autism is and finding ways to interact through having a balance of play activities interspersed with more formal teaching of skills of everyday living. This highly practical text provides a bank of strategies that are specially designed to be matched to the developmental status of each child. These strategies are endorsed by academics who have monitored the children's responses in communicating, pretending, playing, moving and singing, and describe how the children have responded positively over time.

This book covers a variety of topics such as:

- the importance of play for enhancing learning for children with autism and other complex needs;
- evaluating different ways of developing communication;
- transferring learning from one environment to another to aid memorizing;
- understanding the impact of sensory hypo and hyperactivity on children's learning;
- developing a 'Theory of Mind';
- the importance of movement, music and having fun.

Observation and assessment schedules are provided, along with clear and helpful evaluation forms which show staff in primary and early years settings how children on the autistic spectrum can be helped to make meaningful and encouraging progress.

This text is a vital read for any practitioners working with children on the autistic spectrum or with complex learning difficulties.

**Christine Macintyre** was formerly a senior lecturer in Child Development, Play and Special Needs at the University of Edinburgh, UK. She now works as an early education consultant.

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# Acknowledgements

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There were many people who made this book possible and my heartfelt thanks go to them all.

First of all, so many thanks to the children's parents, the headteacher, Mrs Kirsty Rosie, and all her staff who allowed me to be in school to see and understand the practice that built such a happy and productive learning environment for children with different learning differences. Many of these children have an autistic spectrum condition and others have complex conditions such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), Fragile X and Down's syndrome. The positive atmosphere in every class sparked the motivation for this book that asked the professionals to share the strategies they had devised to support their children and helped them learn in a happy, stress-free way.

The children themselves set the group of professionals (later called the team) challenges in deciding what was best for each one and in responding or indeed in leading play developments; they provided joy and fun and sadness just as all children do. The team carefully monitored their development and selected the most appropriate strategies to enhance their learning. The ideas were researched in journals and books a) to ensure that they could all be justified in academic ways b) to find if new writings could suggest additional or alternative strategies c) to find what benefits could realistically be expected and d) to provide a resource for future study and ongoing action and research. There is also an extensive bibliography to provide additional information that is outwith the scope of this book.

The children's parents wholeheartedly supported the investigation. They were generous in giving permission for the team to compile case studies of their children so that readers could get to know them in their learning environment. In this way we hoped that readers could empathise with the children and recognise how the strategies found to be successful in this venue could be adopted or amended for use in their own setting or at home.

As in all books, the children's names are changed and in photographs some of their faces are blurred, but the text describes real events with real children. I do hope the joy does not disappear with the blurring! What is hidden is the expressiveness of the eyes and the smiles especially when the children learn to communicate. This is especially revealing in non-verbal children but there are other, possibly social reasons why faces cannot be shown. The wishes of the parents have been respected at all times. The photographs are very important as they illustrate the progress the children make as the strategies are put into action. They



show the pleasure the children gain and the resources that stimulate them to learn through play.

The parents also provided information about the children's wellbeing at home in the daily diaries which passed from home to school and they were regularly welcomed as visitors into school. These measures allowed both parents and staff to communicate successes and concerns (e.g. on occasion, if the team found it difficult to tell if certain children were happy, the parents would confirm that they were eager to come to school or perhaps explain some home incident that might have concerned the child). And so when successes or worries occurred they could be immediately shared and ways to move forward could be developed together in the sure understanding that everyone was doing their best to support the child.

Throughout the study, the cooperation of the professionals in school was so important. They all had different specialist interests and levels of experience. What they had in common was total commitment to the children and a real belief that they would all blossom! The headteacher and other senior staff supported the work too. They were constantly contributing ideas and providing more resources so that different strategies could be tried. The caterpillar for the garden was specially bought to encourage crawling although Leon discovered a new balance challenge!



Very patient teachers, nursery nurses and teaching support staff shared their observations, their plans and their strategies; physical education specialists and occupational therapists planned together developing ideas and reflecting on their practice with many smiles, sometimes sadness and always asking questions as to why some things worked while others stalled. In this positive atmosphere everyone gained a deeper understanding of how to optimise the children's learning. Music, speech, art and occupational therapists made significant contributions too, thus making education for the children rich in every sphere. The four aspects of development, i.e. intellectual, motor, social and emotional, provided a base for planning and assessing thus ensuring that a balanced curriculum was part of each day.

All the team hoped that the increased workload they had to fulfil the demands of the study would provide new insights that could be used to build the most appropriate and stimulating learning strategies for many of the children who had complex needs. The team worked together to find play activities to engage children in their learning, to foster pretending and so develop a theory of mind. And through gaining self-esteem, the team hoped that the children would become more competent in carrying out the activities of daily living, for after all 'it is to the young that the future belongs'.

Many thanks to the professional team at Keystroke for the lovely organisation of the text. Thank you too to the team at Routledge for the professional presentation of the text. Different contributors led by Senior Publisher Alison Foyle and Senior Editorial Assistant Sarah Tuckwell are unfailingly cheerful and helpful. I have written many books for them and their support has been constant and stimulating. My grateful thanks goes to them all.

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# Preamble

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This text explains a project that invited experienced professionals who taught children with complex needs, (primarily autistic spectrum conditions) to share their expertise with others. The aim in so doing is to find whether a bank of tried and tested strategies in one venue could ease the learning path for pupils and teachers in another so that they might enjoy and more fully benefit from their time in school. (The change in terminology from autistic spectrum disorder to autistic spectrum condition is a new but more gentle description. The change is similar to the move from learning difficulties to learning differences. These changes remove any sense of 'blame' or negativity.)

The team were first asked to share observations of their children through compiling brief but personal case studies. The next step was to explain and justify the strategies they devised to support the children's learning and in evaluating them (for ideas didn't always work first time), endorse or amend their choice. This was so that readers could appreciate the responses of the children in their learning context and so judge whether the suggested strategies could be helpful in their own setting.

Today, the National Autistic Society (NAS) explains that the number of people in the UK affected by autism has risen to 700,000 (adults and children) and more children are affected by Fragile X, Down's syndrome and global developmental delay too. The policy of inclusion means that many children with these and other complex needs are in mainstream settings and sometimes the professionals there have not had the opportunity to interact with and teach children who learn differently. Finding how each individual child learns best is challenging especially if the children are non-verbal. Sadly, throughout the UK, parents of 40 per cent of children report that they are not happy with the schools their children attend (NAS 2015) because the class numbers and the ever changing routines are not ideal for children with these conditions. It is hoped that the strategies explained in this book will provide support, even inspiration, so that more professionals will enjoy teaching these lovely children. And if the strategies are not immediately transferable to different situations, possibly because of the different context and the numbers of children to be taught, it is hoped that they can be readily amended.

Alongside the strategies, there are a range of theoretical explanations that explain the implications of having complex needs and show some of the detailed research that is being done. These demonstrate that the choice of each strategy is not 'ad hoc' but has been carefully considered and justified in recent academic writings and in knowledge of each child's needs. This is really a 'dip in' book that allows readers to follow different children and understand how they became more confident and competent, i.e. how they blossomed over time.

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## General strategies

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Just before setting out and as this book is all about strategies that give ideas for interaction, the team compiled a list of general strategies or pieces of advice that they would share with new members of staff. These were:

- Enjoy the children. Get to know each child beyond any 'label' they have been given. They are children with a difficulty that is not their fault – not difficult children. Find how they learn best and adapt plans to suit their preferred way.
- Smile a lot and always be patient – our children often need extra time to build up trust. The aim is to have an oasis of calm so that the children can approach you confidently.
- Build a routine, e.g. sing the same songs to signify regrouping in the teaching circle. These let the children recognise when it is time to change activities and gives them time to respond. Routine gives our children security.
- Don't rush in. Stay back and give the children time to get to know you. For many children 'the world goes too fast'. Use the first days to learn each child's name and build up positive observations about the things each child can do.
- Recognise that, while developing eye contact is very important, too much too soon can overwhelm some children and cause them to withdraw. Similarly 'over enthusiasm' can confuse children who need calm. Remember that sensory overload is a common trait.
- Let the children play and try to follow their lead. Give them plenty of time to play if they are happy to do so. Notice what they play at, if they watch others and copy or learn to pretend. Monitor if and when they choose to communicate with others and how they do so. Perhaps call this play time, 'Golden Time' so that the children know this is a critically important part of the learning timetable.
- Keep language to a minimum in the early days. Use key words and gentle gestures to convey support.
- Slow down and speak clearly – the children need time to process what they see and hear.
- Let the children see you respect them, their families and their home environment. This is done by sending home positive notes – the parents are desperate to hear good news – and letting the parents know you are grateful for their input in helping their child at school.
- Show you empathise with families who find it difficult to cope. Some families have more than one child with special needs. They may need extra provisions

such as nappies or special dietary shopping. This all takes time and money and is a 24/7 commitment.

- Be positive. 'Catch the children being good' and praise them immediately to boost their self-esteem. If they do not enjoy overt praise, a smile or a tap on the shoulder or a sticker will convey that you are pleased. When something very good happens, let the child choose the 'reward', for something you choose may not be favoured!
- Focus on achievement while paying attention to other aspects. Avoid always seeing 'support' as dealing with difficulties. Following the children's lead will convey the message that you value what they choose to do.
- Try to ignore minor upsets to prevent the same child's name always being called out.
- If a child becomes fractious, divert the other children till calm is restored.
- See the learning environment through the children's eyes and reduce noise, light and 'traffic' whenever possible. Simple changes can engender calm. Careful organisation can settle the children.
- Arrange the furniture so that there are no open runways especially if there are children who love to charge around. Make a safe runway outside.
- Small spaces can help security. Reduce the space, e.g. in the gym, till the children feel secure.
- The learning environment should always respond to sensory difficulties. Children with impaired hearing have to be near the teacher and away from any source of noise distraction e.g. a radiator that fizzes, even earrings that jangle. Children with visual difficulties should have shielded lights and be able to move out of direct sunlight. Those who find it difficult to stay still can be calmed by sitting on a beanbag that allows a modicum of movement. Many children have to move to feel balanced and secure. A beanbag allows this.
- Many children can 'listen better' if they have something to hold or stroke. If all their proprioceptors are working their sensory input is enhanced.
- Allow 'chill out time' so that if any children feel tense or over stimulated they can be private for a short time. A walk round the school with a trusted buddy can alleviate anxiety and help focus. Alternatively a child may wish to be in a safe space 'alone' or with a toy for a short spell.
- Allow the children to use headphones that give a calming, white noise. This helps reduce distractors from the environment and encourages focus. These can also reduce over-sensitive hearing.
- In class have a visual timetable so that the children can see what comes next. In the beginning remove the pictures when the learning episode is over to help the children understand the sequence of the day, but once this is understood arrange the episodes as a clock with a pointing hand that moves around. This conveys the passing of time. An opportunity to transfer learning from this to recognising numbers on a clock might be possible.
- Visual timetables are very important – for examples see Appendix 2. These save remembering, relieve anxiety and promote independence! The same ones can be used at home and in school. These are particularly useful for sharing planning and sequencing activities with the children. Sometimes children can do the discrete parts of a task but can't plan or appreciate what comes first, then next.

- Let the children know of any change in their routine in plenty of time. ‘Unexpected treats’ are often not so! They may cause alarm and upset.
- If children are unexpectedly aggressive or withdrawn, remember something at home may have distressed them and they may need time and calm to refocus.
- Become part of a team with *all* the support staff. All staff are there to support and encourage the children and they all have experiences to share. Sometimes ‘helpers on the school bus’ or kitchen staff can be the first to suspect a child is unwell.
- For children in the mainstream classroom: let children choose where they wish to sit – they are often more at ease at the back of the room so that there are no ‘surprises’ e.g. jolts or someone encroaching on their personal space behind them. Similarly when the children line up to leave the classroom, the children may prefer to be at the back so that they can follow the others.
- Give the children as much advance notice of personnel or curriculum changes as possible – avoid ‘surprises’.
- Work with the children’s strengths e.g. if they are good at maths, can mathematical experiences be highlighted in other lessons e.g. being in charge of the till in the ‘shop’ or being responsible for making and counting tickets for the school bus or if they like music can they be in charge of a tape recorder and have their choice of music in class?
- Enjoy the children and their successes – they will happen. Don’t panic, ask for help.

Good luck!