

Autism: Fact Sheet for Studying at Home

For an autistic person who studies at home: completing assignments, sitting online assessments, and working without a teacher in the room. Also for the family member or support person helping them.

What is going on

Autism is a natural difference in how the brain develops and processes information. It shapes how a person communicates, understands others, handles change and experiences sound, light and touch (Raising Children Network, 2025a). When an autistic student hits difficulty, it is rarely about academic ability. The barrier is usually an environment or a task not designed with autistic people in mind (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training [ADCET], 2021).

In study, this shows up as:

- **Literal understanding.** Vague instructions, idioms, sarcasm and hints cause confusion. “Discuss briefly” means different things to different people, and the autistic student often needs to know which one.
- **Need for clear expectations.** Uncertainty about what “good” looks like creates stress.
- **Difficulty with change.** A moved deadline, a changed assessment or a new platform disrupts a whole plan.
- **Executive function.** Planning, prioritising, managing time and switching between tasks take extra effort.
- **Sensory load.** Noise, bright light, smells and clutter drain energy and attention.
- **Abstract tasks.** Inference, open-ended questions and “use your judgement” tasks are harder than clear, concrete ones.
- **Group work.** Unwritten social rules in group projects cause friction and exhaustion.
- **Anxiety.** Stress rises with uncertainty or sensory overload (ADCET, 2021).
- **Overwhelm.** When load builds past coping, a meltdown or shutdown follows. A meltdown is an intense response to an overwhelming situation, not a tantrum or bad behaviour (National Autistic Society, 2020).

Strengths to build on

- Deep, focused interests and strong motivation within them.
- Attention to detail and accuracy.
- Good recall of facts.
- Strong visual learning.
- Creative and original thinking.
- Honest, direct communication.

These strengths are named in tertiary education guidance (ADCET, 2021). Use them: link assignment topics to interests where the course allows, use visual planning tools, and treat attention to detail as an asset in editing and research.

Setting up to study at home

- **A sensory-friendly space.** Control light (lamp instead of overhead light, or sunglasses), noise (headphones or ear defenders) and clutter. Use sensory aids such as fidget items, which help attention rather than distract (ADCET, 2021).
- **A predictable routine.** Study at the same times and in the same place each day. Predictable routines support learning and reduce stress (Donnelly, n.d.).
- **A visual timetable.** Show the week on a wall planner or screen: study blocks, breaks, due dates and appointments.
- **Warnings before transitions.** Use a timer to signal “10 minutes until the break” and “10 minutes until study starts again”.
- **One place for all course information.** Keep instructions, marking guides and emails in one folder, so nothing relies on memory.
- **A plan for changes.** Agree in advance on what happens when something changes, such as rewriting the visual timetable straight away.

Doing an assignment, step by step

1. **Get the exact expectations.** Read the question, the marking guide and any word limit. Ask the teacher for a sample of good work if one exists. Seeing a finished example removes guesswork.
2. **Check every unclear word.** Make a list of any word or phrase with more than one meaning, such as “critically evaluate” or “brief”. Email the teacher with the list and ask what each means for this task (ADCET, 2021).
3. **Ask why.** If the purpose of the task is unclear, ask. Knowing the reason for a task helps engagement (ADCET, 2021).
4. **Turn the task into a visual checklist.** List each step in order, with a box to tick. Put the checklist where it stays visible.
5. **Plan the structure with a template.** Use headings, a paragraph plan or a graphic organiser. A fixed structure turns an open-ended task into a concrete one.
6. **Link to an interest where allowed.** If the topic is open, choose one connected to a strong interest.

7. **Research within limits.** Set a number of sources and a time limit for research. Deep interest makes research easy to start and hard to stop.
8. **Write section by section.** Finish one heading before moving to the next, if switching back and forth is draining.
9. **Check against the marking guide.** Go through each criterion and find where the work meets it.
10. **Decide when it is done.** Use the marking guide as the definition of done. Perfectionism keeps editing going long after the work meets the standard.

Group assignments

- Ask for roles, tasks and deadlines to be written down and shared.
- Ask the teacher to help with joining a group if it is hard to approach others.
- If group work is too stressful, ask the course provider about an alternative task (ADCET, 2021).

Doing an assessment or exam at home

Before

- Ask to see the exam structure and instructions ahead of time. This reduces confusion and anxiety on the day (ADCET, 2021).
- Practise in the same room, at the same time of day and with the same set-up as the real exam.
- Prepare the sensory environment: lighting, headphones, comfortable clothing, water.
- Write a plan for the exam period: start time, halfway check, finish time.

During

- Read each question for its literal meaning. If a question allows two readings, note both and answer the one which fits the course content best.
- Multiple-choice questions are often confusing for autistic students (ADCET, 2021). Read every option fully before choosing.
- Use sensory aids throughout.
- If a question is unclear and the exam allows contact, ask the supervisor or teacher for clarification.

After

- Allow recovery time. Assessments use a lot of energy.

When the person is stuck

What you notice	What to try	Why it helps
Unsure what the question means	Write down each possible meaning. Email the teacher and ask which one they want.	Removes the uncertainty driving the stress. Teachers often do not see their own ambiguity.
Waiting for “perfect” before starting	Start with a template and fill in headings first. Remind the person the first draft is meant to be rough.	A concrete structure gives a starting point.
A plan or deadline has changed	Stop and rewrite the visual plan with the new information. Keep everything else the same.	A visible new plan restores predictability.
Cannot switch from one task to another	Give a 10-minute and a 2-minute warning. Mark a clear finishing point in the first task.	Transitions are easier when they are predictable.
Not interested in the topic	Find a link between the topic and an existing interest. Explain the purpose of the task.	Interest and reasons drive engagement.
Pacing, rocking, asking the same question repeatedly, or going completely still	Treat this as early overwhelm. Stop the task. Reduce noise and light. Offer a quiet space and time. Avoid questions and demands (National Autistic Society, 2020).	Acting early often prevents a meltdown.
Meltdown or shutdown	Stay calm and quiet. Do not judge. Allow time to recover. Check in calmly and expect a slow response (National Autistic Society, 2020).	Recovery from overload takes time. Pressure extends it.
Group members not responding	Send one clear written message with the task, owner and date. Copy in the teacher if there is still no reply.	Written, specific communication avoids unwritten social rules.
Feedback is vague, such as “needs more depth”	Ask the teacher for a specific example of what more depth looks like.	Clear, specific feedback is needed to learn from mistakes (ADCET, 2021).
Exhausted after a study session	Plan rest after demanding tasks. Track which tasks drain most energy.	Sensory and social effort is tiring even when it is not visible.

Tools which help

- Visual timetable or planner, on paper or screen.
- Templates and graphic organisers for assignment structure.
- Noise-cancelling headphones or ear defenders.
- Timers for transitions and breaks.
- Text-based communication with teachers, such as email, instead of phone calls.
- A diary to track what happens before overwhelm, to find patterns (National Autistic Society, 2020).

Adjustments to ask your course provider for

In Australia, the Disability Standards for Education 2005 apply to schools, TAFE, universities and training providers. Providers must consult with the student and make reasonable adjustments (Department of Education, n.d.). Adjustments used for autistic students include (ADCET, 2021):

- All information about the course, assessments and deadlines in writing.
- Specific notice of any change to assessments, dates or platforms.
- Literal, clear wording in assessment instructions.
- A chance to clarify assessment instructions with the teacher.
- A preview of exam structure and instructions.
- An alternative to group work where group work causes high stress.
- A separate, quiet exam room, and permission to use sensory aids.
- A consistent contact person at the provider.
- Specific feedback explaining what to change and why.

How a support person at home helps

- Keep a calm, low-pressure manner, especially when stress is rising.
- Follow spoken information with a written copy.
- Check understanding by asking the person to describe the task in their own words.
- Help draft emails to teachers asking for clarification.
- Respect the routine and give warnings before changes.
- During overwhelm, give space and quiet, not questions.
- Keep a record of what helps and what triggers overwhelm.

Avoid

- Vague instructions such as “do your best” or “have a go”.
- Sarcasm, idioms or hints.
- Surprise changes to plans.
- Treating a meltdown as bad behaviour.
- Pushing through overwhelm to finish a task.
- Forcing eye contact or phone calls.
- Assuming fluent speech or writing means no support is needed.

Sources

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