

ADAPTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

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Adaptive teaching- Autism

Overview		<p>Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference that affects how pupils perceive, communicate, and interact with the world. In education, this can impact relationships, processing of information, and sensory experiences. Each autistic pupil is unique, so adaptive teaching focuses on reducing barriers and creating predictable, supportive learning environments where pupils feel safe, valued, and able to succeed.</p>
Key Principles		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure: Use routines, timetables, and visual supports to reduce anxiety. • Positivity: Build on pupils’ strengths and interests to motivate and engage. • Empathy: Show calm understanding and consider the world from the pupil’s perspective. • Low arousal: Manage sensory demands — reduce clutter, noise, and distractions. • Links: Work consistently with families and professionals, sharing strategies that support learning. <p>(SPELL framework – NASEN SEND Handbook)</p>
Adaptive Teaching		<p>Scaffold: Step-by-step instructions, visual prompts, worked examples, and word banks.</p> <p>Scale: Adjust task size and complexity — present learning in smaller, achievable parts.</p> <p>Style: Provide options for showing understanding (oral, visual, written, practical).</p> <p>Synthesize: Make explicit links to prior learning and real-life contexts.</p> <p>Solidify: Use repetition, retrieval, and overlearning to embed knowledge.</p> <p>Safety: Prioritise emotional and sensory safety with calm routines and predictable transitions.</p>
Practical Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display daily schedules in the same place every lesson. • Use consistent visual and verbal cues to signal changes. • Reduce visual and auditory distractions in the environment. • Model errors and corrections to normalise mistakes. • Provide calm-down spaces or sensory tools when needed. • Prepare pupils for changes in advance and explain the reason for them. • Celebrate small successes early to build self-esteem.
Autism Friendly Additions		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give extra processing time after instructions. • Use clear, literal language — avoid idioms or abstract phrasing. • Offer choices where possible to provide a sense of control. • Provide structured options during unstructured times (breaks, transitions). • Be consistent with routines, approaches, and expectations. • Reinforce effort as well as accuracy.

Adaptive teaching- SEMH

Overview		<p>Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs affect how pupils manage emotions, relationships, and behaviour. These needs may show as anxiety, withdrawal, low self-esteem, or challenging behaviours. Adaptive teaching for SEMH focuses on creating safe, consistent, and supportive learning environments where pupils feel valued, calm, and able to access the curriculum.</p>
Key Principles		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety: Emotional safety first – pupils learn best when they feel secure and cared for. • Consistency: Predictable routines reduce anxiety and prevent escalation. • Relationships: Trusting, positive relationships are central to engagement. • Emotional regulation: Support pupils to recognise and manage feelings. • Belonging: Encourage participation, celebrate small successes, and build confidence.
Adaptive Teaching		<p>Scaffold: Provide clear structures, step-by-step tasks, and behaviour prompts (visual or verbal). Scale: Adjust task demands to match emotional readiness; shorten tasks during dysregulation. Style: Use flexible approaches – discussion, practical tasks, movement breaks. Synthesize: Make links between learning and real-life, personal experiences. Solidify: Revisit routines and expectations frequently to embed security and self-belief. Safety: Ensure a calm, predictable environment with clear boundaries and respectful communication.</p>
Practical Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin lessons with calm, predictable routines. • Use visual timetables and clear expectations to reduce uncertainty. • Allow short regulation breaks or safe spaces when pupils are overwhelmed. • Keep language calm, simple, and non-confrontational. • Separate the behaviour from the child – use restorative approaches. • Model positive emotional regulation yourself. • Recognise and reward small steps of success to build self-esteem. • Provide opportunities for pupil voice and choice to increase engagement.
SEMH Friendly Additions		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipate and reduce triggers wherever possible. • Build in movement, practical activities, and talk-based learning. • Use peer support carefully and positively. • Prepare for transitions with warnings and clear instructions. • Work closely with parents, carers, and pastoral staff for consistent strategies. • Ensure pupils have a trusted adult they can turn to when needed.

Adaptive teaching – PDA

Overview		<p>Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile within the autism spectrum where pupils experience high anxiety around everyday demands and expectations. This often leads to avoidance, withdrawal, or behaviours that appear oppositional. Adaptive teaching for PDA focuses on reducing perceived pressure, fostering trust, and using flexible, collaborative approaches that help pupils engage without escalating anxiety.</p>
Key Principles		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce pressure: Frame requests as invitations or choices rather than demands. • Collaboration: Work with pupils, involving them in decisions about their learning. • Flexibility: Be prepared to adapt plans quickly if anxiety rises. • Trust: Strong relationships are the foundation of engagement. • Safety: Create environments where pupils feel respected, listened to, and in control.
Adaptive Teaching		<p>Scaffold: Break tasks into small, manageable steps and provide supportive prompts.</p> <p>Scale: Reduce the scale of tasks when anxiety is high, building up gradually.</p> <p>Style: Offer flexible ways to complete work — oral, practical, or digital.</p> <p>Synthesize: Link tasks to pupils’ interests to increase motivation and reduce resistance.</p> <p>Solidify: Reinforce routines gently and consistently, celebrating small successes.</p> <p>Safety: Prioritise emotional safety by reducing direct demands and maintaining calm interactions.</p>
Practical Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reframe instructions as choices, questions, or invitations (“Would you like to start with this or that?”) • Use indirect language to soften demands (“Let’s see how we can do this together”). • Build in shared problem-solving to give pupils ownership. • Provide safe exits or breaks when anxiety escalates. • Offer alternative formats for demonstrating understanding (drawing, explaining, typing). • Use humour, playfulness, or role reversal to lower tension. • Recognise and celebrate small attempts, not just completed outcomes.
Autism & SEMH Friendly		<p>Avoid confrontation — focus on calming and reconnecting rather than insisting. Use visual supports but allow flexibility in how tasks are completed. Pre-empt anxiety triggers by building predictability where possible. Ensure the pupil has a trusted adult to go to when overwhelmed. Normalise the idea that needing space or choice is okay. Share strategies consistently with parents, carers, and staff.</p>

Adaptive teaching – Reluctant Participants

Overview		Some pupils may be reluctant to participate due to anxiety, lack of confidence, processing difficulties, or fear of making mistakes. Adaptive teaching ensures that every pupil has safe, accessible ways to contribute. By normalising different forms of participation, we create inclusive classrooms where all voices are heard.
Key Principles		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Every pupil has the right to be heard.• Mistakes are part of learning and should be normalised.• Participation should be structured and predictable, not optional.• Small, early successes help build confidence and engagement.• Equity matters – all pupils should be given fair opportunities to contribute.
Adaptive Teaching		<p>Scaffold: Provide prompts, sentence stems, and response frames.</p> <p>Scale: Begin with low-stakes contributions before building to whole-class input.</p> <p>Style: Offer varied response methods (verbal, written, visual, practical).</p> <p>Synthesize: Link pupil contributions back to prior knowledge and learning goals.</p> <p>Solidify: Use repeated opportunities to practise and embed participation.</p> <p>Safety: Foster a classroom culture where effort is valued and mistakes are safe.</p>
Practical Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use a no-hands up approach to ensure equitable participation.• Provide think time before selecting pupils to respond.• Encourage pair share so pupils can rehearse answers with a partner.• Use mini-whiteboards or multiple-choice cards for non-verbal contributions.• Offer sentence starters to support structured answers.• Celebrate effort and progress, not just correct answers.• Allow different contribution formats – written notes, visual responses, or demonstrations.• Allow pupils to quietly tell the teacher their answer, who can then share it with the class.• Normalise quiet responses so pupils feel comfortable contributing in their own way
Autism & SEMH Friendly		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pre-warn pupils before asking them to share.• Provide structured roles during group work (note-taker, timekeeper, reporter).• Offer the option to “pass” with the chance to return later.• Keep questions and instructions short, clear, and direct.• Praise courage and effort in contributing, even if the answer isn’t correct.• Avoid putting pupils on the spot in a way that heightens anxiety.

Adaptive teaching – Sensory Friendly Classrooms

Overview		<p>Many pupils with ASD or SEMH experience the classroom environment differently, with sensory sensitivities to noise, light, touch, or movement. Creating a sensory-friendly classroom reduces stress and anxiety, helping pupils focus, feel safe, and participate in learning.</p>
Key Principles		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce overload: Limit unnecessary noise, clutter, or visual distractions. • Consistency: Keep layouts and routines predictable. • Choice: Provide pupils with safe ways to manage their sensory needs. • Calm: Maintain a low-arousal environment that promotes focus. • Balance: Recognise that some pupils seek sensory input while others avoid it.
Adaptive Teaching		<p>Scaffold: Provide sensory tools (ear defenders, fidgets, weighted items) Scale: Adjust the amount of sensory input (dim lights, quiet voices, smaller groups). Style: Offer flexible seating and varied workspaces. Synthesize: Link calming strategies to learning routines (“When we start writing, you can use your cushion”). Solidify: Embed predictable sensory supports as part of everyday routines. Safety: Ensure sensory strategies promote calm and never single out pupils.</p>
Practical Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use calm, neutral colours and reduce clutter on walls and desks. • Provide ear defenders, calming music, or quiet spaces. • Allow movement breaks or sensory circuits. • Adjust lighting (avoid harsh strip lights where possible). • Provide seating options (wobble cushions, standing desks). • Keep “calm corners” or safe spaces available when needed.
Autism & SEMH Friendly		<p>Pre-warn pupils before sensory changes (e.g. fire alarm tests, assemblies). Allow pupils to signal discreetly if they need a sensory break. Avoid sudden loud instructions or unnecessary touching. Model calm behaviours and emotional regulation. Work with families to understand sensory triggers and strategies that help.</p>

Adaptive teaching – Managing Emotional Regulation

Overview		<p>Pupils with ASD and SEMH may struggle to recognise, express, and manage their emotions. This can lead to anxiety, withdrawal, or challenging behaviour. Supporting emotional regulation helps pupils stay calm, engaged, and ready to learn. Using consistent frameworks like Zones of Regulation gives pupils shared language and strategies to understand and manage their feelings.</p>
Key Principles		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition: Teach pupils to notice and label their emotions. • Language: Use consistent vocabulary (e.g. Zones of Regulation colours). • Safety: Provide calm, non-judgemental support during dysregulation. • Independence: Equip pupils with strategies they can use themselves over time. • Consistency: Use the same approaches across staff, lessons, and environments.
Adaptive Teaching		<p>Scaffold: Use visual aids (Zones posters, check-in cards) and prompt sheets</p> <p>Scale: Adjust task demand when emotional arousal is high — offer shorter or simplified tasks.</p> <p>Style: Provide choice of regulation strategies (movement, breathing, sensory tools).</p> <p>Synthesize: Connect emotions to triggers and coping strategies (“When we feel in the yellow zone, we can try deep breathing”).</p> <p>Solidify: Practise regulation strategies in calm times so they can be used during stress.</p> <p>Safety: Maintain calm tone and body language, separating the pupil from the behaviour.</p>
Practical Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use daily check-ins (verbally or with visuals) to help pupils notice their emotions. • Provide calm corners or safe spaces for regulation breaks. • Model emotional regulation yourself — narrate calm strategies. • Teach and practise strategies explicitly (deep breathing, grounding, movement breaks). • Use visual reminders of the Zones of Regulation across classrooms. • Allow pupils to access tools or routines discreetly (fidget toys, breathing cards).
ASD & SEMH Friendly Additions		<p>Pre-empt emotional triggers by planning supportive transitions.</p> <p>Avoid power struggles — use calm, low-arousal responses.</p> <p>Give processing time rather than pressing for immediate explanations.</p> <p>Validate feelings even when behaviour is redirected (“I can see this is hard for you”).</p> <p>Reinforce and praise attempts at using regulation strategies.</p> <p>Work with parents/carers to share consistent approaches.</p>

