

Support positive behaviour

A suggestion for implementing the strategy
'Key areas of support' from the Guide: [Autism and learning](#)

-
- Includes:**
- Understand the behaviour
 - Develop school wide strategies
 - Ako - take a reciprocal learning approach
 - Recognise and respond to distress
 - Manage difficult times
 - Useful resources

Inclusive Education

From

Guide: [Autism and learning](#)

Strategy: [Key areas of support](#)

Suggestion: [Support positive behaviour](#)

Date

10 July 2026

Link

inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/autism-and-learning/support-positive-behaviour-using-recommended-approaches

Understand the behaviour

Identify the likely triggers or reasons for the behaviour of concern. When the function or purpose of the behaviour is identified, the information can be used to address the triggers in the environment and to respond appropriately.

Behaviour is a form of communication and it serves a purpose. When you understand its purpose, you can understand how to respond and intervene.

Source:

(Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, PB41 pdf
<https://pb41.tki.org.nz/Media/Files/Understanding-why-children-behave-the-way-they-do>

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Develop school wide strategies

Develop personal, class and school-wide strategies that increase positive behaviours and promote self management.

- ✓ Regularly teach and reinforce behaviour expectations throughout the school.
- ✓ Identify, understand and remove or minimise things that cause distress or are known triggers for the autistic student.
- ✓ Build staff, peer and student capability to recognise signs that the student is beginning to feel upset or anxious and to respond appropriately.
- ✓ Use personalised timetables, timers and visual aids so that students can anticipate transitions and manage themselves independently.
- ✓ Talk through last minute changes that may be startling to students.
- ✓ Keep whānau informed of what is going on each week and let them know if there is going to be a change to the plan.

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Ako – take a reciprocal learning approach

As each autistic student is different, some approaches will work better than others.

Explore different approaches with the student and regularly reflect with them on what's working well.

Refine as needed.

Help students develop a strong sense of identity and be knowledgeable about their needs and abilities:

- Explore flexible options to allow students to learn in ways that work for them.
- Validate, respect and respond to student concerns and emotions.
- Help students give language to what they are feeling using verbal and visual tools.
- Work together to identify challenges, solve problems and develop systems for asking for help and finding a safe place or person.
- Create opportunities for students to take the lead using their strengths and interests.
- Develop cues that can be used by ākongā, peers or kaiako to signal such things as the need to refocus or take a break from a task or situation.

Work together to develop effective feedback systems:

- Avoid abstract or subtle rewards such as social approval and facial expressions that students are not attuned to.
- Develop clear written and visual success criteria.
- Use concrete and precise communication to avoid misunderstandings.
- Consider short term contracts to achieve specific learning goals and task expectations.

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Recognise and respond to distress



Source:

Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga

<https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/behaviour-services-to-help-schools-and-students/minimising-physical-restraint-in-new-zealand-schools-and-kura/>

[View full image \(70 KB\)](#)

Recognise the signs that students are becoming overwhelmed or struggling, respond with the kind of support ākonga need to feel settled again and restore connections and support integration back into classroom and peer activities.

Manage difficult times

There will be times when ākongā feel overwhelmed. Guide ākongā through these challenging situations, while being calm and confident.

Notice the signs that ākongā are becoming anxious. For example tapping, rocking and fidgeting.

- Remind them of any self-management and relaxation strategies they know.
- Remove unnecessary demands and/or redirect the student to another activity.
- Connect with ākongā using verbal and non-verbal techniques.

Slow down and communicate calmly and simply

- Maintain a low, calm tone of voice.
- Use supportive phrases such as “I’m here to help. When you are ready, we can...”.
- Actively listen, for example nod and repeat key phrases.
- Validate student emotions “I can see you are feeling frustrated.”

Be mindful of your body language

- Approach ākongā from the side, rather than front on, this is less confronting.
- Maintain a calm presence and provide reassurance.
- Keep an appropriate distance, close enough to let ākongā know you’re there, but making sure they don’t feel trapped.
- Use appropriate eye contact, direct eye contact can be challenging and intimidating.

Create a safe space and get support

- Create space and use silence and non-action as an opportunity for ākongā to gather their thoughts. Pause, observe and prepare for any further action that may be needed.
- Ask other ākongā to move away or leave the classroom if necessary. Be aware of how this may impact others.
- Use your school’s agreed process for getting support.

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Useful resources



The incredible 5-point scale

Overview of the Incredible 5-point scale, including examples and a blank template.

Publisher: Kari Dunn Buron

[Visit website](#)



Sensory differences – a guide for all audiences

Information, strategies and tips including examples of sensory differences and strategies to help.

Publisher: The National Autistic Society

[Visit website](#)

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