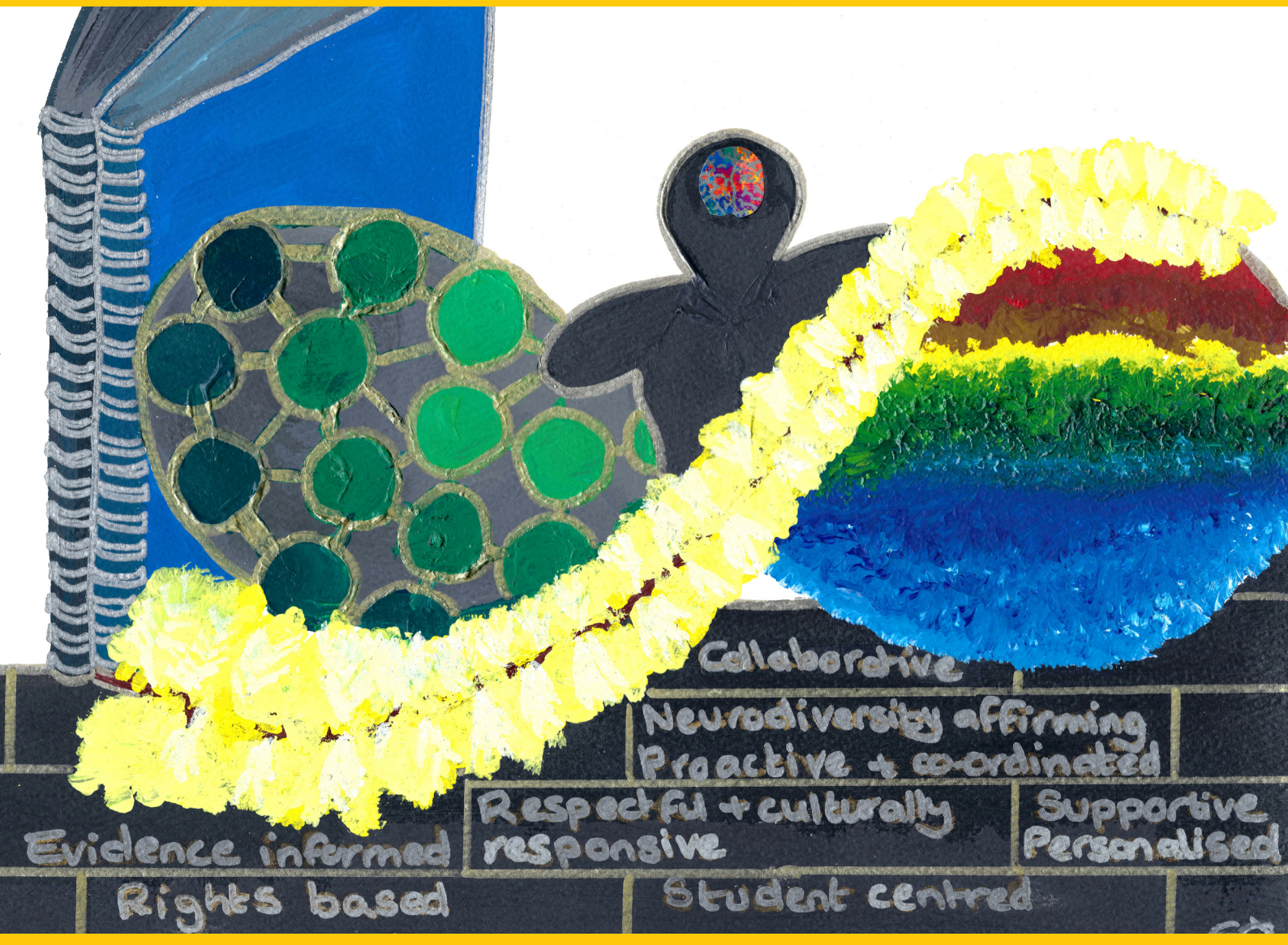
AutismCRC

National Guidance

For best practice in inclusive education for autistic students

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National Guidance for best practice in inclusive education for autistic students

Dawn Adams
Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, La Trobe University

Emma Goodall
Centre for Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology

Suzanne Carrington
Centre for Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology

Kate Simpson
Autism Centre of Excellence, Griffith University

Annetta Cayas
Griffith University | Queensland University of Technology

Louise White
Griffith University | La Trobe University

Elizabeth J. Cook
Centre for Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology

Beth Saggers
Centre for Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology

Sofia Mavropoulou
Centre for Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology

Chris Champion
Positive Partnerships

Kathryn Ambrose
Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, La Trobe University

Becc Clark
Assistant Director Aboriginal Outcomes, South Australia Department for Education, Support and Inclusion Division

Tania Waring
Queensland University of Technology

Rebecca Jessop
Independent Autistic Consultant

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Cover artwork: Dr Emma Goodall. “This artwork represents the infinite presentations of autism. The student/child at the centre of this Guidance. The principles are the foundations by which autistic students will thrive. The golden wattle represents that this Guidance is from, and for, the Australians across the land that also helped to create it. The two sides of the infinity symbol represent the different aspects of the Guidance and show the importance of connections, collaboration and wellbeing for the students and then the importance of being culturally grounded as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are to the sea, land and waterways.”

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Guidance Reference Group

We acknowledge the members of the Guidance Reference Group (GRG), who brought diverse expertise and perspectives. The organisations represented on the GRG operate in the fields of education; autism; or diversity, equity, and inclusion; or have an interest in supporting autistic children and youth, and inclusive education. Details of GRG members and the organisations they represented are provided further into this document.

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Executive summary

Autistic children and young people have the right to attend schools and learning environments where they feel safe, valued, respected, and supported to learn and thrive. They have the right to access inclusive education in their local, regular pre-school, kindergarten or school, and to belong as fully participating members of their learning communities. Yet many autistic students, particularly non-speaking autistic students or those with high support needs and/or co-occurring disabilities, experience barriers to accessing inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education. Such barriers often include inconsistent access to appropriate adjustments, environments that do not meet their sensory and learning needs, and school cultures not designed with neurodiversity in mind.

Autistic people and advocates have challenged the framing of autism as 'disorder'. Many describe autism as part of neurodiversity – a term that recognises the diversity of ways people think, learn, process, and communicate information (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). Neurodiversity emphasises that there is no 'right' way of thinking or learning, and that different ways of being are equally valid and valuable.

Autistic people also have multiple, intersecting aspects of identity, including dis/ability, race, gender, sexuality, and social class that shape their experiences in education contexts (Collins & Bilge, 2016). As a result, autistic students may experience intersecting forms of marginalisation, as well as diverse strengths and support needs. Recognising this intersectionality is critical to understanding the varied barriers autistic students may encounter in accessing inclusive and equitable high-quality education. It also underscores the need for nuanced and flexible approaches tailored to understanding and responding to the diverse support needs of each autistic student.

This National Guidance has been developed to support schools and education systems to identify, address, and remove some of these systemic barriers, and to create evidence-based, neurodiversity-affirming, and rights-based inclusive education for autistic students. It provides practical, consensus-based Recommendations that draw on the best available research, lived experience from the autistic and autism communities gained through extensive consultation, and professional wisdom from a broad, multidisciplinary reference group including autistic people, educators, allied health professionals, and system leaders.

The National Guidance identifies nine Guiding Principles that underpin inclusive education for autistic students: collaboration, evidence-informed practice, neurodiversity-affirming approaches, personalisation, proactive and coordinated action, cultural responsiveness, rights-based decision-making, student-centred and student-informed practice, and supportive environments. These foundations shape each of the 48 Recommendations within the National Guidance, which are organised across four key areas: (1) student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships; (2) pedagogy and teaching practices; (3) collaboration, connections, and leadership; and (4) the physical environment.

The Recommendations emphasise the importance of predictable but also flexible supports; trauma-informed and neurodiversity-affirming pedagogy; genuine collaboration with families; and environments that reduce sensory stress and foster participation. They encourage whole-school or whole-centre approaches in which leaders champion and model inclusion, and staff are equipped through appropriate resourcing and ongoing professional learning or mentoring from specialist staff.

They also encourage the recognition of autistic students and their families as partners in decisions affecting them, with autistic students recognised as knowledgeable agents in their own learning and wellbeing.

The National Guidance is grounded in a rigorous methodology, informed by formal guideline development processes. It draws on:

- seven systematic literature reviews (64,434 articles screened; 507 included)
- a national community consultation involving more than 800 participants (including autistic youth)
- a Delphi study with experienced school leaders
- input and endorsement from a Guidance Development Group and Reference Group including autistic people, educators, parents, allied health professionals, First Nations representatives, and leaders from across Australian school systems.

This evidence was used to inform the development of the Recommendations.

The Recommendations are intended to be implemented as a cohesive, interconnected framework. They offer practical examples for application across early childhood education and care (ECEC), primary, and secondary contexts, acknowledging that all autistic students, and all schools, are diverse and unique.

This is Australia's first National Guidance focused specifically on inclusive education for autistic students in mainstream settings. It provides a clear, evidence-informed foundation for transforming school cultures and practices so that autistic students experience safety, belonging, engagement, and success. The next steps involve education systems, leaders, and educators adopting and embedding this National Guidance within their local contexts. A review of this National Guidance is recommended within 5 years to ensure alignment with emerging evidence and community priorities.

Plain language **summary**



Plain language summary

This National Guidance is focused on the key actions pre-schools, kindergartens and schools can take to provide inclusive education for autistic students and young children. The National Guidance is shaped by nine Guiding Principles and addresses four key areas: student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships; pedagogy and teaching practices; collaboration, connections, and leadership; and the physical environment. The sections included in the National Guidance and what this means in practice for schools are described below.

Section 1: Guiding Principles

These Guiding Principles form the foundation for inclusive education for autistic students and young children. They underpin every Recommendation in the document. These were identified through the research and community consultation as the key factors that can guide schools in building inclusive and supportive learning environments for autistic students.

The Guiding Principles highlight how inclusive education works best when schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres, students, their families and professionals genuinely work together as partners. Support should be personalised to each child's strengths, needs, and what matters most to them at that time, with students actively involved in decisions whenever possible. Schools should use trusted evidence and real-world experience and seek input from families and young people, to guide their practice.

Schools must recognise and remove barriers to inclusion and create safe, respectful, culturally responsive, and neurodiversity-affirming environments that respect difference and diversity, and value individual people, their strengths, and support needs. Support should be planned carefully across the whole school journey from pre-school, including transitions, and designed to meet each child's social, emotional, sensory, and learning needs. Inclusive education should help students to feel valued, confident, safe, and welcome in their schools, and make it easier for students and families to access the right support at the right time.

Section 2: Student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships

Student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships looks at what schools can do to help students to feel connected and to develop a sense of belonging at school. It involves helping to build positive relationships, addressing issues of bullying, and supporting students' wellbeing and mental health.

Schools should support autistic students' mental health by having clear, flexible routines, building trust, and enabling access to specialists and professionals who understand neurodiversity. Schools should celebrate difference. They need to make sure that all students are supported to have relationships with peers that are beneficial and meaningful, understanding that these may look different for autistic students than for non-autistic students. Schools need to act to prevent bullying and respond quickly to stop bullying. Schools must ensure that autistic students feel valued and able to be themselves. They can do this by providing safety and predictability. Schools must also respect autistic students and listen to the things they have to say.

Section 3: Pedagogy and teaching practices

Pedagogy is a word used to describe all the things teachers know, think, and do that help students learn. It includes how lessons are taught, how students are supported, how learning is adjusted to suit different needs, and how learning is assessed.

Schools should plan teaching and learning, curricula, and assessment to match all students' strengths, needs, and preferences. This helps all students, including autistic students, to learn and demonstrate what they know. Schools should ensure that learning environments are safe and supportive. They should celebrate student achievements and develop learner identities in collaboration with families and professionals to ensure that all autistic students can achieve their learning goals.

Section 4: Collaboration, connections, and leadership

Collaboration, connections, and leadership looks at how schools, families, and communities can work together to create a school culture that feels inclusive and supportive for autistic students. School leaders have an important role in ensuring everyone works together to create and maintain inclusive education. The term "school leaders" includes not just school principals, but also multi-layers of leaders in the school such as deputy leaders, heads of curriculum or year level, or heads of inclusion or special education.

Schools should have a clear plan for inclusion for autistic students. School leaders need to both model inclusive practices and give staff training, time, and support to make sure that they can use inclusive practices. Schools also need to work closely with families, specialists, and professionals. Schools should have a vision that means inclusion becomes a part of everyday life at school. This includes listening to autistic students and their families, and insisting on respect, teamwork, and strong relationships.

Section 5: Physical environment

The physical environment refers to spaces at school where students learn and play across the school day. Schools should make classrooms and other spaces (indoor and outdoor) safe, easy to use, and comfortable for autistic students. This includes making sure that all areas are set up to support different sensory needs, for example, by providing furniture that suits different needs and having spaces where autistic students can go when they feel overwhelmed or need to self-regulate. Schools should build an understanding of how the physical environment may impact autistic students, how they learn, and their experience of the school setting. Schools should also listen to autistic students when making decisions about their physical environments.

List of **Recommendations**



List of Recommendations

This section provides a complete list of the consensus-based Recommendations included in the National Guidance; it serves as a quick reference guide only.

It is important to note each Recommendation is informed by evidence from the research literature and community consultation activities. Recommendations should be considered alongside the detailed guidance on how the Recommendation could be applied, which is found in Sections 2-5 of this document.

Accompanying each Recommendation is a rating that reflects the strength of the evidence from the research literature and community consultation activities, which was used to inform the development of the Recommendation. The strength of evidence is categorised from "Not Recommended" to "High" based on criteria that were developed for each level of evidence. This is illustrated using a four-circle system (Not Recommended ○○○○, Very low ●○○○, Low ●●○○, Moderate ●●●○ and High ●●●●) which is described in Table 6.

All recommendations included in the National Guidance were supported by evidence rated as low, moderate, or high strength. Further explanation about the evaluation of the strength of evidence is provided in the National Guidance development process outlined below. Detailed information is available in the *Administration and Technical Report* which accompanies the National Guidance.

The strength of evidence rating of a given Recommendation does not indicate which Recommendation should be implemented first or prioritised. They are all equally important and should be applied together to support inclusive education for autistic students. Due to the rigorous gathering of evidence to inform the Recommendations, all Recommendations are considered best practice and should be implemented. Although they are listed in four sections, they many interconnect and impact on each other.

Section 1: Guiding Principles

What Guiding Principles should be followed when providing inclusive education to autistic students?

These Guiding Principles were developed by the Guidance Development Group (GDG) and further refined by the Guidance Reference Group (GRG); more details on these groups can be found under the section titled **Guidance development process**.28

The Guiding Principles also had community input. During the community consultation, survey respondents were invited to identify the key factors that support inclusive education for autistic students. Each person's response was read and checked to see whether it aligned with the Guiding Principles or whether it suggested anything that had not yet been considered. The responses were then used to review and improve the draft of the Guiding Principles. This process helped to refine the Guiding Principles of the National Guidance and ensure they reflect the community perspectives.

The community-informed Guiding Principles are presented below in alphabetical order. Although numbered, each is equally important and they should be considered together rather than in isolation.

Guiding Principle 1

Collaborative: The approach should be based on genuine and mutual collaboration between students, families, teaching staff, school leadership, administrative and school support staff, and allied health professionals across the whole school journey. Students should, to the extent possible, be actively involved in decisions affecting them. Decisions should be reasonable and desired by or acceptable to students.

Guiding Principle 2

Evidence-informed and practice-based: There should be a setting-wide commitment to ongoing learning based on research and lived experience, including from youth and families, to extend professional knowledge of autism and apply this knowledge to inform practice.

Guiding Principle 3

Neurodiversity-affirming / Based in social model of neurodiversity: An inclusive approach should recognise and celebrate the diverse neurological makeups of individuals, particularly those who are autistic. Neurodiversity-affirming schools should recognise systemic, social, and structural barriers and enablers to inclusion, and demonstrate commitment to removing barriers.

Guiding Principle 4

Personalised: Supports and adjustments in delivery, content, assessment, schedules, and participation should be designed for flexibility to meet each student's unique needs, strengths, and interests, and to incorporate students' views and their agency.

Guiding Principle 5

Proactive and coordinated: All actions should be planned and strategically implemented across the whole school journey, including transitions.

Guiding Principle 6

Respectful and culturally responsive: Approaches should be culturally safe and respectful of cultural, contextual, and individual diversity supported by a whole-school commitment to understanding, curiosity about, and responsiveness to diversity and inclusion.

Guiding Principle 7

Rights-based: All approaches to inclusion are grounded in a human rights approach that aims to promote and protect a student's right to accessing inclusive education at their local, regular school, ensuring accountability for educators to fulfill their obligations.

Guiding Principle 8

Student-centred: All activities should be based on a holistic understanding of the individual, including their needs, history, trauma, experiences, interests, strengths, goals, and areas for support.

Guiding Principle 9

Supportive: Social, physical, and educational spaces should be intentionally structured and designed to meet sensory, emotional, regulation, and learning needs.

Section 2: **Student wellbeing, belonging and relationships**

This section focuses on how schools can promote autistic students' wellbeing by supporting their mental health, fostering positive peer relationships, preventing harm, and strengthening a sense of connection and belonging. The Recommendations address four questions related to this topic:

- How can autistic students' mental health and wellbeing be supported in school?
- How can schools support and promote positive peer relationships for autistic students in school?
- How can autistic students be supported to feel connected and/or a sense of belonging in their school?
- How can bullying or negative interactions be prevented for autistic students in school?

How can autistic students' mental health and wellbeing be supported in school?

Recommendation 1

Reduce stress and uncertainty for autistic students by providing personalised supports that create predictable, neurodiversity-affirming approaches to learning, participation, and behaviour expectations.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 2

Ensure teachers are aware of the increased prevalence of mental health challenges among autistic students, the factors that are likely to lead to or increase mental health challenges for autistic students, and the influence of mental health challenges on behaviour.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 3

Implement proactive strategies to support autistic students' mental health, wellbeing, and emotional regulation, using both individualised and class- or setting-wide approaches.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 4

Foster a trusting, respectful relationship between each autistic student and key members of staff who understand the student, their interests, strengths, needs, and goals.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 5

Provide autistic students with access to qualified mental health practitioners or school counsellors who use neurodiversity-affirming approaches to equip students with strategies and skills to manage mental health challenges and strengthen wellbeing.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

How can schools support and promote positive peer relationships for autistic students in school?

Recommendation 6

Promote positive peer relationships for autistic students by creating a school culture that authentically celebrates autistic students and promotes inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming attitudes.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 7

Ensure that all students in the school community are provided with neurodiversity-affirming opportunities to learn skills to support social interactions and relationships.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 8

Respect autistic students' preferences when supporting the formation and maintenance of positive peer relationships.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 9

Intentionally provide accessible spaces and activities that encourage opportunities for all students to meaningfully engage with peers across all aspects of school life.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

How can bullying or negative interactions be prevented for autistic students in school?

Recommendation 10

Implement proactive strategies to prevent bullying by providing autistic students with access to trusted peers and safe, supervised spaces during less structured parts of the school day.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 11

Build a safe and supportive school culture that responds swiftly to any acts of bullying, harassment, or assault.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

How can autistic students be supported to feel connected and/or a sense of belonging in their school?

Recommendation 12

Enable autistic students to be their authentic selves by creating emotionally safe, predictable school environments.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 13

Ensure autistic students feel trusted, respected, heard, and valued by ensuring authentic listening to their perspectives.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

Section 3: **Pedagogy and teaching practices**

Pedagogy describes the ways teachers plan, teach, and support learning. This section focuses on teaching methods and classroom practices that enable inclusive education of autistic students. It considers what knowledge, skills, training, and support educators need, and how schools can plan and deliver inclusive teaching and learning for autistic students. The Recommendations address four questions related to this topic:

- What do teachers and schools need to know and do to plan, implement, and evaluate inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices for autistic students?
- How can autistic students be supported with equitable access to curriculum and assessment?
- How can school-wide pedagogical approaches support practices that provide equitable classroom engagement, participation, and progress for autistic students in inclusive classrooms?
- What knowledge, skills, training, and supports are required to prepare and sustain teachers for supporting autistic students?

What do teachers and schools need to know and do to plan, implement, and evaluate inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices for autistic students?

Recommendation 14

Adopt a personalised and flexible approach to planning, teaching, and evaluation to support and develop the individual learning needs and goals of autistic students.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 15

Deliver structured and consistent teaching to ensure clarity, predictability, and personalised opportunities for autistic students to practise and generalise learning across contexts.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 16

Collaboratively develop and regularly review individual education plans with autistic students, families, and professionals to align with student goals, needs, and preferences.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 17

Create emotionally safe learning environments through neurodiversity-affirming, trauma-informed pedagogy and teaching practices that foster belonging, wellbeing, and engagement.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

How can autistic students be supported with equitable access to curriculum and assessment?

Recommendation 18

Establish inclusive curriculum planning processes that centre on student perspectives, lived experience, and collaboratively designed adjustments.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 19

Design and implement flexible and responsive assessment practices to accurately capture autistic students' learning.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

How can school-wide pedagogical approaches support practices that provide equitable classroom engagement, participation, and progress for autistic students in inclusive classrooms?

Recommendation 20

Use strengths-based and neurodiversity-affirming language across all school communication and reporting practices.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 21

Embed inclusive teaching as part of a whole-school approach to facilitate equitable participation, engagement, and progress for autistic students.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

What knowledge, skills, training, and supports are required to prepare and sustain teachers for supporting autistic students?

Recommendation 22

Ensure teaching staff understand autism and autistic ways of learning, regulation, and engagement through ongoing professional learning, coaching, and collaboration.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Section 4: **Collaboration, connections and leadership**

This section outlines how schools can work in partnership with autistic students, families, and professionals to support consistency, shared understanding, and effective support across settings. It also addresses the role of school leadership in setting expectations, allocating resources, and embedding inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming practices across the school. The Recommendations address four questions related to this topic:

- What leadership approaches, including beliefs and use of inclusive language, best support and promote a culture where diversity is embraced?
- What approaches facilitate positive and collaborative relationships in school communities (e.g., school leaders, staff, and autistic students, parents, families, and allied health specialists) to support successful outcomes for autistic students?
- What leadership approaches best support a whole-school approach and culture of inclusion for autistic students?
- What professional knowledge, understanding, and resources do school leaders need to facilitate inclusive approaches in a school community?

What leadership approaches, including beliefs and use of inclusive language, best support and promote a culture where diversity is embraced?

Recommendation 23

Develop and communicate a setting-wide vision for inclusion that reflects neurodiversity-affirming values and is co-designed with input from autistic students and families.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 24

Ensure school leaders initiate evidence-based professional learning about autism and inclusive education, foregrounding lived experience and neurodiversity-affirming approaches.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 25

Ensure school leaders actively engage in and co-design school protocols for respectful, collaborative, and neurodiversity-affirming communication with autistic students and their families, recognising their expertise and central role in inclusive education.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 26

Establish and maintain a whole-school approach to inclusion through policies, practices, and culture that actively support autistic students' rights, strengths, needs, and wellbeing.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 27

Facilitate and engage in effective shared information/collaboration between staff and external specialists (e.g., therapists, psychologists, allied health professionals) to ensure consistent and coordinated approaches to effectively support autistic students with fidelity.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

What approaches facilitate positive and collaborative relationships in school communities (e.g., school leaders, staff, and autistic students, parents, families, and allied health specialists) to support successful outcomes for autistic students?

Recommendation 28

Establish setting-wide systems for effective communication and collaborative student support planning that include autistic students, families, educators, and specialists, ensuring consistent support and shared understanding.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 29

Establish and maintain respectful and equitable partnerships between schools, specialists, autistic students, and their families to support inclusive and strengths-based planning, wellbeing, and learning.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 30

Establish setting-wide systems for ongoing, job-embedded, evidence-informed professional learning about autism and inclusive education, with a strong emphasis on consulting with those who have autistic lived experience or use neurodiversity-affirming practice.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 31

Foster belonging, flexibility, and respectful collaboration with autistic students and their families to strengthen inclusive school procedures and practices.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

What leadership approaches best support a whole-school approach and culture of inclusion for autistic students?

Recommendation 32

Establish a multi-layered leadership approach that supports leaders to model and embed inclusion in strategic planning to foster a culture of belonging and respect for neurodiversity across the school.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 33

Establish systems that support teachers through professional learning, coaching, and mentoring to implement inclusive practices for autistic students.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 34

Create a school culture that is inclusive and culturally responsive and prioritises building positive relationships with autistic students, so they feel valued, respected, and supported across all environments.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 35

Establish and communicate a clear, setting-wide vision for inclusion, supported by consistent strategies, shared language, and neurodiversity-affirming practices that promote belonging, sense of connection, and respect for autistic students.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

What professional knowledge, understanding, and resources do school leaders need to facilitate inclusive approaches in a school community?

Recommendation 36

Ensure school leadership prioritises funding, time, and staffing to support professional learning, inclusive practices, and specialist support for autistic students.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 37

Support learning and use of resources across school communities that prioritise authentic collaboration and connection with families of autistic students to support inclusion, wellbeing, and learning.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 38

Ensure schools engage autistic people and autistic-led organisations to inform consistent messages, policy development, and inclusive practice.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Section 5: **Physical environment**

This section offers best-practice guidance for designing and adapting physical school environments to increase inclusivity and accessibility, thereby reducing sensory stress and promoting comfort, safety, and engagement for autistic students. The Recommendations address three questions related to this topic:

- How can all members of the school community design, promote, and sustain inclusive physical environments for autistic students?
- How can autistic students' agency, autonomy, and independence be supported through the design and creation of, and access to, indoor and outdoor physical environments?
- What knowledge and/or understanding is required to provide inclusive physical spaces that support positive educational outcomes for autistic students?

How can all members of the school community design, promote, and sustain inclusive physical environments for autistic students?

Recommendation 39

Designate specific, safe, and accessible spaces within the school environment where students can go when they need time to regulate, decompress, or manage sensory overload.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 40

Ensure the physical elements of the school environment are designed, adapted, and maintained to facilitate sensory and physical wellbeing for all students.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 41

Purposefully design the spatial organisation of the physical environment (indoor and outdoor) to ensure that all students can safely access, navigate, and engage with the space in ways that promote inclusion, independence, and meaningful learning experiences.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 42

During recreational time and unstructured learning times, provide safe and accessible spaces that are equipped to accommodate a range of physical activity levels, sensory preferences, and engagement styles.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 43

Design and maintain the school physical environment with input from stakeholders, using feedback to ensure it is inclusive, safe, accessible, and responsive to the diverse needs of autistic students.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

Recommendation 44

Provide flexible furniture options to accommodate diverse students' needs, promoting comfort, accessibility, and engagement across various activities.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

How can autistic students' agency, autonomy, and independence be supported through the design and creation of, and access to, indoor and outdoor physical environments?

Recommendation 45

Design and manage physical spaces to actively support and respect autistic student autonomy and independence, enabling autistic students to make choices about how they engage with and move through the environment.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 46

Embed autistic student perspectives in the analysis, design, and evaluation of physical school environments to actively support student agency.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

What knowledge and/or understanding is required to provide inclusive physical spaces that support positive educational outcomes for autistic students?

Recommendation 47

Implement neurodiversity-affirming training for staff and students that builds understanding of sensory responsivity and how environmental factors can influence individual students' experiences and learning.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 48

Regularly assess the physical school environment to identify and adapt sensory elements that may impact on autistic students differently.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

Introduction



Introduction

Background

What is autism?

Autism is one of many neurotypes: a way of experiencing and interacting with the world that shapes how a person understands and engages with others and their environment. It is not something to be "fixed", but a fundamental part of human diversity. Autistic students bring strengths, interests, and perspectives that enrich classrooms, childcare centres, and school communities.

Diagnostically, autism is described as a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in social communication, the presence of repetitive behaviours or focused interests, and/or sensory differences (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). There can be many barriers to accessing an autism assessment or receiving a diagnosis. As a result, some autistic students in classrooms, childcare centres, and schools may not yet be formally identified as autistic. Autistic students may also have co-occurring diagnoses, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), intellectual disability, anxiety, depression, or other mental health conditions. These co-occurring conditions can further shape a student's strengths as well as their learning, communication, wellbeing, participation, and support needs.

Inclusive education as a right

All autistic students have the right to access inclusive education in their local, regular school. Australia's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) affirms inclusion as a fundamental educational entitlement, requiring education systems and schools to remove barriers and to provide environments in which autistic students can participate meaningfully, belong, and thrive.

Inclusive education is defined by the United Nations CRPD General Comment No. 4 (2016) as:

> a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences. (p. 3)

This definition emphasises that inclusion is incompatible with exclusion or segregation, and requires transformation of education systems to:

> accommodate the differing requirements and identities of individual students, together with a commitment to removing the barriers that impede that possibility. It involves strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners. (pp. 2–3)

Many schools already work hard to support autistic students, yet research shows that systemic barriers persist, including inconsistent access to reasonable adjustments, limited autism knowledge of school staff and peers, sensory environments that can increase stress, and school cultures that do not always affirm neurodiversity. These barriers contribute to higher rates of exclusion,

disengagement, and mental health challenges for autistic students in Australia (Adams, 2022; Senate Select Committee on Autism, 2020). These impacts are not experienced equally. They can be particularly pronounced for autistic students with a co-occurring intellectual disability, those with complex or non-speaking communication profiles and those with multiple intersecting identities.

Intent of the National Guidance

This National Guidance responds to a longstanding need for clear, evidence-informed direction for inclusive practice in mainstream schools. It has been co-produced with autistic people, families, educators, and professionals across Australia, and provides practical, consensus-based Recommendations to support wellbeing, learning, belonging, and participation. All Recommendations have been designed to be applied across different educational contexts, and to be relevant to autistic students with a range of profiles. This includes autistic students with a co-occurring intellectual disability and those with complex communication or support needs.

Consistent with all aspects of inclusive education practice, effective implementation of the recommendations in this Guidance requires a detailed understanding of the individual student, including their communication profile, strengths, and support needs. The National Guidance recognises that autistic students are diverse across culture, language, gender, socioeconomic background, and co-occurring disabilities and health conditions, and that these intersecting identities shape educational experiences and outcomes. This includes autistic students with intellectual disability and those with complex communication needs, whose rights to inclusive education, communication, and participation must be explicitly supported. Inclusive education must respect and respond to this intersectionality to meet the needs of all learners. It must be culturally responsive and developed in partnership with families, communities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations (Lily et al., 2019). Incorporating a wide range of perspectives (families, students and staff) is therefore fundamental to supporting all autistic learners to thrive and flourish in education.

While previous national guidelines have addressed supports for autistic children in community and clinical settings, no equivalent, nationally consistent guidance has existed for inclusive education in Australian mainstream schools. This National Guidance responds directly to that need. It offers a comprehensive, evidence-based foundation for inclusive education for autistic students aged 3–18 years. It is designed to support schools and educators to create and ensure rights-based, neurodiversity-affirming practices that enable autistic students to flourish, benefiting all learners and strengthening school communities.

Just as creating an inclusive educational environment for autistic students requires collaboration among school staff, specialists, families, and students, this National Guidance has been co-produced with autistic people, families, educators, and professionals across Australia from the outset. This co-production has ensured that the priorities, expertise, and lived experiences of autistic students and their communities have shaped every element of its development.

Partnerships such as these are central to building school cultures, policies, and practices in which autistic students can flourish. Supporting this shift requires drawing on evidence-based and evidence-informed practices grounded in inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming values. Inclusive education is a shared responsibility across the education system, and when enacted effectively, it strengthens schools and enriches the educational experience for all.

Introduction to the National Guidance

What is the National Guidance?

In 2025, Autism CRC commissioned a Commonwealth-funded project to develop Australia's first *National Guidance for best practice in inclusive education for autistic students* (National Guidance). This National Guidance is one part of creating a society and systems that are more inclusive, equitable, and responsive. The National Guidance is primarily designed for schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings (hereafter "schools"). It provides evidence-based Recommendations for supporting positive academic, social, and wellbeing outcomes for autistic children and youth (hereafter "students") throughout their formal schooling in mainstream settings (pre-school to secondary, K–12). While written for schools broadly, the National Guidance is also valuable for school leaders, teachers, families, and professionals working with autistic students.

The National Guidance Recommendations and suggested ways the Recommendations could be applied were developed within an evidence-based practice framework, combining published research evidence with evidence drawn from community consultation with autistic youth and adults, school staff, specialists and professionals, and families.

An evidence-based and collaborative approach to inclusive education

While the term "best practice" is debated in the field, the National Guidance uses it to denote practices grounded in the strongest available research evidence and informed by community perspectives and lived experience. The Recommendations and suggested applications therefore represent well-supported approaches that can be adapted to individual students and local contexts, rather than prescriptive or universal solutions.

Support should be planned carefully across the whole school journey, including during transitions, with the aim to support autistic students to develop the skills that they need to successfully transition on from school and into safe and fulfilling adult lives. The intent is to support schools and other stakeholders to work together to enact inclusive principles and practices that are evidence-informed, responsive, and contextually appropriate.

Collaboration and listening to multiple perspectives will therefore be critical when planning, implementing and evaluating the impact of these recommendations. This includes schools working collaboratively with suitably qualified staff (e.g. allied health professionals, specialist teachers, etc.), and providing staff with relevant, high-quality professional development on knowledge and understanding of autism while working to implementing this Guidance. In particular, schools would ideally be creating regular opportunities for educational support staff (sometimes called teacher aides) to engage in opportunities to further develop their knowledge and skills, given the important role these members of staff play in the provision of support for autistic students.

Contextual considerations when implementing the National Guidance

In Australia, mainstream education contexts vary considerably. The National Guidance Recommendations, and the suggested ways the Recommendations could be applied, are intended to offer flexible, practical direction that can be adapted to local school contexts in ways that are relevant and meaningful.

In implementing this Guidance, it is essential to acknowledge the realities of current school and system conditions, including staff shortages, teacher workload, wellbeing, and the availability of time and resources. These are significant and valid considerations that reflect the need to improve supports through proactive approaches rather than reactive responses that may exacerbate these conditions. However, these constraints do not change what constitutes best practice, nor do they diminish the rights of autistic students to access inclusive, high-quality education and they should not reduce any person's commitment to ensuring those rights are upheld. Rather, they highlight the need for systemic support and cross-sector collaborations to enable schools and teachers to enact this Guidance effectively now and into the future.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the various legal frameworks that govern the work of schools, and to note that this Guidance is designed to sit alongside these important legislative responsibilities. The Guidance authors acknowledge that the creation of this Guidance is part of a longer journey toward creating truly inclusive educational experiences for autistic students in Australian schools.

Purpose and objectives

The National Guidance provides evidence-based guidance on best practice for inclusive education for autistic students. It does this by focussing on evidence-based ways to support positive academic, social, and wellbeing outcomes for autistic students throughout their formal schooling in mainstream schools (pre-school to secondary, K–12). Whilst the National Guidance is designed for schools (rather than for teachers specifically), many people, including school leaders, teachers, parents, and professionals working with autistic students, may find it helpful.

The National Guidance identifies a set of Guiding Principles for inclusive education of autistic students. These Guiding Principles inform the 48 Recommendations made in the National Guidance. The Recommendations are presented across four areas of significance in inclusive education for autistic students. These four areas are:

1. **Student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships**
2. **Pedagogy and teaching practices**
3. **Collaboration, connections and leadership**
4. **Physical environment.**

Scope

Table 1 outlines aspects that are in and out of scope of the National Guidance.

Table 1. The scope of the National Guidance

Aspect	In scope	Out of scope
Autistic children/ students	Children and young people aged 3–18 years who are diagnosed autistic or who are believed to be autistic (including imputed disability for school data collection purposes)	Autistic children or adults outside of this age range and who do not meet this criterion
Education setting	Any mainstream pre-school or school that delivers a formal curriculum for children and students aged 3–18 years. This includes government-funded kindergarten or pre-school programs, including those delivered in early childhood education and care settings (e.g., "Kindy approved" programs)	Segregated, exclusionary, and "special" models of schooling and education which are inconsistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities definition of inclusion (General Comment No. 4, CRPD, 2016)

National Guidance audience

The primary audience for the National Guidance is all ECEC settings and schools across Australia who are involved in planning and delivering inclusive education for autistic students. This includes, but is not limited to, government (state), independent (non-government), and faith-based primary and secondary schools, as well as government-affiliated and independent early childhood services, as outlined in the scope.

Secondary audiences include:

- educators in early childhood education, primary, and secondary settings who plan and deliver inclusive education for autistic students
- allied health and medical professionals who work with and support autistic students
- autistic students and their families, who can use this National Guidance to further their understanding around best practice inclusive education for autistic students
- governing bodies and departments of education in state, independent, and faith-based settings
- Australian training organisations, including peak bodies and higher education institutions, to develop and tailor training and qualifications focused on inclusive education for autistic students
- government agencies, to support evidence-based policy and funding decisions aligned with consensus Recommendations relevant to Australia's autistic communities.

Core Project Team

The Core Project Team was responsible for the day-to-day work of drafting and refining the National Guidance. They managed the technical aspects of National Guidance development, ensuring that all evidence is rigorously assessed and integrated. While they prepared draft Recommendations and supporting materials, the Guidance Development Group (GDG) and Guidance Reference Group (GRG) made final decisions on the content and direction of the National Guidance.



Professor Dawn Adams (Project Co-lead)

Dawn is the Endowed Chair of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) at La Trobe University and previous Director of the Autism Centre of Excellence at Griffith University. Dawn is a neurodivergent Clinical Psychologist and academic whose research focuses upon autistic students' wellbeing, with a particular focus on the school setting.



Professor Suzanne Carrington (Project Co-lead)

Suzanne has 30 years of experience working in universities including teaching, research, international development, and various leadership roles. She is a qualified teacher, and has worked in early childhood, primary, secondary and special schools. She was also the Program Director of the School Years Program for Autism CRC from 2013-2022. Suzanne's areas of expertise are in inclusive education, ethical/transformative leadership for inclusive schools, disability and teacher preparation for inclusive schools.



Dr Emma Goodall (Project Co-lead)

Emma (she/her) is an auDHD (autistic and ADHD) researcher, public policy professional and Co-Principal of a small school for gifted students. Her work within Australasia aims to improve life outcomes for neurodivergent individuals. She is an experienced and qualified teacher at pre-school and school levels and has worked across all levels of education as a teacher, specialist teacher, and consultant, including working with federally funded autism projects.



Associate Professor Kate Simpson

Kate (she/her) is the Director of the Autism Centre of Excellence in the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University. She is also the Program Director of Griffith University's postgraduate autism studies program. Kate is a qualified occupational therapist and a teacher (primary and special education). She brings over three decades of experience working with autistic people and their families.



Dr Annetta Cayas

Annetta (she/her) is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Griffith University who also lectures in teacher education at Queensland University of Technology. She is a registered secondary teacher and a parent of neurodivergent children. Annetta's research explores the intersection of families and schooling and investigates how educational policy and school requirements for parent engagement impact the day-to-day experiences of diverse young people, parents, families, and educators.



Dr Elizabeth J. Cook

Elizabeth (she/her) is autistic and has ADHD. She is currently a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the School of Education at Queensland University of Technology, and a sessional academic at Edith Cowan University. Elizabeth has over a decade of experience in education, evaluation, and applied research. She has contributed to large-scale evaluations for education departments, government agencies, and not-for-profits across early childhood, school, and higher education sectors.



Dr Louise White

Louise (she/her) is an autistic researcher, a registered teacher, and mother of autistic children. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Autism Centre of Excellence at Griffith University and at the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) at La Trobe University. Louise has won many awards and accolades for her doctoral research, which looked at identifying ways to effectively support autistic students' transition on from secondary schooling. Louise is an inclusive curriculum consultant and has taught in primary and secondary schools in both Australia and England.

Guidance **development process**



Guidance development process

The development of the National Guidance followed the approach of previous Autism CRC guidelines which were developed using the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Guideline for Guidelines Handbook (2016). A comprehensive description of the National Guidance development process will be provided in the *Administration and Technical Report* which accompanies the National Guidance.

Step 1: Establishing the Guidance Development Group

The first step was to establish a Guidance Development Group (GDG) to inform and advise on the development of the National Guidance Recommendations. The GDG is the governance and decision-making body for the National Guidance. Comprising a diverse group of stakeholders, and community representatives, the GDG provided oversight and strategic direction for the National Guidance development. They reviewed and critically appraised the draft Recommendations prepared by the Core Project Team in relation to the evidence, made final decisions about the content of the National Guidance, and ensured that the Recommendations are relevant, feasible, and acceptable to the intended users. The GDG also ensured the National Guidance reflects diverse perspectives, including those of autistic people, families, educators, and professionals.

To commence the process for establishing the GDG, the project Co-leads identified a range of perspectives that were critical to inclusive education for autistic students. These perspectives included lived expertise (autistic people, family members), professional expertise in education systems and inclusive education (including autistic teachers), and the lived expertise of First Nations persons.

The Co-leads also identified research expertise that would be relevant to the development of the National Guidance, including expertise in co-design of National Guidance development processes, and research activities such as systematic literature reviews and community consultation practices. Following this, the Co-leads identified people who had knowledge, skills, and experience relevant to each of these required perspectives, and distributed invitations via email. Consideration was given to ensuring diversity within the GDG.

The GDG was comprised of 14 members and includes autistic and non-autistic people who are researchers; experienced and/or currently practicing teachers across government and non-government early childhood, primary, and secondary education settings; a First Nations representative; and parents of autistic children, some of whom have complex support or healthcare needs. Many of the GDG members brought both professional and personal expertise relating to autism.

The GDG met fortnightly across the project duration and provided asynchronous feedback and input outside of this time. The collective GDG established Guiding Principles for the National Guidance and provided feedback that informed the development of the Recommendations. Processes were put in place to declare and manage any potential conflicts of interest. The GDG members are listed in Table 2.

The GDG members contributed their personal and professional knowledge, skills, experience, and perspectives to the development of the National Guidance. This included consultation and input in relation to research activities, and feedback on each draft of the National Guidance.

Table 2. Members of the Guidance Development Group (GDG)

GDG member	Affiliation, expertise
Dawn Adams	Project Co-chair, researcher at La Trobe University Neurodivergent researcher and clinical psychologist
Emma Goodall	Project Co-chair, auDHD researcher and consultant Special education and mainstream teacher trained (children 3–18)
Suzanne Carrington	Project Co-chair, researcher at Queensland University of Technology Special education and primary teacher trained
Kate Simpson	Researcher at Griffith University Occupational therapist, special education and primary teacher trained
Beth Saggers	Researcher at Queensland University of Technology Primary and special education teacher trained
Sofia Mavropoulou	Researcher at Queensland University of Technology Secondary and special education teacher trained
Annetta Cayas	Researcher at Griffith University Secondary teacher and inclusive education trained, parent of neurodivergent children
Chris Champion	Director, Positive Partnerships
Louise White	Researcher at Griffith University and La Trobe University Autistic primary and secondary teacher trained, educational consultant, parent of autistic children
Kathryn Ambrose	Early childhood and primary teacher trained, educational consultant, parent of autistic children with complex health conditions
Megan Gibson	Researcher at Queensland University of Technology Early childhood teacher trained
Becc Clark	Assistant Director Aboriginal Outcomes, South Australia Department for Education, Support and Inclusion Division First Nations representative
Tania Waring	Parent of an autistic child with complex needs
Rebecca Jessop	AuDHD primary teacher trained and education consultant, parent of an autistic child

Step 2: Establishing the Guidance Reference Group

The Guidance Reference Group (GRG) was established to support the development of the National Guidance. The GRG served as an advisory and consultative body that provided additional expertise, perspectives, wisdom of practice, and feedback throughout the National Guidance development process. The GRG reviewed draft Recommendations and supporting materials to ensure clarity, relevance, and practicality. Their input helped refine the National Guidance and enhanced its applicability across diverse contexts.

Members were representatives of national peak bodies and other organisations and services relevant to education, autism, and disability. These included federal, state, and territory departments of education; Catholic and independent education sectors; professional associations in education research and leadership; peak bodies, community partnership organisations, and societies in disability, autism, and education support services; and parents and families. The GRG representatives contributed their professional knowledge, skills, experience, and perspectives to the development of the National Guidance. This included consultation on research activities and feedback on each draft of the Recommendations. The GRG members are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Members of the Guidance Reference Group (GRG)

Organisation or Stakeholder Group	Representative(s)
Federal Department of Education	Esmeralda Rocha Jessica Bartlett (Proxy)
ACT Education Directorate	Jake Naylor
NSW Department of Education	Colleen O'Connell
NT Department of Education and Training	Serena Stirling
Queensland Department of Education	Vicky Booth
SA Department for Education	Anna Noble
Victoria Department of Education	Lia Castorina
Department of Education WA	Debbie Hawthorn
Australian Association of Special Education	Sally Howell
Australian Council of Education Leaders	Lisa Newell Peta Bartlett (Proxy)
Australian Council for Educational Research	Julie McMillan
Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership	Caroline Heysen
Australian Primary Principals Association	Angela Falkenberg
Australasian Society for Intellectual Disability	Teresa Iacono
Education Services Australia	Stacey Hattensen Rhiannon Bowen (Proxy)

Organisation or Stakeholder Group	Representative(s)
ICAN Network	Chris Varney
Isolated Children and Parents Association	Louise Martin
Independent Schools Australia	Tim Chugg
National Catholic Education Commission	Jeanine Gallagher
Professionals and Researchers in Early Childhood Intervention (PRECI)	Denise Luscombe
School Can't Australia	Louise Rogers Tiffany Westphal (Proxy)
Representing First Nations peoples	Peter Anderson

Step 3: Defining the questions and Guiding Principles of the National Guidance

The National Guidance addresses a set of questions relating to educational practices that affect the experiences and outcomes of autistic students. These questions were initially drafted by the Co-chairs and then reviewed by the GDG to ensure they were relevant, clear, complete, and well organised. The GDG were able to add, refine, or reorganise questions to improve the overall coherence of the National Guidance. The revised questions were then shared with the GRG for further feedback. Throughout this process, any proposed changes were discussed with the GDG, who made the final decisions on question wording. The final set of questions is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Questions addressed in the National Guidance

Key area	Questions
Overarching Principles (1 question)	What guiding principles should be followed when providing inclusive education to autistic students?
Student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships (4 questions)	How can autistic students' mental health and wellbeing be supported in school? How can schools support and promote positive peer relationships for autistic students in school? How can bullying or negative interactions be prevented for autistic students in school? How can autistic students be supported to feel connected and/or a sense of belonging in their school?
Pedagogy and teaching practices (4 questions)	What do teachers and schools need to know and do to plan, implement, and evaluate inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices for autistic students? How can autistic students be supported with equitable access to curriculum and assessment? How can school-wide pedagogical approaches support practices that provide equitable classroom engagement, participation, and progress for autistic students in inclusive classrooms? What knowledge, skills, training, and supports are required to prepare and sustain teachers for supporting autistic students?
Collaboration, connections and leadership (4 questions)	What leadership approaches, including beliefs and use of inclusive language, best support and promote a culture where diversity is embraced? What approaches facilitate positive and collaborative relationships in school communities (e.g., school leaders, staff and autistic students, parents, families, and allied health specialists) to support successful outcomes for autistic students? What leadership approaches best support a whole-school approach and culture of inclusion for autistic students? What professional knowledge, understanding, and resources do school leaders need to facilitate inclusive approaches in a school community?

Key area	Questions
Physical environment (3 questions)	How can all members of the school community design, promote, and sustain inclusive physical environments for autistic students? How can autistic students' agency, autonomy, and independence be supported through the design and creation of, and access to, indoor and outdoor physical environments? What knowledge and/or understanding is required to provide inclusive physical spaces that support positive educational outcomes for autistic students?

The National Guidance is based on a set of Guiding Principles that underpin every Recommendation. These were drafted by the Core Project Team, and discussed and revised by the GDG and then the GRG. During community consultation, 827 people shared their views on what is important for creating inclusive schools for autistic students, including those with diverse backgrounds, identities, and co-occurring disabilities. Each response was carefully analysed to help refine and clarify the descriptions of the Guiding Principles. This process ensured that the Guiding Principles align closely with community values. The final Guiding Principles used to inform the National Guidance are summarised in Section 1.

Step 4: Gathering evidence

The GDG recognised that evidence can take many forms. To ensure the Recommendations in the National Guidance were rigorous, relevant, and truly reflective of the autistic community's needs, a large-scale, mixed-methods approach was undertaken. This combined three key sources of evidence that overlapped to inform the National Guidance, as per Figure 1.

1. **Community perspectives**
   Extensive community consultation engaged more than 800 interested participants in an online survey, focus groups, interviews, and a Delphi study with experienced school leaders. This broad consultation across Australia, and representing diverse backgrounds, identities, and co-occurring disabilities, ensured the National Guidance reflects the values and priorities of autistic people and their communities.
2. **Published research evidence**
   Seven systematic literature reviews were conducted, examining over 64,000 articles published in the past 10 years. For three sections of the National Guidance, multiple reviews were done to capture a broad range of evidence.
3. **Professional wisdom**
   The National Guidance also integrates the expertise of professionals in education, autism, disability, advocacy, and inclusive education through the GRG.

Figure 1. Forms of evidence informing the National Guidance



The community consultations, Delphi study research, and reviews were completed between July and September 2025 using a structured process. Ethical clearance for the community consultation activities was obtained through Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (2025/449; 2025/472; 2025/505). The day-to-day work in gathering evidence was primarily undertaken by the three Co-leads (Dawn Adams, Emma Goodall, and Suzanne Carrington) alongside four additional researchers (Kate Simpson, Annetta Cayas, Elizabeth Cook, and Louise White). Additional research assistant support was provided by Lynsey Kennedy-Wood, Kalani Madhusha Loku Liyanage, Lauren Moses, Chris Paradisis, Abby Sesterka, Raechel Smart, Megan Tones, and Gilly-Elle Wiltshire. One third of the team openly identify as autistic. The majority of the other team members identify as neurodivergent and/or parents of autistic or neurodivergent children.

The mixed-method community consultation activities and systematic literature reviews will be described in detail in the *Administration and Technical Report* (which accompanies the National Guidance) and briefly summarised below.

Community consultations

Extensive community consultation engaged interested participants from across Australia, representing diverse backgrounds and identities. Participants shared their lived experiences and knowledge through accessible methods. The community consultation activities are described in further detail in **Appendix A: Community consultation activities conducted as part of the National Guidance development process**. These activities are briefly described below.

4. A national online community survey with responses from 793 adults and 34 autistic youth, with representation from all states and territories across Australia. The online survey asked participants' views and perspectives about inclusive education for autistic students in regular (mainstream) schools. This survey enabled participants accessible options for responses, including typing, voice or video recording, or submitting artwork.
5. Online focus groups (13 groups with up to six participants in each) and individual interviews. These were designed to seek in-depth perspectives from autistic people and community members about the principles and practices that constitute best practice for inclusive education for autistic students in mainstream schools. In total, four autistic youth and 56 autistic adults, parents, educators, school support staff, allied health professionals, and other interested community members provided their views.
6. A Delphi study with experienced school leaders (principals, deputy principals, and middle leaders such as heads of wellbeing or inclusion). The Delphi study aimed to gain the professional perspectives and wisdom of experience of school leaders on the principles and practices that are important for ensuring best practice in inclusive education for autistic students. This involved an iterative process across four survey rounds of seeking perspectives from 24 participants, summarising these views, and asking participants to rank the key ideas generated from all responses. The aim was to reach consensus about the most important factors regarding leadership in inclusive education for autistic students.

Every survey response, transcript of interviews and focus groups, and Delphi study response was read in detail and relevant content that answered the questions set in the National Guidance was used to inform the National Guidance development process. This ensured that the Recommendations reflect the priorities and views of the autistic and autism communities. The process of coding and checking for coding accuracy is detailed in the *Administration and Technical Report* (which accompanies the National Guidance).

Systematic literature reviews

To ensure the Recommendations were grounded in the most current, high-quality evidence from around the world, seven systematic reviews of existing research literature were conducted. In developing the National Guidance, multiple systematic literature reviews were performed to capture evidence across the broad topic area. This rigorous process provides confidence that the Recommendations are robust, well founded, and reflective of the best available knowledge. The seven systematic literature reviews related to the four sections of the National Guidance are detailed in Table 5.

Table 5: Systematic literature reviews informing key areas of the National Guidance

Key area	Systematic literature review topics
Student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships	i) Mental health ii) Belonging, identity, and bullying
Pedagogy and teaching practices	iii) Pedagogy iv) Teacher training
Collaboration, connections, and leadership	v) Collaboration and connections in inclusive education vi) Leadership in inclusive education[1]
Physical environment	vii) Physical environment

In total, across the seven reviews, 64,434 articles published in the last 10 years were identified. After these were screened for relevance, 507 articles remained. Each of these 507 included articles was read, and relevant data were extracted and reviewed. Each article was also reviewed for quality using a standardised assessment of reporting quality (the Quality Appraisal for Diverse Studies [QuADS]).

Step 5: Moving from evidence to Recommendations

The development of the National Guidance Recommendations was co-produced with input from the GDG, and feedback from both the GDG and GRG. Moving from evidence to Recommendations was a systematic process that was informed by the NHMRC Evidence to Decision (EtD) Framework. This involved analysing the evidence and writing the Recommendations as outlined below.

Analysing the evidence

The Recommendations in each of the four key areas were developed based on the evidence from the systematic literature reviews and community consultation activities, supplemented with input from the GDG and feedback from the GRG.

The coded community survey data were read and reviewed, and similar codes clustered to provide answers to the questions for research activities and community consultation. The same process was then undertaken for the focus group and interview data. The data from the systematic literature reviews were initially coded using the codes from the community consultation data, with extra codes added if needed (i.e., if the research data covered something additional or different from the community data).

[1] An additional search in Google Scholar was conducted for this key area, as fewer than 100 articles were returned after title and abstract screening. No other area required this additional database search.

The data from the Delphi study were read and reviewed, and responses grouped into key ideas. Participants were then asked over subsequent rounds to rank these key ideas from most to least important for inclusive education leadership. In the final round, a consensus was reached about how best to lead inclusive education for autistic students in Australian schools.

Writing the Recommendations

Each Recommendation was based on the categorised evidence and written as statements that formulated explicit, detailed, and actionable Recommendations in response to each of the questions for research activities and community consultation. To support practical implementation, suggestions of ways the Recommendations could be applied were then drafted by the Core Project Team. The Core Project Team provided ratings for each Recommendation based on the strength of the evidence as listed below.

Strength of evidence from the community views (survey, focus groups and interviews, Delphi study where applicable):

- confidence was judged in relation to strength of agreement, consistency, richness, and directness.

Strength of evidence from the research data (systematic literature reviews):

- confidence was judged in relation to quality and bias, consistency, directness, precision, publication bias, and total sample using the QuADS appraisal tool.

Overall rating:

- a best judgement was made of the strength of the evidence, based on the combination of the community views and research data.

The ratings could be *High strength of evidence*, *Moderate strength of evidence*, *Low strength of evidence*, *Very low strength of evidence*, or *Not recommended* (i.e., indication of harm) based on the evidence. In this document, the overall rating is provided to indicate the strength of evidence supporting the Recommendation, which is depicted using a scale of circles. Information about what constitutes each of these ratings, together with the graphic circles, is shown in Table 6. Further information is available in the *Administration and Technical Report* which accompanies the National Guidance.

Table 6. Graphic scale signifying strength of evidence for the National Guidance Recommendations

Graphic scale	Strength of evidence
●●●●	**High strength of evidence** – the Recommendation is well supported by a range of evidence across research data and community views
●●●○	**Moderate strength of evidence** – the Recommendation is supported by some evidence across research data and community views but the strength of evidence may not be equal in both sources
●●○○	**Low strength of evidence** – the Recommendation is supported by some evidence, or evidence from research or community views, but further research is required
●○○○	**Very low strength of evidence** – the Recommendation is supported by very limited or inconsistent evidence
○○○○	**Not recommended** (i.e., indication of harm) – the evidence suggests harm may result from such activity, therefore not considered appropriate practice

The strength of evidence rating for each Recommendation is intended to support users by informing them of the extent to which evidence (research and lived experience) supports the Recommendation made. The strength of evidence rating of a given Recommendation does not reflect whether that Recommendation should be implemented or prioritised. Due to the rigorous gathering of evidence to inform the Recommendations, all Recommendations in the National Guidance met criteria at "Low" strength of evidence or higher. The National Guidance Recommendations therefore represent best practice and should be implemented. The complete set of judgements is provided in the Supporting Evidence document accompanying this National Guidance.

The Core Project Team prepared the draft National Guidance and shared it with the GDG, alongside the complete set of community views and research evidence. These documents were reviewed and then discussed by members at a meeting of the GDG. The Core Project Team reviewed and revised the Recommendations and application examples based on feedback from the GDG. The Recommendations and application examples were then shared with the GRG who provided feedback. Feedback from the GDG and GRG was implemented into the National Guidance and the updated National Guidance alongside "you said, we did" logs shared with the GDG and GRG. Both the GDG and GRG provided approval for this version of the National Guidance to go out for public consultation.

Step 6: Public consultation

Public consultation on the Draft National Guidance and supporting documents (Summary of Evidence) opened on 13 February 2026 and closed on 15 March 2026 (a four-week period).

Ahead of public consultation
The Core Project Team, in collaboration with the GDG and GRG, prepared the Draft National Guidance and supporting documents (Summary of Evidence) for public consultation.

Autism CRC prepared an Easy Read version of the Guiding Principles and updated its website to invite the public to participate in the consultation process. Their website included a video explaining the consultation process, links to all draft documents, and access to the online consultation survey instrument designed to capture feedback from the public.

The survey instrument was developed by the Core Project Team in collaboration with the GDG, GRG and Autism CRC, and was delivered via Accessible Surveys. It included a Participant Information Statement and Consent Form. Participants had the option to provide general feedback on the National Guidance, specific feedback on Recommendations, and rate each Recommendation's clarity, feasibility, impact, and risk of harm. Participants could respond flexibly to any or all questions. Participants were also able to provide feedback as individuals or organisational representatives. Organisational representatives could also submit an extended written response on behalf of their organisation.

The consultation was initially promoted via email to Autism CRC's communications database, with targeted invitations to key professional and consumer organisations. Announcements were also made via social media. GDG and GRG members were invited to disseminate the consultation through their professional networks.

During public consultation
Reminders about the public consultation process were distributed via email, social media, and paid advertising campaigns (Facebook and LinkedIn) by Autism CRC, and on shared by the Core Project Team, and GDG and GRG members.

After public consultation
The survey was accessed 454 times. In total, 287 provided individual responses and 44 responded on behalf of organisations, with four organisations submitting extended written feedback via the survey. Of the individual responses, 173 (59.9%) continued beyond the demographic questions to include feedback. Of these, 122 consented to their feedback being published and their feedback is included in tables within the *Public Consultation Summary*.

Analysing feedback and revising the National Guidance
All feedback was systematically reviewed and used to inform revisions to the National Guidance.

Feedback was grouped by relevant sections and allocated to key area leads for detailed review. Each item of feedback was reviewed by at least two members of the Core Project Team, with consensus reached through discussion. Where required, decisions were escalated to the broader team. Proposed changes were considered by the GDG, with consensus guiding final decisions.

Where changes were agreed, key area leads revised the National Guidance and updated all supporting documents. Feedback tables (provided in the *Public Consultation Summary*) were compiled documenting each comment, response, and any resulting changes. These were reviewed and endorsed through a consensus process, with final oversight by the Co-leads.

Guidance Development Group and Guidance Reference Group review of feedback and changes
GDG members were provided with a penultimate draft of the National Guidance, including tracked changes and responses to feedback. Members reviewed and provided input via email, document edits, and/or discussion.

Following final revisions, all documents were circulated to GDG and GRG members for endorsement. Members were offered opportunities to discuss any outstanding questions prior to finalisation of the National Guidance. GRG and GDG members communicated by email, verbal acknowledgement during the final meeting, or completion of an online form to confirm their endorsement of the final National Guidance.

Reading the **National Guidance**



Reading the National Guidance

The National Guidance is structured into a set of consensus-based Recommendations and suggestions for ways the Recommendations can be applied or implemented in practice. The National Guidance recognises that there is a diverse audience with a variety of individual contexts, perspectives, needs, and requirements that shapes the way people may wish to engage with the Recommendations and suggestions for implementation. This means the National Guidance is presented in a way that does not suggest greater significance or importance of some areas or Recommendations over others. Instead, the National Guidance has built an important interconnectedness between the Recommendations across key areas. This reflects the interconnected nature of people and structures that are interwoven into supporting students.

Improving outcomes for students is at the core of inclusive education theory, policy, and practice. Therefore, the key areas of the National Guidance are presented in a way that centres students and builds an ecosystem of support surrounding them. The key areas are:

1. **Student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships**
2. **Pedagogy and teaching practices**
3. **Collaboration, connections, and leadership**
4. **Physical environment.**

While the Recommendations are presented in these sections, they are intended to be implemented as a cohesive, interconnected framework. Recognising that every autistic student, and every school, is unique, there is no requirement for the Recommendations to be read or implemented in a specific order or sequence.

Notes on language and terminology

Language and words can have powerful impacts on individuals, groups of people, and society more broadly. The National Guidance authorship team recognise that no single set of terms can fully capture the diversity of people, experiences, and practices described within it. Where possible, the National Guidance uses clear, commonly understood language to support accessibility and shared understanding. Definitions are provided in Appendix B. Glossary for terms that require further clarification or elaboration. The sections below outline important considerations regarding language use throughout the National Guidance.

Talking about autism

The National Guidance has been developed using neurodiversity-affirming concepts and language. This means the language used is intentional: it values difference, diversity, individual people, and their strengths and support needs. The National Guidance therefore uses identity-first language (e.g. “autistic person”) as research suggests this is often preferred by autistic people who take part in the research (Kenny et al., 2016). Furthermore, during the writing of previous Guidelines (e.g., Trembath et al., 2022), comprehensive work was undertaken to understand the views of the community on how to talk about autism. This work also found that identity-first language is commonly preferred by autistic people.

However, it is also acknowledged that there are diverse views and individual preferences when it comes to language. Accordingly, education settings are encouraged to be guided by, and to respect, the language and terminology preferences of each autistic child or young person and their family.

Talking about parents, carers, and families

The National Guidance uses the term *parents* as a collective descriptor, while acknowledging that children and young people may be supported by a wide range of adults, including caregivers, carers, guardians, kinship carers, extended family members, and adults in blended, kinship, or rainbow families. The National Guidance also recognises that many autistic children have autistic and/or neurodivergent parents. Education settings are encouraged to respect and respond to the communication preferences of autistic and/or neurodivergent parents when working collaboratively to implement the Recommendations.

Talking about children, youth, and students

The National Guidance uses the term *students* as a collective descriptor, while acknowledging that this term is not typically used in relation to children and learners in ECEC settings, as identified in scope. For simplicity and readability, the term students is used throughout the National Guidance to refer to all children and young people within scope, including those in ECEC and school settings.

Talking about schools and education settings

The National Guidance uses the term *school* as a collective descriptor, while acknowledging that this term is not typically associated with ECEC settings, as identified in scope. For clarity and consistency, references to schools should be understood to include early learning and school settings that deliver a formal curriculum for children and young people aged 3–18 years. This includes government-funded kindergarten or pre-school programs delivered within ECEC services (e.g., “Kindy-approved” programs).

Involving autistic students in decision-making

The National Guidance uses the term *co-design* to describe approaches that draw on the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, including autistic students, parents and families, allied health and medical professionals, and education and external staff, to identify and develop equitable approaches and solutions. Meaningful involvement of autistic students in decision-making requires communication approaches that are responsive to individual needs, strengths, and preferences. This may sometimes be referred to as student voice, with acknowledgment of the diverse ways students communicate, including through augmentative and alternative Communication (AAC; see **Appendix B: Glossary**).

The notion of best practice

The National Guidance uses the term *best practice* to reflect the evidence-informed foundation of the Recommendations, while acknowledging that no single approach will be appropriate for all students or settings.

Talking about inclusive education

The National Guidance uses the term *inclusive education* as defined by the United Nations CRPD Global Comment No.4 (2016) as:

> a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences. (p. 3)

This definition emphasises that inclusion is incompatible with exclusion and segregation, and that it requires systemic transformation across education settings.

Talking about plans that support autistic students

The National Guidance uses the term *individual education plans* (*IEPs*) to refer to formalised plans that support individual students across educational domains, including academic, social, emotional, wellbeing, and attendance-related needs. Such plans may be known by different terms across sectors and jurisdictions, including reasonable adjustment plans, learning support plans, personalised learning plans, or support plans.

Making use of the National Guidance

To make the best use of this National Guidance, schools are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the full document. The Recommendations address the whole school experience of autistic students and are grounded in the Guiding Principles and four interconnected domains: student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships; pedagogy and teaching practices; collaboration, connections, and leadership; and the physical environment. The Recommendations are designed to work together as a coherent framework and are most effective when considered and implemented as a whole, rather than in isolation.

For each Recommendation, the National Guidance provides examples of ways it could be applied in practice. These examples are not intended to be prescriptive or exhaustive. They recognise that schools and other learning settings must be responsive to the strengths, needs, and preferences of individual autistic students, and to the unique contexts of each educational setting. Instead, they are offered as practical illustrations of the types of activities, processes, approaches, and actions that schools may consider when planning and implementing inclusive practice.

Some Recommendations also include context-specific examples for particular education settings (e.g., early childhood, primary, secondary). These examples are intended to support implementation by providing greater clarity where this may be helpful, while recognising that schools and settings vary widely in structure, resources, and communities. Schools are encouraged to adapt these examples in partnership with students, families, and staff to fit their local context.

Section 1:
Guiding principles



Section 1: Guiding Principles

What Guiding Principles should be followed when providing inclusive education to autistic students?

These Guiding Principles were developed by the GDG and further refined by the GRG. During community consultation, respondents were invited to identify the key factors that support inclusive education for autistic students. Their feedback was carefully reviewed and used to validate, improve, and ensure that the Guiding Principles reflect the broader community's perspectives.

The Guiding Principles are presented in alphabetical order; however, each is equally important and they should be considered together rather than in isolation.

Guiding Principle 1

Collaborative: The approach should be based on genuine and mutual collaboration between students, families, teaching staff, school leadership, administrative and school support staff, and allied health professionals across the whole school journey. Students should, to the extent possible, be actively involved in decisions affecting them. Decisions should be reasonable and desired by or acceptable to students.

Guiding Principle 2

Evidence-informed and practice-based: There should be a setting-wide commitment to ongoing learning based on research and lived experience, including from youth and families, to extend professional knowledge of autism and apply this knowledge to inform practice.

Guiding Principle 3

Neurodiversity-affirming / Based in social model of neurodiversity: An inclusive approach should recognise and celebrate the diverse neurological makeups of individuals, particularly those who are autistic. Neurodiversity-affirming schools should recognise systemic, social, and structural barriers and enablers to inclusion, and demonstrate commitment to removing barriers.

Guiding Principle 4

Personalised: Supports and adjustments in delivery, content, assessment, schedules, and participation should be designed for flexibility to meet each student's unique needs, strengths, and interests, and to incorporate students' views and their agency.

Guiding Principle 5

Proactive and coordinated: All actions should be planned and strategically implemented across the whole school journey, including transitions.

Guiding Principle 6

Respectful and culturally responsive: Approaches should be culturally safe and respectful of cultural, contextual, and individual diversity supported by a whole-school commitment to understanding, curiosity about, and responsiveness to diversity and inclusion.

Guiding Principle 7

Rights-based: All approaches to inclusion are grounded in a human rights approach that aims to promote and protect a student's right to accessing inclusive education at their local, regular school, ensuring accountability for educators to fulfill their obligations.

Guiding Principle 8

Student-centred: All activities should be based on a holistic understanding of the individual, including their needs, history, trauma, experiences, interests, strengths, goals, and areas for support.

Guiding Principle 9

Supportive: Social, physical, and educational spaces should be intentionally structured and designed to meet sensory, emotional, regulation, and learning needs.

Section 2:
Student wellbeing, belonging and relationships



Section 2: **Student wellbeing, belonging and relationships**

This section focuses on how schools can promote autistic students' wellbeing by supporting their mental health, fostering positive peer relationships, preventing bullying, and strengthening a sense of connection and belonging. The Recommendations address four questions related to this topic:

- How can autistic students' mental health and wellbeing be supported in school?
- How can schools support and promote positive peer relationships for autistic students in school?
- How can autistic students be supported to feel connected and/or a sense of belonging in their school?
- How can bullying or negative interactions be prevented for autistic students in school?

Before engaging with these Recommendations, you are strongly encouraged to review:

- The **Guiding Principles**, which underpin all aspects of the National Guidance and provide essential context for their interpretation and application.
- The defined **Scope** of the National Guidance (Table 1).
- The **Writing the Recommendations** section (Table 6, in Step 5 of the Guidance development process), which describes how the "Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation" was formed.
- The **Glossary** (Appendix B), which supports a shared understanding of key terms used throughout.

How can autistic students' mental health and wellbeing be supported in school?

Recommendation 1

Reduce stress and uncertainty for autistic students by providing personalised supports that create predictable, neurodiversity-affirming approaches to learning, participation, and behaviour expectations.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Collaborate with students and families to create individual education plans (or relevant alternative) with proactive supports and environmental adjustments that promote predictability and reduce stress. This may include strategies to minimise stress during arrival and departure from school. Ensure these are implemented consistently. Consistent, effective supports also foster positive self-esteem and a strong learner identity.
- Resource staff to consistently implement adjustments that enable full participation in all school activities and spaces, including excursions, camps, and other outside-of-school activities (e.g., school carnivals or fairs).

- Offer choices in participation and learning formats to empower students and to minimise pressure. Empower autistic students to make their own choices about how they would like to participate in school life and respect their decisions. Use a variety of methods to empower autistic students to do this in the way in which they are most comfortable (e.g. using AAC, selecting objects that represent activities, or share their views in writing, in meetings, via email, etc).
- Adjust workload, pacing, attendance, and task formats collaboratively with the student, family, and professionals to accommodate fluctuating capacity and/or emotional needs of the autistic student. Allow time for regulation and recovery. Regularly update these adjustments to ensure they continue to meet the needs of the student.
- Provide advance notice of changes and ensure that autistic students have input into their plan for transitions or off-schedule events to maintain predictability and reduce anxiety.
- Plan school activities, events, camps, and excursions with inclusion and student wellbeing as priorities. Empower autistic students to have input into how they want to participate and what supports they need before, during, and after the event. Ensure liaison with any external providers regarding accommodations or supports.
- In ECEC settings, use age or developmentally-appropriate visual supports including pictures, symbols, objects and/or photographs, to support predictability.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 2

Ensure teachers are aware of the increased prevalence of mental health challenges among autistic students, the factors that are likely to lead to or increase mental health challenges for autistic students, and the influence of mental health challenges on behaviour.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide professional development for all school staff on autism, neurodiversity, and mental health, including how these intersect. Training should be relevant to the context, and build understanding and awareness to help staff support students effectively. This recognises the important role of school staff in supporting mental health of autistic students, but diagnosing or treating mental health conditions is the role of mental health practitioners.
- Provide professional development to staff working directly with autistic students that focuses on recognising and responding to autistic students' mental health needs, even in the preschool years. This can be achieved through providing information on how signs of mental health are often behavioural and differ from neurotypical presentations, information on strategies to adapt environments to reduce stress and support regulation, and information on approaches that should not be used as they trigger or exacerbate mental health challenges experienced by autistic students.
- Ensure staff are aware of the increased likelihood of anxiety and depression in autistic children. Anxiety and depression often occur earlier in autistic students than in non-autistic students, with anxiety being commonly reported in young (i.e., pre-school) autistic children. For staff in ECEC settings, add prompts for regular wellbeing check-ins to templates used for note-taking when completing observations relating to autistic children within the setting.

- Use case studies, co-designed training, input from autistic people and mental health professionals, and reflective practice sessions to support staff to maintain confidence and skill in recognising and responding to signs of mental health challenges in autistic students.
- Use team discussions to remind staff of the importance of recognising early indicators of distress in autistic students and avoid misinterpreting signs of distress as defiance or poor behaviour. Ensure considerations of the students' mental health and wellbeing (including positive self-identity and self-esteem) are central to the formation of any support plan for behaviour. Ensure that all plans expressly acknowledge that behaviour is often communication of unmet needs.
- Emphasise proactive wellbeing strategies and environmental adjustments for autistic students, such as sensory adjustments, mentoring and scheduled and proactive times for rest and recharge.
- Ensure staff access specific training or professional learning on camouflaging and masking in autistic students, how this makes it difficult to identify autism and/or mental health challenges, and its impact on educational experiences.
- Ensure that all staff are aware that for many autistic students, there may be multiple factors leading to mental health challenges present in school, and that it may not be possible to address all at once. Staff may need to adopt flexible approaches, such as temporarily reducing non-essential demands and/or prioritising reducing the most significant stressors, to support student wellbeing.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 3

Implement proactive strategies to support autistic students' mental health, wellbeing, and emotional regulation, using both individualised and class- or setting-wide approaches.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Schedule regular emotional wellbeing check-ins with a trusted staff member with whom the autistic student feels safe (recognising that feeling safe is a subjective experience). The check-ins should be co-designed with the autistic student to ensure they are responsive and sustainable. Use preferred formats (e.g., thumbs up/down/sideways, rating scales, verbal responses, email check-in) and support staff to be able to respond proactively with agreed strategies.
- Recognise each autistic students' strengths and successes to build confidence and connection. Provide genuine, individualised positive feedback that acknowledges each autistic students' effort, persistence, and self-advocacy. As not all autistic students will like overt praise, positive feedback should always be delivered in a way that aligns with the students' needs and preferences.
- Work with the autistic student, family, and professionals to identify and anticipate more stressful points (e.g., transitions, assessments, assemblies, changes to typical schedules such as the last week of term or a school trip) and plan supports (for both the student and teacher) in advance.
- Embed wellbeing and emotional literacy into the ECEC or school activities using concrete, visual, and inclusive approaches. Help teachers to model ways to describe and express their emotions by naming their own feelings as they arise. Support staff to normalise conversations about emotions and mental health through tools like emotion wheels and regular check-ins.
- Explore different self-regulation strategies with the class. Ensure these include options for those who are still developing self-regulation skills. Having a range of options helps each child to find what helps them to regulate their emotions in different contexts.
- Support students to develop interoceptive awareness so they can notice and respond to building emotions. Staff should also model self-regulation and collective care to maintain capacity and avoid co-escalation.
- Ensure individual education plans (or relevant alternative) prepared collaboratively with autistic students prioritise the perspective of the student, and include proactive strategies to increase wellbeing and regulation, including developing interoceptive awareness. Ensure that diverse communication methods are used to enable autistic students with higher support needs to provide this feedback. Regularly monitor impact of plans and adjust as needed.
- Normalise help-seeking and emotional regulation through activities that are embedded into the school day. These can be specific to each class or part of whole-school wellbeing approaches.
- Ensure that resources and materials used to discuss emotions are neurodiversity-affirming and reflect autistic as well as non-autistic experiences.
- Ensure that wellbeing supports, clubs, or workshops offered are neurodiversity-affirming and inclusive for autistic students.
- Support transitions (between years, from ECEC into school or from school into boarding school, senior school, tertiary education, or employment) with targeted wellbeing planning and coordination across services. Acknowledge the impact of various factors (e.g., being rural/regional) on how these supports may need to be focused.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 4

Foster a trusting, respectful relationship between each autistic student and key members of staff who understand the student, their interests, strengths, needs, and goals.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Use student input, available family insights, and professional advice to guide and monitor personalised strategies that promote mental health and engagement. For example, the student may be able to identify if they would benefit from having a consistent, trusted staff member as a primary contact to support wellbeing and to suggest who this may be. In boarding contexts, students may also wish to identify a trusted staff member in the boarding house.
- Ensure key staff learn about autistic students' interests, strengths, preferences, goals, communication preferences, and cultural identities and languages, and consider this when co-designing wellbeing support. Creating profiles can be an effective way to do this. Respectfully share insights across staff to ensure consistent understanding and support for emotional and social needs.
- Use collaboration between school staff, the student, families, and allied health professionals to get to know more about the student and their wellbeing. This should include factors that influence their wellbeing, indicators of their wellbeing, and behaviours that may occur during times of poor wellbeing.
- Maintain regular communication with families and relevant professionals. This will ensure that information that supports the continued development of trusting relationships is shared regularly with key staff members.
- Ensure transition strategies utilised at enrolment prioritise the formation of autistic learners' relationships with key staff (i.e., class teacher, teacher aide, ECEC staff, learning support/inclusive education teacher, etc.). Having trusting relationships with at least two staff minimises stress for the child when one key staff member is not available.
- Ensure key staff are easily identifiable even for any autistic students with difficulty recognising faces (prosopagnosia, also known as face-blindness, estimated to be present in almost one third of autistic people).
- Support autistic students to have regular, autonomous access to key staff members.
- Acknowledge the importance of early formation of trusting relationships with key staff for students in remote/rural areas who may be travelling large distances or moving away from home to access education.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 5

Provide autistic students with access to qualified mental health practitioners or school counsellors who use neurodiversity-affirming approaches to equip students with strategies and skills to manage mental health challenges and strengthen wellbeing.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Facilitate autistic students' access to school-based staff with mental health expertise (i.e., psychologists, counsellors, or trained wellbeing specialists) who use neurodiversity-affirming approaches that respect and build on autistic students' strengths and preferences. As access may take time, plan proactively and provide interim supports to maintain student wellbeing.

Roles and responsibilities for facilitating access should be clear and coordinated across school leadership, wellbeing teams, and classroom staff. In ECEC settings, partner with school counsellors, psychologists, or allied health professionals who are experienced working with young autistic children.

- Student mental health should be considered a serious matter and decisions around student mental health should be made in alignment with qualified professional advice (where provided). Where medical recommendations (e.g., short-term leave, adjusted requirements to task or attendance) are provided, school processes should respect and incorporate that advice in conjunction with documented consultation with the student and their family.
- Promote clear, ongoing dialogue between mental health practitioners, families, and schools to facilitate consistency of strengths-based, neurodiversity-affirming, proactive mental health support strategies used across home and school environments.
- Create opportunities for staff and autistic students to collectively learn wellbeing and regulation skills alongside, or from, wellbeing staff or mental health practitioners. Invite practitioners to model co-regulation approaches, for example, guiding students through grounding activities or supporting transitions. Ensure these activities are adjusted so that they are accessible for autistic students with higher support needs. Normalising these practices by embedding them into class and across the school helps to reduce stigma and promote a culture of collective wellbeing.
- Offer training to help staff recognise that regulation is a developmental and relational process, including co-regulation, shared regulation, self-regulation. This training should also support staff to offer a range of regulation strategies that support autistic students at all ages and stages.
- Use the expertise of mental health professionals to develop staff knowledge around camouflaging and masking and its role in mental health challenges of autistic students.
- Support the development of interoceptive awareness in appropriate ways, such as through action songs, workshops, or group activities. Higher levels of interoceptive awareness are associated with lower levels of mental health symptomology.
- Take proactive steps to address contributors to poor mental health. This could include embedding calming, predictable routines into the day, with mental health practitioners helping staff to tailor co-regulation approaches for individual students, and making suitable environmental adjustments to address identified needs.
- Enable suitably qualified professionals to conduct in-school observations or centre visits, and to provide expert guidance based on their observations.
- Discuss resourcing and options of psychologists with families, and explore multiple options of how students can access psychologists. These psychologists may be school-based or external.
- In secondary contexts, support collaboration between practitioners and teachers to adapt strategies to subject-specific contexts (e.g., managing sensory demands in practical subjects, navigating group work, or planning breaks during long lessons).

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

How can schools support and promote positive peer relationships for autistic students in school?

Recommendation 6

Promote positive peer relationships for autistic students by creating a school culture that authentically celebrates autistic students and promotes inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming attitudes.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Implement strengths-based education about autism and neurodiversity across the whole school to encourage empathy, understanding and appreciation of diverse ways of thinking and learning
- Respect autistic students' right to determine if/when they disclose to their peers that they are autistic and be mindful that support may be needed to share in ways that feel safe.
- Recognise and respect diversity through inclusive events, ensuring autistic students are actively involved in planning and representation during assemblies, awareness days, and setting-wide initiatives, and aim to include all members of the wider school community in these events. Ensure these events showcase all students' strengths and talents in ways that reflect their individual communication styles and preferences.
- Recognise diverse strengths and talents in award systems and celebrations, providing equitable opportunities for all students to be acknowledged for academic, creative, and social contributions.
- Provide ongoing and focused staff training on neurodiversity-affirming practices, including language use, use of alternative communication methods, inclusive attitudes, and respectful classroom practices. Broaden the impact of this by offering information sessions on autism and neurodiversity to the broader school community and focus on challenging misconceptions through these activities.
- Ensure resources are available for autistic students that reflect their interests and areas of strength to foster a love of learning.
- Engage families of all students in creating a neurodiversity-affirming culture by sharing lists of neurodiversity-affirming resources and/or recommendations of information sessions that promote understanding of neurodiversity beyond the school context.
- Ensure any IEP goals focused on social outcomes are informed by the autistic student's views and preferences. Use personalised communication methods to enable autistic students with higher support needs to share their views.
- In ECEC contexts, explicitly teach and model how to include others in play, respect different communication and play styles, and recognise that behaviours may communicate different needs, preferences, emotions, or sensory experiences. Provide adult-facilitated play opportunities where young children can practice inclusive ways of playing, communicating, and responding to one another.
- In primary and secondary contexts, co-construct class expectations with all students. Ensure these include expectations for respectful language, flexible approaches to participation, and respectful understanding of sensory needs.
- Authentically highlight the strengths of autistic students in wellbeing and inclusion efforts, creating tailored opportunities to showcase their talents and interests and to contribute

meaningfully to school culture. Ensure autistic students lead these efforts, to avoid tokenism and to ensure representations of autism are not stereotypical or 'othering'.
- In primary and secondary contexts, prioritise the representation of autistic perspectives. Empower autistic students' leadership through committees, panels, and clubs that support autistic students' participation in events and advocacy activities.
- *See Recommendation 35 for further content related to creating a school vision for/culture of inclusion.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 7

Ensure that all students in the school community are provided with neurodiversity-affirming opportunities to learn skills to support social interactions and relationships.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Take whole-class approaches to explicitly teach autistic and non-autistic students about different communication styles and positive, respectful relationships. For younger students, this may include using role modelling and storytelling to teach students about respectful communication and relationships and bodily autonomy and consent. Stories may need to be explained where autistic students have a literal understanding of language.
- Implement activities that utilise dance, music, drama, stories, media, toys, or group discussions to support students' development of skills that foster positive and respectful social interaction.
- Support all students to develop the individual and personalised skills they need for healthy friendships including self-advocacy, decision-making, and problem-solving of relationships. When necessary, consult with allied health professionals to support this. In ECEC settings, this could include teaching all children to recognise and respect different ways of communicating, playing, and interacting with others, play materials, and the environment.
- Provide support for autistic and non-autistic students to develop skills in understanding and respecting different approaches to social communication and interaction. Use concepts such as the double-empathy problem to encourage discussions about mutual adaptation and creating positive interactions.
- Collaborate with families and relevant professionals to identify individual autistic learners' communication preferences and teach all students and staff the skills needed to respect these preferences (e.g., boundary setting, articulating concerns).
- Look within the existing curriculum areas or find new spaces to create neurodiversity-affirming opportunities for autistic students to learn relationship skills such as self-advocacy, decision-making, and problem-solving.
- Offer autistic students optional support to learn strategies for navigating non-autistic communication styles, empowering them to use them confidently if and when they choose to do so.
- Provide whole-school education programs that focus on respectful relationships.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 8

Respect autistic students' preferences when supporting the formation and maintenance of positive peer relationships.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Respect autistic students' play, interaction, communication, and relationship preferences in supporting the development of authentic friendships. This includes individual preferences on how many friends autistic students want to have, how often they want to interact, and the types of friendships that feel right for them. Some autistic students may prefer one close friend, a small and predictable peer group, or infrequent social contact; all of these are valid. Allow autistic students to have alone time, for both learning tasks and play, recognising that socialising may be draining for them.
- Work collaboratively with autistic students and their families to understand and support the formation of relationships with peers who share interests and/or preferences, or who are likeminded. The autistic student's perspective should be at the centre of decision making. Be mindful that these likeminded peers may be in a different age group or identify with a different gender, and do not assume that a peer is likeminded just because they are also neurodivergent.
- Support the maintenance of existing friendships, where possible, by ensuring autistic students are placed in classes, groups, houses, and activities with established friends, especially during times of transition (e.g., into primary school, into high school or boarding school, to offsite training courses, during staff changes, and into a new school year).
- Provide structured social support and resources to all students which are adapted to respond to the specific social challenges they report and the school context they are in. Allow autonomy in how and when these are used.
- Use age-appropriate methods (e.g., role play, modelling, puppets, story books, or whole-class approaches) to demonstrate common friendship challenges and skills to navigate these for all students.
- Provide access to counsellors and other supportive adults to support all students when navigating social challenges.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 9

Intentionally provide accessible spaces and activities that encourage opportunities for all students to meaningfully engage with peers across all aspects of school life.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Support positive peer relationships by providing groups and activities during less structured times of the day, such as lunch and breaks. Where possible, allow mixed ages within these groups to support friendships across age ranges. These opportunities should be thoughtfully designed to reflect the interests, passions, and communication preferences of autistic students, enabling social engagement that is meaningful from the students' own perspective. It is important that these opportunities are optional, as not all autistic students will want to participate or have the capacity to do so.
- In ECEC contexts, incorporate the interests of autistic students when creating play-based activities, with opportunities for solo play, parallel play, and group play.
- Ensure policies actively support autistic students' access to lunch and break activities to spend time with their peers or to rest and recharge. This can be achieved by avoiding using such times for homework or classwork completion, or for implementation of behavioural consequences.

Instead, create policies that promote and respect autistic students' need for rest and social interaction during these times.

- Provide autistic students with meaningful opportunities to participate in all aspects of school life, including extracurricular programs, leadership roles, and responsibilities such as classroom jobs or assemblies. Design leadership and responsibility roles that celebrate diverse strengths and talents, and ensure they are responsive to autistic students' needs, preferences, and abilities so they can engage positively with peers.
- In secondary contexts, establish a co-designed peer mentoring system to support autistic students' social connection.
- Provide dedicated, supervised spaces where autistic students feel safe (recognising that feeling safe is a subjective experience that can be understood through seeking student perspective) and can engage with like-minded peers and/or engage in relaxing activities (that may be solitary or with peers). This is especially important during less structured parts of the school day and outside of lesson times.
- *See Recommendation 10 for further content related to using spaces proactively to support autistic students' sense of safety.*
- *See Recommendation 42 for further content related to the design of specific safe spaces for autistic students.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

How can bullying or negative interactions be prevented for autistic students in school?

Recommendation 10

Implement proactive strategies to prevent bullying by providing autistic students with access to trusted peers and safe, supervised spaces during less structured parts of the school day.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide adequate active supervision in parts of the school where bullying behaviours may be more likely to occur (e.g., locker rooms, bathrooms, oval).
- Provide pre-planned, supported, supervised activities and play or leisure opportunities for autistic students during less structured parts of the day (e.g., lunch, breaks, "free time", etc.). These should be informed by autistic students' perspectives, and should be optional, respecting that some autistic students may need or prefer to rest and recharge during these times.
- Prioritise placement of autistic students with trusted peers where possible when planning excursions, camps, and other school activities. Ensure that these efforts respect the privacy and dignity of the autistic student.
- In ECEC settings, explicitly teach and model inclusive ways of playing and interacting, including how to invite others without pressure, respond respectfully when someone says no, and notice when another child may need space, support, or a different way to participate.
- In boarding school contexts, consider the importance of placing autistic students with trusted peers when planning living arrangements.

- With guidance from school staff, support responsible peers to recognise when a peer may welcome connection, companionship, or practical support, while respecting autonomy and individual preferences.
- Make sure staff understand their obligations for student safety across all areas of the school and provide autistic students with access to specific safe spaces, especially during less structured parts of the day.
- *See Recommendation 9 for further content related to providing access to safe spaces.*
- *See Recommendation 11 for further content related to the importance of creating a school-wide culture of safety.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 11

Build a safe and supportive school culture that responds swiftly to any acts of bullying, harassment, or assault.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Create neurodiversity-affirming school policies and procedures that commit to action on any allegation of bullying, harassment, or assault (including online and on social media), and that detail expectations for immediate responses to reported incidents. Ensure alignment with Standard 8.3 of the Disability Standards for Education (2005), titled "Eliminating harassment and victimisation", which requires schools to take reasonable and proactive steps to prevent, identify, and respond to harassment or victimisation of students with disability.
- Engage students in development of policies and procedures designed to reduce bullying, with explicit focus on addressing beliefs, understandings, and attitudes that lead to, or enable, bullying behaviours. In ECEC settings, this could include working with children to develop simple, age-appropriate expectations about including others, respecting differences, keeping each other safe, and responding when someone is hurt or left out.
- Regularly promote the school's anti-bullying, pro-kindness, and pro-inclusion stance, through assemblies, awareness events, promotional materials (e.g. posters, billboard images, screen savers), and communications sent home, such as newsletters. Embed anti-bullying, pro-kindness, and pro-inclusion messages within the curriculum.
- Educate school staff in identifying the signs that autistic students may be victims of bullying.
- Promptly undertake inquiries into complaints about other people's behaviour impacting an autistic student's wellbeing, taking time to understand the autistic student's experiences and prioritise their safety.
- Ensure bullying investigations are authentic, fair, and transparent.
- Ensure all students are explicitly taught how to recognise and explain bullying, including incidents that are less obvious and harder to detect. In ECEC contexts, this would involve explicitly teaching what it means to be kind and unkind, using picture books, puppets, or other age-appropriate methods.
- Implement efficient systems to ensure autistic students can easily report incidents of others' behaviour that were distressing or perceived as bullying. Consider how these systems can be accessible for autistic students with higher support needs, by enabling sharing of experiences using a range of communication methods.

- Empower autistic students to recognise and act at the initial signs of bullying behaviour by peers, and to seek help from supportive adults who recognise and understand the social communication profiles of autistic students and the importance of early action to prevent compounding effects.
- Offer bullying victims access to support from relevant staff, such as counsellors or members of school leadership.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

How can autistic students be supported to feel connected and/or a sense of belonging in their school?

Recommendation 12

Enable autistic students to be their authentic selves by creating emotionally safe, predictable school environments.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Create a school where autistic students feel that they are welcome, belong, and do not feel the need to mask by teaching all students about autism and neurodiversity. This could be through curriculum content and whole-school initiatives that build understanding, respect, and appreciation of diverse ways of thinking and learning. Ensure any curriculum materials that represent autistic people (i.e., books, film materials, case studies, etc.) are neurodiversity-affirming. Where possible, ensure these are selected in conjunction with autistic students.
- Engage autistic students in developing setting-wide expectations that promote respect and appreciation of individual differences (e.g., not insisting on eye contact or specific body language).
- Ensure provision of controllable environmental elements (e.g., high sensory input or low sensory input) and invite students to discuss preferences and make adjustments to explore their preferences.
- Collaborate with autistic students, their families and allied health team to identify sensory triggers and helpful sensory supports that help students feel regulated, safe, and able to participate authentically in school activities. Normalise consideration of needs and preferences by discussing what each student may need or want for upcoming tasks.
- Support flexible participation options and respond positively to autistic students' requests for regulation strategies, such as breaks or alternative ways to engage in activities. Recognise that participation for autistic students may not always mean being directly involved; it may mean observing or having a different role (e.g., umpire, scorer) in the game.
- Ensure staff recognise the importance of, and are trained in, using neurodiversity-affirming practices to build trusting relationships with autistic students. Increase staff understanding of autistic students' sensory, communication, and regulation needs to help foster environments where autistic students feel safe to be their authentic selves. Train staff to understand that sensory and emotional regulation needs are central to wellbeing, not behavioural issues.
- In ECEC contexts, encourage educators to observe and respond to early signs of dysregulation, offering calm co-regulation strategies. Recognise that autistic students often have differences in their interoceptive awareness and ensure that this is discussed as a difference, not classified as a problem or deficit.

- Ensure school-wide predictability. For example, display clear visual schedules and use consistent routines for starting and ending lessons, and for break times and other school activities. Support predictable schedules by providing visual or digital timetables and advance notice of timetable or teacher changes. Have a plan in place for unpredictable times, such as always going to the support office if there is a substitute teacher.
- Help autistic students to plan for busy or unstructured times (e.g., recess, assemblies) or changes to typical schedules (e.g., the last week of term).
- Use visual or auditory signals to cue transitions, giving autistic students time to adjust.
- Respect autistic students' right to determine if/when they disclose to their peers that they are autistic. Carefully protect confidentiality.
- Work with students to create expectations for respectful classrooms.
- *See Recommendation 15 for further content related to using structured and consistent teaching to ensure clarity and predictability for autistic students.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 13

Ensure autistic students feel trusted, respected, heard, and valued by ensuring authentic listening to their perspectives.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Use student-preferred communication methods (e.g., augmentative and alternative communication [AAC] which may include visuals or written communication) to ensure every autistic student can express themselves and be meaningfully heard. Offer training to staff and peers in alternative communication methods to support two-way communication in autistic students' preferred methods.
- Embed autistic student perspectives in decision-making through varied feedback channels like discussions, surveys, creative mediums, and involvement in planning processes. Use child-relevant tools (e.g., visuals, emotion scales) to gather views.
- Act on autistic student input transparently and fairly, showing how their perspectives shape learning supports, classroom environments, and school schedules, reinforcing trust and respect. In ECEC contexts, use visual and play-based tools to help autistic students to express ideas about their day or experiences.
- Provide access to trusted adults (teachers, heads of year, counsellors, etc.) who are trained in empathetic, neurodiversity-affirming communication and active listening. Ensure regular contact with these trusted adults to help to create, build, and maintain safe and respectful relationships.
- Intentionally listen to autistic students' perspectives by embedding neurodivergent student input across curriculum areas, well-being and personalised learning processes. Demonstrate authentic listening by allowing autistic students time when seeking their thoughts and taking time to consider the range of views shared in reflective practice. Use approaches such as student consultations, strength-based profiles, co-developed plans, and ongoing feedback loops to support shared decision making and goal-setting.
- Invite families to share how their autistic child communicates their likes, dislikes, and comfort levels, and use this knowledge to shape schedules and predictable environments. In secondary contexts, recognise growing autonomy by consulting autistic students directly rather than solely through parents.

- *See Recommendation 14 for further content related to implementing personalised approaches for autistic students.*
- *See Recommendation 23 for further content related to using autistic student perspectives to co-design a vision for inclusion.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

Section 3: **Pedagogy and teaching practices**



Section 3: Pedagogy and teaching practices

Pedagogy describes the ways teachers plan, teach, and support learning. This section looks at teaching methods and classroom practices that enable inclusive education of autistic students. It considers what knowledge, skills, training, and support educators need, and how schools can plan and deliver teaching and learning for autistic students. The Recommendations address four questions related to this topic:

- What do teachers and schools need to know and do to plan, implement, and evaluate inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices for autistic students?
- How can autistic students be supported with equitable access to curriculum and assessment?
- How can school-wide pedagogical approaches support practices that provide equitable classroom engagement, participation, and progress for autistic students in inclusive classrooms?
- What knowledge, skills, training, and supports are required to prepare and sustain teachers for supporting autistic students?

Before engaging with these Recommendations, you are strongly encouraged to review:

- The **Guiding Principles**, which underpin all aspects of the National Guidance and provide essential context for their interpretation and application.
- The defined **Scope** of the National Guidance (Table 1).
- The **Writing the Recommendations** section (Table 6, in Step 5 of the Guidance development process), which describes how the "Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation" was formed.
- The **Glossary** (Appendix B), which supports a shared understanding of key terms used throughout.

What do teachers and schools need to know and do to plan, implement, and evaluate inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices for autistic students?

Recommendation 14

Adopt a personalised and flexible approach to planning, teaching, and evaluation to support and develop the individual learning needs and goals of autistic students.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Adopt universal design for learning (UDL) principles when planning, teaching, and evaluating teaching practices, to provide flexible options that allow autistic students to access, engage with, and demonstrate learning in ways that align with their individual strengths and needs.

- Embed flexible supports and accommodations as part of everyday classroom routines and expectations that enable students to access help or to use supports as needed, and reduce stigma and barriers.
- Enable autistic students to follow or draw on their interests and strengths in completing tasks, whether or not the task is open ended or inquiry based, and provide explicit scaffolding for open-ended tasks as needed.
- Monitor autistic students' engagement and learning outcomes and use this information to evaluate and refine teaching practices.
- Support teachers to adapt to autistic students' strengths, interests, and preferences in planning and teaching. Promote the use of a variety of learning activities – including explicit instruction, inquiry-based projects, real-world problem solving, and flexible grouping (e.g., small-group, paired, or individual tasks) – to provide students with options to engage in ways that match their preferences.
- Ensure flexible supports are available in ECEC and school settings where feasible and accessible, particularly in rural, regional, and remote settings where there may be geographical, staffing or resourcing challenges.
- Ensure opportunities for self-selection of supports and adjustments are available across all school and ECEC contexts (e.g., access to quiet spaces, choice of group work partners), not limited to specific subjects or settings.
- Document all agreed adjustments (e.g., task formats, timelines, assistive tools), including supports for complex needs and co-occurring disabilities, within individual education plans for easy access by teachers.
- Integrate systems for sharing student documentation (including individual education plans) with all teaching staff, including relief teachers, to ensure continuity of personalised supports and accommodations across all learning contexts.
- Ensure all staff are supported to listen to students, respond to their expressed needs and preferences, and use this information to guide individual learning goals and supports.
- *See Recommendation 13 for further content related to listening to autistic students' perspectives to support implementation of personalised approaches.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 15

Deliver structured and consistent teaching to ensure clarity, predictability, and personalised opportunities for autistic students to practise and generalise learning across contexts.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Establish consistent classroom and whole-school processes and practices that support predictability during lessons, transitions, and breaks.
- Regularly check students' understanding and engagement and use this information to adjust teaching, ensuring supports are flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of autistic students.
- Ensure staff use clear, literal language and explain non-literal figures of speech or sayings (such as similes and metaphors) when they occur.
- Provide visual supports (e.g., pictures, diagrams, checklists, timers) when appropriate, tailored to each autistic students' needs and preferences. Use these to scaffold learning and/or clarify

tasks or expectation (e.g., photos or diagrams for each step) when they align with the students' strengths and sensory profile.

- Explicitly teach skills and provide autistic students with repeated opportunities to practise these across different subjects, tasks, and formats (e.g., written, hands-on) so they can apply learning in varied contexts.
- Use structured and visually supported teaching. Maintain these supports even after students demonstrate independence to reduce stress and support consistency. If supports are amended or reduced, this should be guided by the student and be undertaken in an agreed, planned way that continues to support independence and application of skills beyond the classroom.
- *See Recommendation 12 for further content related to ensuring predictability outside the classroom setting to support autistic students.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 16

Collaboratively develop and regularly review individual education plans with autistic students, families, and professionals to align with student goals, needs, and preferences.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide time and support for school staff to engage meaningfully in planning, designing and reviewing plans with autistic students, families, and other relevant staff.
- Collaboratively develop individual education plans with input from autistic students, families, teachers with expertise in inclusive practice, allied health professionals, and other relevant staff, so plans are informed by both lived experience and specialist knowledge.
- Ensure autistic students can share information about their needs and preferences for teaching, learning, regulation (e.g., preferred seating, sensory tools), wellbeing, curriculum, and assessment, and incorporate these into relevant decisions about individual goals, supports, accommodations, and educational planning.
- Support self-advocacy and ownership of individualised adjustments by providing explicit training and guidance for autistic students on how to communicate their needs and preferences. When collaborating on plans, use communication methods that suit the autistic students' preferences (e.g., spoken language, written responses, or Augmentative and Alternative Communication [AAC] such as communication boards or speech-generating devices).
- Ensure staff continually deepen their understanding of each autistic students' unique strengths, needs, and preferences by actively seeking their perspectives, engaging in ongoing observations, and reflecting thoughtfully on educator-student interactions (e.g., noting shifts in interests, learning preferences, and support needs). Staff can share these insights collaboratively when developing or updating individual education plans.
- Support staff to use individual education plans as a tool for ongoing reflection and evaluation (e.g., in team meetings or on progress tracking charts), regularly assessing both teaching practices and student learning by monitoring progress toward collaboratively developed goals, and identifying what works well and where further support or improvement is needed.
- Ensure any accommodations that differ from standard expectations (e.g., permission to leave class, uniform variations) are clearly communicated to all staff interacting with the student, to prevent misunderstandings or inadvertent exclusion.

- Establish effective school-home communication practices (e.g., regular emails, communication books, or online portals) to enable ongoing collaboration about learning goals, strengths, and support needs.
- Establish systems for sharing student documentation (including individual education plans) and communicating agreed goals with all stakeholders (e.g., digital IEP platforms, shared folders) to ensure continuity and consistency of personalised supports across learning contexts.
- *See Recommendation 28 for further content related to establishing setting-wide systems for effective communication and collaborative student support planning*.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 17

Create emotionally safe learning environments through neurodiversity-affirming, trauma-informed pedagogy and teaching practices that foster belonging, wellbeing, and engagement.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Foster emotionally safe learning environments by encouraging staff to consistently demonstrate respect, acceptance, and belief in each students' worth and value. This may be particularly important following times of dysregulation or distress.
- Ensure all staff understand and use neurodiversity-affirming practices and how these can be applied in their pedagogical practice.
- Ensure staff are trained in and apply trauma-informed pedagogical approaches. These recognise the potential impact of stress and trauma on learning and behaviour, support both students and staff to regulate emotions, and avoid practices that may cause harm (e.g., public shaming, restraint, planned ignoring, public behaviour charts, comparisons, or practices that may stigmatise or shame students).
- Support the wellbeing needs of adults in the school community through training and structures that promote calm and compassionate responses to students. This helps to create a stable learning environment where adults can model and foster co-regulation, reducing the risk of escalating situations that disrupt learning.
- Ensure school staff collaborate with autistic students and families to identify and reduce stressors and barriers in the school environment and use this understanding to inform adjustments in teaching approaches and classroom arrangements.
- Provide staff with the time and resources that support authentic engagement with autistic students, fostering choice and autonomy over aspects of the learning environment.
- Embed inclusive pedagogical and teaching practices into setting-wide systems, documentation, and professional learning to ensure continuity and sustainability of support for autistic students during staff and leadership transitions.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

How can autistic students be supported with equitable access to curriculum and assessment?

Recommendation 18

Establish inclusive curriculum planning processes that centre on student perspectives, lived experience, and collaboratively designed adjustments.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Consult and collaborate regularly with autistic students and families during curriculum planning, delivery, and review, including co-decisions about curriculum topics and task formats, to ensure adjustments reflect student perspectives and lived experience, and to respond to individual strengths and needs.
- Support the adaptation of curriculum materials and resources to reflect autistic students' interests, strengths, and learning profiles.
- Work with teaching teams, school leadership, teachers skilled in inclusive practice, support staff, and external professionals (e.g., allied health and other specialists) to build a shared understanding of individual autistic students' strengths, needs, and preferences in relation to curriculum planning, especially for those with complex needs and co-occurring disabilities.
- Ensure educators use iterative cycles of curriculum planning, delivery, and review that incorporate feedback from autistic students and families. This ongoing process supports refinement of inclusive pedagogical practices and helps to assess the impact of adjustments.
- *See Recommendation 13 for further content related to ensuring authentic listening to autistic students' perspectives.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 19

Design and implement flexible and responsive assessment practices to accurately capture autistic students' learning.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Collaboratively design assessment formats and rubrics – including criteria for success – using input from autistic students, families, teachers with inclusive practice expertise, allied health professionals, and/or other relevant staff as needed. Create libraries of examples or templates of co-designed assessments and rubrics and enable mentorship opportunities to support teachers who are new to the co-design process.
- Minimise assessment demands by focusing on essential assessable elements in tasks and rubrics, removing barriers so autistic students can demonstrate core learning outcomes.
- Ensure that approaches to assessment for autistic students are flexible and personalised, and enable students to demonstrate their learning in ways that are accessible and authentic to them. Invite autistic students' input on preferred ways to demonstrate learning.
- Offer a selection of tasks and assessment formats (e.g., oral, visual, digital, multimodal) as multiple assessment pathways to promote agency and equitable access, with new options introduced gradually and supported by explicit teaching and scaffolding. Include opportunities for autistic students to reflect on and review criteria for success.

- Ensure autistic students can access familiar or preferred assistive technologies and alternative communication methods during assessments, so adjustments support learning and enable students to demonstrate their best work in ways that reflect what they know and can do, rather than creating barriers. Ensure that assessment outcomes reflect students' learning, not their proficiency with assistive tools, unless the use of technology is an explicit assessment goal.
- Provide regular opportunities for autistic students to practise using assistive technologies and alternative communication methods in everyday learning activities, not just during assessments.
- Plan to deliver assessments in ways that support autistic students' executive functioning and regulation needs, such as providing access to quiet spaces, interoception activities, self- and co-regulation tools, sensory tools, visual schedules, or flexible seating arrangements. Where possible, provide options for assessment timing, location, and pacing that are responsive to autistic students' needs and preferences, to maintain regulation, reduce stress and support valid demonstrations of learning.
- Provide tools and strategies to help students break large assessment tasks into manageable chunks and pace their work to meet deadlines, such as checklists, step-by-step guides, timers, or interim checkpoints. Facilitate autistic students' agency by incorporating clear, visually supported structures (e.g., steps, checkpoints, exemplars) and communicating these early during the assessment cycle.
- Document and regularly review assessment adjustments in IEPS to confirm they remain effective, equitable, and aligned with students' strengths, preferences, and ways of demonstrating learning.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

How can school-wide pedagogical approaches support practices that provide equitable classroom engagement, participation, and progress for autistic students in inclusive classrooms?

Recommendation 20

Use strengths-based and neurodiversity-affirming language across all school communication and reporting practices.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Ensure educators use strengths-based and neurodiversity-affirming language in everyday teaching interactions, classroom communication, and reporting. Provide training in these areas if required. Ensure that educators recognise these are related but distinct approaches for promoting positive identity development and student engagement.
- Consistently use affirming language, embedding strengths-based, neurodiversity-affirming terminology in school documents, classroom materials, and communication.
- Support staff to model inclusive language in the classroom, such as explicitly affirming each students' unique way of engaging and communicating.
- Promote the use of positive regard and curiosity in all written and verbal communication about autistic students, including descriptions of learning and observable behaviour. This includes

avoiding deficit-based language; blaming, shaming, or judging language; and assuming intent behind actions.

- Guide staff to talk about student behaviour with curiosity and support, describing behaviour as information and an opportunity to provide help, rather than as something to punish or judge.
- Review reporting templates and feedback systems to ensure they reflect strengths-based and neurodiversity-affirming language, including in subject-specific feedback and reporting that focuses on what students can do, rather than what they have not demonstrated.
- *See Recommendation 35 for further content related to using language and neurodiversity-affirming practices to support a vision for inclusion.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 21

Embed inclusive teaching as part of a whole-school approach to facilitate equitable participation, engagement, and progress for autistic students.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Support all staff to develop a shared understanding of inclusive pedagogy and consistent approaches to supporting autistic students.
- Create opportunities for staff to participate in communities of practice with colleagues (e.g., through team meetings, peer observation) to reflect on and share strategies for inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices.
- Take part in collaborative planning, mentoring, and reflective practice with teaching teams (e.g., scheduled planning sessions, peer feedback) to embed inclusive teaching practices across all learning spaces.
- Ensure educators apply inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices in planning and review cycles, incorporating feedback from autistic students, those with lived experience, families, and other stakeholders.
- Make effective use of online learning and communication platforms to support inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices, and to promote consistency and equitable participation across all learning spaces in schools and ECEC contexts.
- Contribute to staff development plans and coaching frameworks by setting and working toward goals for inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices.
- Ensure educators have the opportunity to reflect on and address biases in their practice, to challenge ableism, and to adapt curriculum delivery to meet the needs of all students.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

What knowledge, skills, training, and supports are required to prepare and sustain teachers for supporting autistic students?

Recommendation 22

Ensure teaching staff understand autism and autistic ways of learning, regulation, and engagement through ongoing professional learning, coaching, and collaboration.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide opportunities for staff to engage in evidence-based professional development to learn about autism and autistic ways of learning, and on how to apply trauma-informed approaches that are responsive to student needs and preferences to reduce barriers and support wellbeing.
- Ensure professional learning is sustained, collaborative, and reflective, incorporating active learning, feedback, modelling, and opportunities to reflect on language, assumptions, and attitudes that may impact autistic students' experiences. Ensure professional learning draws on both lived experience (e.g., autistic-led organisations, student perspectives) and the expertise of teachers and professionals in disability and inclusive education, to support staff in meeting diverse and complex needs and co-occurring disabilities.
- Enable staff to participate in ongoing coaching and collaboration with colleagues, specialist teachers, and allied health professionals where possible; recognise when additional coaching or expertise is needed and seek it. Professional learning should allow for feedback, modelling, and collaborative reflection, and should translate it into concrete classroom strategies.
- Encourage staff to set and review individual professional goals related to inclusive pedagogy, autism understanding, and teaching practice as part of performance development and review processes, using self-reflection and feedback to monitor progress and identify areas for further growth.
- Encourage staff to seek out and learn from autistic-led organisations, lived experience perspectives, and teachers or professionals with expertise in disability and inclusive practice, ensuring teaching is informed by both personal experience and specialist knowledge. This can include online content if geographical location or other aspects make it challenging for in-person input.
- *See Recommendation 30 for further content related to creating systems for professional learning on autism, autistic ways of learning, and inclusive education.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Section 4:
Collaboration, connections and leadership



Section 4: **Collaboration, connections and leadership**

This section outlines how schools can work in partnership with autistic students, families, and professionals to support consistency, shared understanding, and effective support across settings. It also addresses the role of school leadership in setting expectations, allocating resources, and embedding inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming practices across the school. The Recommendations address four questions related to this topic:

- What leadership approaches, including beliefs and use of inclusive language, best support and promote a culture where diversity is embraced?
- What approaches facilitate positive and collaborative relationships in school communities (e.g., school leaders, staff, and autistic students, parents, families, and allied health specialists) to support successful outcomes for autistic students?
- What leadership approaches best support a whole-school approach and culture of inclusion for autistic students?
- What professional knowledge, understanding, and resources do school leaders need to facilitate inclusive approaches in a school community?

Before engaging with these Recommendations, you are strongly encouraged to review:

- The **Guiding Principles**, which underpin all aspects of the National Guidance and provide essential context for their interpretation and application.
- The defined **Scope** of the National Guidance (Table 1).
- The **Writing the Recommendations** section (Table 6, in Step 5 of the Guidance development process), which describes how the "Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation" was formed.
- The **Glossary** (Appendix B), which supports a shared understanding of key terms used throughout.

What leadership approaches, including beliefs and use of inclusive language, best support and promote a culture where diversity is embraced?

Recommendation 23

Develop and communicate a setting-wide vision for inclusion that reflects neurodiversity-affirming values and is co-designed with input from autistic students and families.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Ensure school and ECEC leaders (principals, deputy principals, heads of departments, and teacher leaders) advocate for and promote inclusive values and practices across the school and ECEC community, informed by research and consultation with autistic people, families, and educators.

- Lead inclusive practice by modelling respectful language, equitable and transparent decision-making, and proactive engagement with diverse perspectives.
- Review and revise all school policies, including enrolment, attendance, uniform, and behaviour policies, to eliminate ableist practices.
- Champion inclusion by identifying and addressing attitudinal and structural barriers within the school and ECEC context, including staff beliefs and practices.
- Allocate time and resources for staff to collaborate on inclusive planning, implementation, and review processes. Establish setting-wide procedures to allocate time and resources for teachers to support case management of students.
- Collaborate with families and staff to develop and communicate a vision for inclusion that reflects the diversity of the community. Identify and challenge school and ECEC context community attitudes and practices that perpetuate exclusion and support the development of inclusive attitudes and practices.
- Develop setting-wide procedures to ensure all staff consult and collaborate with students and families in ways that are accessible and meaningful for the students and families.
- Establish and sustain strong partnerships with families to support inclusive planning, implementation, and review.
- Account for the diverse needs of students and families when reviewing and revising enrolment, attendance, and behaviour policies; consider the needs of the child and family.
- Ensure all policies enable equitable access for autistic students. Include student perspectives in the development of these policies.
- *See Recommendation 13 for further content related to ensuring input from autistic students.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 24

Ensure school leaders initiate evidence-based professional learning about autism and inclusive education, foregrounding lived experience and neurodiversity-affirming approaches.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide structured, ongoing professional learning for all staff on autism, inclusive practices, multidisciplinary perspectives, and legal obligations, with content informed by autistic people and families and evidence for good practice.
- Embed coaching and mentoring systems within the school and ECEC context to support staff in learning, applying, and monitoring inclusive strategies and values in everyday practice.
- Ensure professional learning includes practical strategies for supporting sensory, communication, emotional regulation, relationships, and learning needs as relevant to the context.
- Prioritise evidence-based learning from lived experience by inviting autistic students, families, and advocates to share insights and to co-design professional learning opportunities.
- Ensure professional learning includes practical strategies for supporting sensory, communication, emotional regulation, relationships, and learning needs.
- *See Recommendation 30 for further content related to creating systems for professional learning on autism and inclusive education.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 25

Ensure school leaders actively engage in and co-design school protocols for respectful, collaborative, and neurodiversity-affirming communication with autistic students and their families, recognising their expertise and central role in inclusive education.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Implement setting-wide protocols that ensure regular, open, and empathetic communication with families, acknowledging their knowledge of the student.
- Embed collaborative individual and setting-wide planning and decision-making processes that includes autistic students, families, teachers, and support staff.
- Train staff in inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming communication practices, including the use of preferred language and modes of communication.
- Ensure home-school communication practices actively address and reduce power imbalances, bias, and assumptions.
- Recognise and support learning about all forms of student communication, including non-speaking and AAC modes, as meaningful and respected.
- *See Recommendation 28 for further content related to establishing setting-wide systems for effective communication and collaborative student support planning.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 26

Establish and maintain a whole-school approach to inclusion through policies, practices, and culture that actively support autistic students' rights, strengths, needs, and wellbeing.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Implement inclusive policies that explicitly address neurodiversity, including anti-bullying, behaviour, enrolment, attendance, and wellbeing of the school community.
- Create a school culture that celebrates diversity and fosters belonging for all students, including autistic students.
- Allocate time, staffing, and resources to enable collaborative planning and support across teams and with families.
- Ensure school-wide teaching and assessment practices are flexible, differentiated and responsive to autistic student needs, even when these needs vary day to day.
- Embed flexible, inclusive practices into everyday routines, physical environments, and communication systems to ensure accessibility and consistency in approach.
- Ensure teaching and assessment practices are flexible, differentiated, and responsive to individual needs.
- *See Recommendation 14 for further content related to flexible teaching that supports an inclusive culture.*
- *See Recommendation 19 for further content related to flexible assessment that supports an inclusive culture.*
- *See Recommendation 35 for further content related to creating a vision for inclusion.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 27

Facilitate and engage in effective shared information/collaboration between staff and external specialists (e.g., therapists, psychologists, allied health professionals) to ensure consistent and coordinated approaches to effectively support autistic students with fidelity.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Establish standard processes (including consent and information-sharing arrangements) that set clear expectations and timeframes for collaboration with external specialists, to ensure individual education plans are co-designed, reviewed, and updated in a coordinated way.
- Prioritise autistic-led approaches by engaging relevant professionals with lived experience in planning and decision-making to support students' learning and engagement.
- Allocate time for staff to consult with specialists through joint meetings, classroom observations, and shared documentation.
- Recognise and embed the expertise of internal specialists (e.g., inclusion coordinators, learning support staff) in setting-wide planning.
- Ensure staff have regular access to specialist advice through consultation, joint meetings, and shared documentation. Allocate time within teaching schedules for consultation and joint planning with external professionals, as well as to implement specialist recommendations.
- Maintain regular, respectful communication between staff, families, and specialists to reflect the social/emotional and academic needs of the student.
- Create a welcoming environment for external professionals that allows access to appropriate spaces and resources to support a collaborative approach. Enable neurodivergent-affirming therapist and psychologist involvement in classroom observations, planning, and professional learning.
- *See Recommendation 28 for further content related to establishing setting-wide systems for effective communication and collaborative student support planning.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

What approaches facilitate positive and collaborative relationships in school communities (e.g., school leaders, staff, and autistic students, parents, families, and allied health specialists) to support successful outcomes for autistic students?

Recommendation 28

Establish setting-wide systems for effective communication and collaborative student support planning that include autistic students, families, educators, and specialists, ensuring consistent support and shared understanding.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Develop and maintain student profiles and individual education plans that are co-created with students, families, teachers, and specialists. Ensure these are updated at least semesterly.

- Ensure that multiple ways of seeking student input are available, such as choice boards, visuals, and photo stories.
- Embed planning and tracking student progress within staff practice.
- Schedule regular meetings with all stakeholders to review progress, update plans, and align strategies across home and school environments.
- Use consistent, accessible formats for documentation that highlight autistic students' aspirations, strengths, interests, support needs, and preferred communication methods.
- Ensure staff have access to autistic students' support documentation and time to interpret and apply strategies effectively, noting student confidentiality protocols.
- Establish protocols for effective communication and collaborative planning that enable timely updates and coordinated support across settings.
- Prioritise school/ECEC context-family partnerships to support inclusion.
- *See Recommendation 16 for further content related to collaborative student support planning.*
- *See Recommendation 27 for further content related to effective collaboration between school-based and external stakeholders.*
- *See Recommendation 37 for further content related to connecting and collaborating with families.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 29

Establish and maintain respectful and equitable partnerships between schools, specialists, autistic students, and their families to support inclusive and strengths-based planning, wellbeing, and learning.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Implement, review, and evaluate consultation processes to ensure they are responsive to students and families.
- Build and maintain positive relationships between staff, students, and families through timely, consistent, empathetic, and culturally responsive communication.
- Educate staff on neurodivergent communication to ensure communication practices across and between home and school are inclusive of and responsive to diverse family neurotypes, structures, cultural backgrounds, and communication preferences.
- Create sustainable opportunities for student perspectives and participation in decision-making that are responsive to students' needs, preferences, and strengths, including feedback on what helps or hinders their learning and wellbeing.
- Support, nurture, and establish positive relationships between staff, specialists, students, and families through consistent, empathetic, and culturally responsive communication.
- Create a formal advisory group to support and advise on partnerships with stakeholders.
- Prioritise student perspectives and participation in decision-making, including feedback on what helps or hinders their learning and wellbeing.
- Ensure communication practices are inclusive of diverse family structures, cultural backgrounds, and neurodivergent communication preferences. Verbal communication should be literal; mean what you say and say what you mean.
- Acknowledge the need for increased communication with families of autistic students.

- Provide staff with professional learning on building, maintaining, and sustaining authentic partnerships with families, including strategies for trust-building, connections, and sense of belonging and collaborative problem-solving.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 30

Establish setting-wide systems for ongoing, job-embedded, evidence-informed professional learning about autism and inclusive education, with a strong emphasis on consulting with those who have autistic lived experience or use neurodiversity-affirming practice.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Ensure professional learning includes critical reflection on ableism, masking, and the diversity of autistic social and communication experiences.
- Provide regular, setting-wide professional learning that includes contemporary research and lived experience perspectives from autistic people and families.
- Engage autistic-led organisations and neurodiversity-affirming professionals to deliver training and consultation tailored to the school's context and needs.
- Embed professional learning about autism and inclusive education into school/ECEC context improvement plans and staff development frameworks to ensure sustainability and accountability. Ensure this includes practical strategies for inclusive teaching, sensory regulation, communication, and emotional wellbeing that seeks to minimise stress and distress for autistic students whilst maximising their strengths.
- Create opportunities for staff to reflect on their beliefs, to challenge ableism, and to build inclusive mindsets through facilitated discussions and coaching.
- Ensure all communications use neurodiversity-affirming language that is consistent with inclusive education.
- Train staff in neurodiversity-affirming approaches informed by autistic perspectives and contemporary research.
- *See Recommendation 22 for further content related to optimising professional learning for teaching staff.*
- *See Recommendation 24 for further content related to school leaders prioritising and foregrounding lived experience in professional learning.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 31

Foster belonging, flexibility, and respectful collaboration with autistic students and their families to strengthen inclusive school procedures and practices.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Create a culture of connection and belonging by modelling inclusive behaviours and attitudes and collaborative processes across all levels of the school/ECEC context.
- Implement setting-wide procedures that support inclusive teaching, culture of belonging, flexible learning environments, and student wellbeing.

- Provide inclusive social opportunities that are responsive to students' needs and preferences during break times (e.g., clubs, low sensory/low social spaces, supported play, peer groups) to reduce isolation and promote connection.
- Embed inclusive values into student education by teaching all students about neurodiversity, respect, and compassion.
- Develop clear and sustainable communication protocols that support consistent, responsive collaboration between staff, students, and families.
- *See Recommendation 13 for further content related to ensuring authentic listening to autistic students' perspectives.*
- *See Recommendation 35 for further content related to creating a vision for inclusion.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

What leadership approaches best support a whole-school approach and culture of inclusion for autistic students?

Recommendation 32

Establish a multi-layered leadership approach that supports leaders to model and embed inclusion in strategic planning to foster a culture of belonging and respect for neurodiversity across the school.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Clearly communicate expectations for inclusive practices to all staff, students, and families, and embed these into policies and procedures.
- Challenge unconscious bias and ableism in leadership decisions, communications, and interactions. For example, focus on student strengths, rather than on deficits.
- Align strategic planning, resource allocation, and staff development with inclusive vision and goals.
- Drive attitudinal and practical change by challenging ableism and fostering a strengths-based understanding of autism.
- Invest in professional learning for leaders and staff that builds capacity to lead inclusive practice and respond to diverse student needs.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 33

Establish systems that support teachers through professional learning, coaching, and mentoring to implement inclusive practices for autistic students.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide access to ongoing professional learning for all staff on inclusive education, autism, and neurodiversity-affirming practices.
- Embed coaching and mentoring structures to support teachers in applying inclusive strategies and reflecting on their practice.
- Allocate time and resources for peer collaboration, addressing unconscious bias and ableism and modelling of inclusive approaches and shared problem-solving.

- Advocate for additional funding and staffing to support inclusive education, including access to specialists and smaller class sizes.
- Invest in professional learning for leaders and staff that builds capacity to lead inclusive practice and respond to diverse student needs.
- Create forums for staff to respectfully share experiences, challenges, and best practices related to inclusion, with leadership support for continuous improvement.
- Clearly communicate expectations for inclusive practices to all staff, students, and families, and embed these into policies and procedures.
- Drive attitudinal and practical change by challenging ableism and fostering a strengths-based understanding of autism.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 34

Create a school culture that is inclusive and culturally responsive and prioritises building positive relationships with school staff and autistic students, so they feel valued, respected, and supported across all environments.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Embed and explicitly teach neurodiversity-affirming practices into classroom routines, physical spaces, and behaviour expectations (e.g., allowing repetitive behaviours/movements, flexible seating, sensory tools; not having expectations for eye contact).
- Facilitate responsive consultation with autistic students about processes which may cause discomfort (e.g., school bells or uniforms).
- Provide professional learning on cultural responsiveness and neurodiversity, including how to support diverse communication and sensory needs.
- Facilitate peer education and social learning opportunities that promote empathy, connections, sense of belonging, respect, and inclusive peer relationships, including facilitating alone time for autistic students when they do not want to interact with peers.
- Commit to building positive relationships with autistic students and teachers and to being curious about their lived experience.
- Celebrate autistic perspectives and lived experience through inclusive events including storytelling in ECEC, primary and secondary contexts.
- *See Recommendation 35 for further content related to creating a vision for inclusion.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 35

Establish and communicate a clear, setting-wide vision for inclusion, supported by consistent strategies, shared language, and neurodiversity-affirming practices that promote belonging, sense of connection, and respect for autistic students.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Communicate inclusive vision, mission statement, policies, and strategies clearly and consistently to all staff, students, and families in ways that are accessible to the school/ECEC community. Use a range of communication methods to meet the needs of everyone.

- Use inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming language that recognises the strengths and support needs of autistic students that does not reinforce ableist norms, across all documentation, visual displays, signage, behaviour expectations, and communications.
- Allocate funding and resources to support teachers in implementing inclusive strategies, including access to professional learning and classroom supports.
- Create opportunities for autistic students and their families to connect with each other and with staff, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.
- *See Recommendation 14 for further content related to flexible teaching practices that support an inclusive school vision.*
- *See Recommendation 19 for further content related to flexible assessment practices that support an inclusive school vision.*
- *See Recommendation 20 for further content related to communicating using neurodiversity-affirming language.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

What professional knowledge, understanding, and resources do school leaders need to facilitate inclusive approaches in a school community?

Recommendation 36

Ensure school leadership prioritises funding, time, and staffing to support professional learning, inclusive practices, and specialist support for autistic students.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- School/ECEC communities advocate for increased funding to support inclusive education, including access to specialists, resources, and assistive technologies.
- Allocate budgets to ensure that all staff can participate in professional learning focused on autism, autistic experiences of school, and inclusive pedagogy.
- Increase access to support and/or specialist staff (e.g., inclusion coordinators, education assistants, allied health professionals) to support planning and implementation.
- Allow designated time that is protected within staff schedules for collaboration, planning, and engagement with families and external professionals and for completing Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) reporting requirements.
- Ensure leadership teams engage in professional learning to build deep understanding of autism and autistic experiences of school and to lead inclusive change effectively.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 37

Support learning and use of resources across school communities that prioritise authentic collaboration and connection with families of autistic students to support inclusion, wellbeing, and learning.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Allocate time and resources for staff to build and maintain strong relationships with families, including regular meetings and informal check-ins.
- Provide staff with training on culturally responsive and neurodiversity-affirming approaches to family engagement.
- Co-design transition and individual education plans in a proactive way with students and their families, recognising their expertise and insights into the student's strengths, preferences, and needs.
- Ensure setting-wide communication systems are accessible, consistent, and tailored to family preferences, including verbal and alternative sources of communication and multilingual options.
- Facilitate community-building, peer connection, and sense of belonging by creating opportunities for families to engage with each other and with key staff in both informal and structured settings.
- Establish age-appropriate feedback loops that allow families and students to share experiences, concerns, and suggestions, and ensure their input informs practices and planning. For example, autistic students can point out or photograph things they like or dislike in ECEC settings.
- *See Recommendation 28 for further content related to establishing setting-wide systems for effective communication and collaborative student support planning.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 38

Ensure schools engage autistic people and autistic-led organisations to inform consistent messages, policy development, and inclusive practice.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Employ or consult autistic professionals to support setting-wide planning and inclusive practices.
- Provide opportunities for autistic educators, students, families, and community members to share lived experience, to serve as role models, and to co-lead inclusion initiatives.
- Consult autistic people and autistic-led organisations when creating policies to ensure these reflect lived experience.
- Specify ongoing multiple roles for autistic people: consultants, co-trainers, advisory group members, co-researchers.
- Employ autistic staff (teachers, teacher aides etc).

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Section 5:
Physical environment



Section 5: **Physical environment**

This section offers best-practice guidance for designing and adapting physical school environments to increase inclusivity and accessibility, thereby reducing sensory stress and promoting comfort, safety, and engagement for autistic students. The Recommendations address three questions related to this topic:

- How can all members of the school community design, promote, and sustain inclusive physical environments for autistic students?
- How can autistic students' agency, autonomy, and independence be supported through the design and creation of, and access to, indoor and outdoor physical environments?
- What knowledge and/or understanding is required to provide inclusive physical spaces that support positive educational outcomes for autistic students?

Before engaging with these Recommendations, you are strongly encouraged to review:

- The **Guiding Principles**, which underpin all aspects of the National Guidance and provide essential context for their interpretation and application.
- The defined **Scope** of the National Guidance (Table 1).
- The **Writing the Recommendations** section (Table 6, in Step 5 of the Guidance development process), which describes how the "Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation" was formed.
- The **Glossary** (Appendix B), which supports a shared understanding of key terms used throughout.

How can all members of the school community design, promote, and sustain inclusive physical environments for autistic students?

Recommendation 39

Designate specific, safe, and accessible spaces within the school environment where students can go when they need time to regulate, decompress, or manage sensory overload.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Consult with a range of stakeholders (e.g., autistic students, families, school staff, early childhood specialists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and other suitably qualified professionals) to inform the design of the space that support students' diverse needs and developmental requirements.
- Provide flexibility in which spaces students can access for regulation, decompression, managing sensory input and emotional wellbeing rather than relying on a single fixed room. The designated spaces should consider various individual needs and school layout, including include indoor, outdoor, in-class, or separate areas.

- Make spaces functional and purposeful and use spaces proactively. Provide areas where students can engage in movement, quiet time, sensory input, and emotional regulation in ways they prefer and for the time they need. Provide opportunities for the student to choose the designated space and engage in this space in the way they prefer.
- Communicate the purpose and use of the space to all staff to ensure they understand how and why the students engage in that environment and to ensure the space is maintained for the intended purpose and does not become associated with punishment or disciplinary practices.
- Provide sensory equipment in the space that caters to the students' needs and interests (e.g., self-regulation aids, headphones, crash mats, trampolines).
- Respect the dignity, privacy, and safety of students when choosing the location. Spaces used for deescalating students should be away from highly visible areas.
- Create multiple appropriately located regulation and decompression spaces that are easily accessible, close to learning and play areas, and designed to support safe, discreet use that preserve student privacy in times of dysregulation.
- Ensure students can identify and safely access regulation spaces from different areas of the school (e.g., classroom, outdoor and play spaces).
- Ensure there is sufficient staffing to accompany or supervise students who are accessing spaces out of direct line of sight. Where possible, ensure supervision is by staff the student feels safe with, who understand and can respond to individual student needs.
- Create a space where students feel emotionally and physically safe by providing clear guidelines on the purpose of the space; explicitly model how it can be used and provide opportunities to become familiar with the space outside of crisis times.
- Promote the use of the designated spaces as part of everyday wellbeing practices, not just for crisis times.
- Where possible, create spaces within the classroom to provide students with opportunities to regulate more frequently before distress behaviours escalate.
- Create procedures that provide the student with agency to access the space.
- Establish procedures to ensure a space is open, accessible, and monitored by staff throughout the school day, including before and after school, and ensure the procedures are consistently implemented.
- Maintain regular checks for safety compliance (e.g., early childhood standards).

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 40

Ensure the physical elements of the school environment are designed, adapted, and maintained to facilitate sensory and physical wellbeing for all students.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Evaluate the existing physical environment and consider how physical elements can be modified and/or organised, within current resources, to better support students. Use natural lighting or adjustable light sources (e.g., dimmable LED lights).
- Replace old fluorescent tubes with quiet, flicker-free alternatives.
- Include sound-absorbing materials such as low visual sensory rugs and fabric wall panels to adjust acoustics.

- When the acoustics in the classroom cannot be reduced satisfactorily, consider teacher use of amplification devices to aid them being heard during class teaching activities.
- Provide paper towels instead of hand dryers in bathrooms, or provide an available bathroom without a hand dryer to reduce noise.
- Avoid the use of strong-smelling items in classrooms and shared spaces. This includes cleaning products, perfumes, auto-spray scents, diffusers, and foods with intense smell. Restrict deodorant use to roll on in changing rooms and near lockers and consider having a scent-free bathroom where possible.
- Ensure indoor spaces are well ventilated and temperature is regulated.
- Be responsive to each individual students' experience of sensory elements, noting that responses can fluctuate within lessons, between classes, across the day, and across the year.
- Identify and implement an alternate system to a loud school bell, for example lights and/or music.
- Minimise visual stimuli by limiting noticeboards and wall displays to current and relevant materials. Consider alternate methods to display student work (e.g., digital displays, designated wall display).
- Use curtains to limit visual glare and visual distractions outside the classroom window.
- Use low impact colours and neutral patterns on internal walls.
- Organise classroom resources with a clear place for everything and everything in its place with consistent signage and visual supports to support engagement in learning and comfort in the space.
- Place sensory accommodation tools that cater to a diverse range of needs in areas that all students can easily access.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 41

Purposefully design the spatial organisation of the physical environment (indoor and outdoor) to ensure that all students can safely access, navigate, and engage with the space in ways that promote inclusion, independence, and meaningful learning experiences.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Make physical spaces available to support students' varied learning and safety requirements, including the need for movement breaks.
- Incorporate flexibility in the use of physical environments to support learning, inclusion, regulation, and sense of safety. This can include conducting lessons outside.
- Include access to spaces where students have opportunities to engage in physical activity or movement breaks during structured learning periods.
- Create defined learning areas within the classroom (e.g., reading corners, group worktables, play areas) and allow flexible use of these areas. Consider community and cultural elements of design for zones such as yarning circles and gathering spaces.
- Reduce overcrowding by considering class size and the layout of the furniture in the room.
- Ensure adequate personal space in and around learning areas (e.g., enough space between rows of desks for students to move without bumping into furniture). Arrange furniture to allow unobstructed movement around the classroom.

- Allocate and arrange seating with consideration for the impact of the environment on the student. Construct seating plans with input from autistic students to ensure their needs and preferences are met.
- Use physical dividers to create and organise different spaces within a room.
- Ensure pathways around the school and to and from classrooms are unobstructed, clearly signposted, and accessible. In ECEC and primary contexts, use visuals (e.g., signs, paint on concrete) to highlight pathways to different areas within the environment. Use visuals (e.g., signs, paint on concrete), labels, and signage to create visual barriers for child-free zones and exits/entrances.
- Designate drop-off and pick-up zones and procedures to reduce congestion at peak periods of the school day.
- Organise resources in the classroom to be kept in designated spaces that are accessible, predictable, and clearly signposted, using signs and/or visuals.
- Provide clear signs, pictures, or symbols to help autistic students know where they are and how to get to where they need to go.
- Provide advanced notice and explanation to students for changes to the spatial organisation of the physical environment.
- Provide opportunities for staggered transitions (i.e., in small groups or individually) and designated flow pathways to reduce congestion and sensory overload.
- Provide spaces to undertake assessment tasks that support the autistic student.
- In secondary contexts, carefully consider locker placements to avoid congestion or flexibility in the timing of students' access to lockers to avoid congestion. Offer autistic students the opportunity to select their preferred location for their locker.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 42

During recreational time and unstructured learning times, provide safe and accessible spaces that are equipped to accommodate a range of physical activity levels, sensory preferences, and engagement styles.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide areas that meet a diverse range of accessibility requirements to support active movement.
- Provide and/or adapt equipment in designated areas that support exploration through a range of senses, including movement, balance, and body awareness (e.g., swings, balance beams, climbing structures, tunnels).
- Provide indoor and outdoor areas that support a range of student social interaction preferences, including solitary and social play.
- Consult with a range of stakeholders (e.g., autistic students, families, school staff, early childhood specialists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, playground equipment groups, and other suitably qualified professionals) about the appropriate equipment that would support students' diverse needs and developmental requirements.
- Provide a range of activity safe spaces to meet students' interests and play preferences. These may include nature spaces, spare parts play, quiet play areas, and structured activity spaces.

- Ensure that recreational spaces include seating and shaded options that are available to all students.
- In primary contexts, ensure different types of play are accessible to all age groups (e.g., older students get sand play too, as they may wish to engage in activities for younger students). Include equipment for all ages that supports both gross and fine motor skills (e.g., balance beams, climbing frames, swings).
- In secondary contexts, provide spaces which students can access at breaks which cater to a variety of needs, but which don't isolate students from their peers. This could be a school library or other quiet space, or passive playground spaces with appropriate seating/eating areas. Ensure that quiet spaces are maintained as quiet spaces rather than being used for indoor noisy group activities.
- Provide sufficient staffing to ensure all recreational areas are adequately supervised within line of sight. Ensure that supervising staff have knowledge and understanding of how to support students' communication preferences and behavioural responses.
- Use multiple methods (e.g., visual – symbols/written, verbally reinforced, etc.) to clearly communicate the purpose and use of the spaces. This may include installing communication boards in specific areas that highlight options available and that support interaction between students with diverse communication preferences.
- Consider the purchase and maintenance of equipment within department and school budgets.
- Ensure equipment in recreational spaces is accessible for students with various physical abilities and their supporting educator (if required).
- Regularly evaluate the condition of the equipment and the use of the space to ensure areas are maintained and used by students. Use existing objects (e.g., trees, buildings, fences) to provide clearly defined borders/boundaries to distinguish the different areas.
- Consider the use of the space when designing designated areas.
- *See Recommendation 9 for further content related to using spaces proactively to reduce risk of bullying and to support autistic students' sense of safety.*

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 43

Design and maintain the school physical environment with input from stakeholders, using feedback to ensure it is inclusive, safe, accessible, and responsive to the diverse needs of autistic students.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Where possible, work with experts who have lived experience of and/or knowledge in flexible design and/or disability to create, adapt, and maintain inclusive physical spaces.
- Engage with students, families, specialist educator, and allied health professionals to design culturally and neurodiversity-affirming spaces that support a welcoming environment. Provide feedback methods for students and staff to comment on the inclusiveness of the physical spaces. *See Recommendation 46 for further content related to including students in design and decision-making.*
- Provide multiple methods (e.g., written, verbal, photographic) that stakeholders can use to contribute to decision-making about physical spaces.

- Establish processes to provide feedback to all stakeholders, enabling regular evaluation of the use of the physical space.
- Clearly communicate decisions and recommendations about the design and use of physical spaces to interested parties and users.
- Conduct ecological or environmental inventories on the use of physical spaces. This includes conducting regular checks for safety compliance in line with relevant frameworks and legislation.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

Recommendation 44

Provide flexible furniture options to accommodate diverse students' needs, promoting comfort, accessibility, and engagement across various activities.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- When possible, consult with allied health professionals to help select suitable furniture and equipment for play, gross motor activities and classroom use (e.g., tables, desks, and seating). Arrange these to support students' posture, comfort, and physical and developmental needs.
- Be flexible in how furniture is distributed across the school to ensure appropriate seating options are available for students in different classrooms.
- Explicitly teach staff and students how to effectively use the flexible furniture options and the benefits of this equipment.
- Provide a variety of flexible seating and furniture options that students can choose from to support their individual needs, including their physical, sensory and postural needs. These options should be available across different learning environments, from early years (e.g., circle or mat time, reading corners) to subject classrooms and study spaces in secondary settings, and support both collaborative and independent learning. Students who benefit from movement should be supported to stand or move during learning tasks.
- Provide a range of optional seating locations (e.g., seats under trees, modular seats) outside of the classroom that students can choose to use. Ensure flexible seating spaces are available and optional during recess, and before and after school.
- When purchasing equipment, consider appropriate furniture that meets the needs of all students.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

How can autistic students' agency, autonomy, and independence be supported through the design and creation of, and access to, indoor and outdoor physical environments?

Recommendation 45

Design and manage physical spaces to actively support and respect autistic student autonomy and independence, enabling autistic students to make choices about how they engage with and move through the environment.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide regular and authentic opportunities for agency and choice regarding equipment, physical spaces for learning and play, and environments.
- Create alternate spaces that are accessible to all students during break times.
- Respect and value student autonomy by acknowledging their decisions, affirming their choices, and taking appropriate action to support them. Provide options (e.g., choice boards, visuals, lists) to allow autistic students choice and autonomy over play decisions, including during break times.
- Provide school staff access to information that helps them support student independence by tailoring assistance to each students' readiness and choices about their physical environment.
- Build student capacity to be able to recognise and understand their responses to the environment and advocate for what they need. To do this, provide activities which enable the child to reflect on their experience in the physical space (e.g., sensory checklist, emoji rating scales, or space-mapping activities where students label/draw areas they like or avoid).
- Support school staff to engage in professional learning to support student agency and autonomy in the use of physical spaces.
- Normalise supports by modelling use and providing access to all students.
- Explicitly teach students when and how to access equipment, physical spaces, and environments and provide visual reminders for future use.
- Teach students language around safe physical spaces and support students to identify environments that help them feel safe.
- Provide options that allow autistic students agency over when they can take a break during class time.
- In secondary contexts, foster student initiative and responsibility for learning environment choices and recreational choices.
- Provide safe, structured, and supervised opportunities for autistic students to try different physical spaces and equipment and reflect on how it supports their needs. For example, in ECEC contexts, create different physical spaces in which students have a choice to play and engage with different materials.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

Recommendation 46

Embed autistic student perspectives in the analysis, design, and evaluation of physical school environments to actively support student agency.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide regular and flexible opportunities for the students to express their opinions about the physical environment using methods of communication that best support the student.
- Provide opportunities for autistic students to share their experiences about the impact different environments have on their learning and wellbeing. This could be facilitated through meetings, written feedback, choice boards, or photographs.
- Engage students as co-designers in their indoor and outdoor physical spaces, as well as areas used for transitions. This could include designing classroom spaces.
- Involve students in decision-making related to how physical environments are designed, organised, accessed, and used.

- Schedule regular time periods across the year, where students are given the opportunity to provide feedback on the physical environment (e.g., student experience surveying).
- Be responsive to students' feedback and evaluation of the school physical environment, including designated spaces and spaces where they feel safe. Plan spaces responsively based on current student interests.
- Use student-led conversations, that are developmentally appropriate and accessible (e.g., visual tools, drawings, and alternative communication methods) to understand how students experience different spaces and to inform decisions.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

What knowledge and/or understanding is required to provide inclusive physical spaces that support positive educational outcomes for autistic students?

Recommendation 47

Implement neurodiversity-affirming training for staff and students that builds understanding of sensory responsivity and how environmental factors can influence individual students' experiences and learning.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Provide ongoing professional learning for staff to build current, neurodiversity-affirming understanding of responses to sensory input in autism.
- Provide ongoing professional learning that explores how individual responses to physical environments interact with other characteristics of autism such as social communication, fluctuating capacity, and co-occurring disabilities.
- Educate students and members of the school community on sensory differences and the impact of the environment on autistic students' learning and experiences.
- Embed neurodiversity-affirming language and images in displays in physical spaces (e.g., diverse role models, representation of autistic perspectives, and affirming language).
- Build a school-wide understanding of how the school's physical environment (e.g., fluorescent lighting, noise, food smells, bright wall displays, texture of school uniforms) may influence autistic individuals, including influences on behaviour, attention, and capacity, and why there is need to make adjustments because of this.
- Provide a range of opportunities and methods for autistic students to describe and explain how elements of the school environment can impact on their learning and wellbeing, and to communicate their sensory preferences.
- Acknowledge that autistic students experience physical spaces differently, and recognise and respond to individual needs in physical environments.
- Ask students about their experiences in different environments and how this may change across the day and week.
- Encourage all staff to learn about and understand individual students and their strengths, challenges, and needs within the physical environment. Ensure information about this is communicated to all their teachers, including relief teachers.
- Use classroom observation opportunities to identify preferred and non-preferred sensory and physical environments in consultation with families, students and/or other stakeholders.
- In primary and secondary contexts, understand and be responsive to the impact that different physical environments can have on a student (e.g., assembly hall, cooking classes, science labs, workshops, gym, music sessions, corridors, classrooms).

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: High ●●●●

Recommendation 48

Regularly assess the physical school environment to identify and adapt sensory elements that may impact on autistic students differently.

Ways this Recommendation could be applied

- Conduct regular systematic environmental audits on the physical school space, including annual sensory audits of all classrooms and other learning areas, with input from interested parties, and act on the findings.
- Identify sensory elements in the space (e.g., lighting, noise, spatial layout) and observe how different students respond to these elements. Based on these observations, problem solve with students to make considered decisions about classroom placement and expectations.
- Work with students, families, and professionals to understand and evaluate how different physical spaces and sensory elements of these spaces impact individual students and their behaviour.
- Develop a planned approach to reduce or eliminate problematic sensory elements and provide positive sensory elements in the space to meet diverse student needs.
- Evaluate and review changes to sensory elements regularly. In primary and secondary contexts, provide students the opportunity to conduct their own environmental audit and then if needed make changes to the use of the physical environment. When possible, support students to develop their own sensory plans or strategies for dealing with sensory elements.
- In secondary contexts, work with students to plan environments for different learning activities.
- Observe students' behaviour during different activities in different spaces to evaluate stress/distress versus focus and engagement. Use this information to inform planning.

Strength of evidence informing this Recommendation: Low ●●○○

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Appendices



Appendix A: Community consultation activities conducted as part of the National Guidance development process

National online community survey

Description

A national online community survey designed to understand the views of the autistic and autism communities about inclusive education for autistic students in mainstream schools. There were two versions of the survey: one for autistic youth and one for community members.

Who was able to take part?

The national online community survey was open to all members of the community, aged 18 years or older. Information about how to be involved was distributed via Autism CRC channels and shared through professional networks by GDG and GRG members.

What was involved?

The survey was structured around the National Guidance questions and allowed for Likert scale and/or open-ended responses. Participants were able to provide general views about the principles they believed underpin inclusive education for autistic students, and more detailed responses aligned to each of the National Guidance questions. The survey was designed to be accessible and to provide options for participants to provide responses, including typing, voice or video recording, or submitting artwork. Flexibility was built into the survey design as much as the survey platform permitted, allowing participants to skip or choose to not answer questions and go back within sections.

How was it completed?

The survey was completed online.

How many people took part?

793 community members participated in the online community survey.

National online autistic youth survey

Description

A national online community survey designed to understand the views of the autistic youth aged 8-18 years. The survey sought autistic youth perspectives about inclusive education for autistic students in mainstream schools.

Who was able to take part?

The autistic youth survey was open to all autistic youth aged 8–18, with parental consent. Information about how to be involved was distributed via Autism CRC channels and shared through professional networks by GDG and GRG members. Parent consent was first obtained and the survey link was then emailed to parents to pass on to their young person.

What was involved?

The youth survey was purposefully designed to be inclusive and accessible. It was written in succinct language and was accompanied by a video explainer that parents and autistic youth could view prior to consent and participation. The survey was structured around the National Guidance questions and allowed for Likert scale and/or open-ended responses. Autistic youth could be supported by an adult to provide their general views on the principles informing inclusive education for autistic students, and then more detailed responses aligned to each of the National Guidance questions. The survey was accessible for autistic youth and allowed options for providing responses, including typing, voice or video recording, or submitting artwork. Flexibility was built into the survey design as much as the survey platform permitted, allowing participants to skip or choose to not answer questions and go back within sections.

How was it completed?

The survey was completed online.

How many people took part?

34 autistic youth participated in the online autistic youth survey.

Autistic youth individual interviews

Description

Interviews were designed to enable autistic youth to provide detailed discussion on their views and experiences of best practice in inclusive education for autistic students. Participants were provided the option to join a focus group or individual interview; all participants chose to take part in an individual interview with an experienced researcher.

Who was able to take part?

The autistic youth focus groups/interviews were open to all autistic youth aged 8–18, with parental consent. Information about how to be involved was distributed via Autism CRC channels and shared through professional networks by GDG and GRG members. Participants of both national online surveys (community and autistic youth) could also indicate interest to participate in the youth focus groups/interviews. Parent consent was obtained, including preference for focus group or individual interview. A meeting link was then emailed to parents.

What was involved?

Each interview was conducted with an autistic researcher. Interviews were one hour in length and focused on asking age-appropriate questions to allow autistic youth to reflect on the principles and practices that inform best practice for inclusive education for autistic students. Autistic youth could participate in any way that they preferred, including through video, voice only, live chat, drawing, or via a support person.

How was it completed?

Online via videoconference.

How many people took part?

Four autistic youth participated in interviews.

Focus groups

Description

Focus groups were designed to provide opportunity for further detailed discussion on the experiences of the autistic and autism communities in the principles and practices that contribute to best practice in inclusive education for autistic students.

Who was able to take part?

The community focus groups were open to all members of the community, aged 18 years or older. Information about how to be involved was distributed via Autism CRC channels and shared through professional networks by GDG and GRG members. Participants of the national online survey could also indicate interest to participate in a focus group. Each focus group had a maximum of six participants. The number for each representative group was: autistic adults (n = 12), autistic teachers (n = 6), parents of autistic children (n = 12), teachers (n = 18, including one pilot focus group), teacher aides and school support staff (n = 6), allied health professionals (n = 12), open to all community members (n = 12).

What was involved?

Each focus group was one hour in length and included dedicated time for each individual to discuss and reflect on the principles and practices that inform best practice for inclusive education for autistic students. Participants could take part in focus groups in any way that they preferred, including through video, voice only, and live chat. Some participants also provided reflections via email after the focus group ended.

How was it completed?

Online via videoconference.

How many people took part?

56 people participated in the focus groups.

Delphi Study

Description

A series of surveys (one per week for four weeks) with experienced school leaders designed to reach expert consensus on the barriers and enablers to inclusive education leadership.

Who was able to take part?

The Delphi study was open to experienced school leaders with more than seven years' experience across a range of school sectors, school settings including boarding schools, leadership roles, and geographic regions. Information about how to be involved was distributed via Autism CRC channels and shared through professional networks by GDG and GRG members. School principals, deputy principals, heads of inclusion, or similar middle leadership roles were invited to register their interest to participate by completing an initial demographic screening survey. Of the 49 participants who completed this screening, 24 met the inclusion criteria of seven years' experience in school leadership roles.

What was involved?

Participants were asked to complete a series of four online survey rounds (one survey each week) with seven days to respond for each survey. In the first round, leaders were asked five questions about principles and leadership approaches to support inclusion; barriers to inclusion; knowledge, skills, training, and supports; and system- and policy-level actions. In subsequent rounds, leaders were asked to rank the Recommendations from the previous round, until consensus on the top three Recommendations for inclusive education leadership was reached in Round 4.

How was it completed?

An online survey, accessed via a link emailed directly to invited participants.

How many people took part?

Twenty-four leaders were invited to complete the Delphi study and numbers of participants varied across each round. There were 16 participants in the first round, nine in the second round, 14 in the third round, and 18 in the final round.

Appendix B: **Glossary**

This glossary is intended to support understanding of key concepts in relation to inclusive education. Terms included here are those fundamental to people's understanding of the National Guidance, in reference to relevant recognised authorities. Other commonly used terms are not defined here.

Term	Definition
Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)	Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is when a person uses anything other than speech to communicate. They can include body movements, gestures, signs, gestures, or a computer or device. They might use communication books or other printed material. (Speech Pathology Australia, 2024)
Ableism	"Ableism is the systemic exclusion and oppression of people with disability by people without disability." (People with Disability Australia, 2021, p. 7)
Adjustment	"Adjustments are actions taken to enable a student with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students." (NCCD, n.d., Glossary section)
Differentiation/ Differentiated	"Differentiation refers to the responses that teachers make to learners' needs. Teachers are 'differentiating' when they: • provide several learning options or different paths to learning, to help students take in information and make sense of concepts and skills • provide appropriate levels of challenge for all students including those who are behind, those in the middle and those who are advanced." (New South Wales Government, 2025, Differentiating learning section)

Term	Definition
Individual education plan (IEP)	"An individual education plan (IEP) is a written statement that describes the adjustments, goals and strategies to meet a student's individual needs so they can reach their full potential. An individual education plan is also referred to as a reasonable adjustment plan; learning support plan; individual learning plans; individual language plan and negotiated education plan. The DSE uses the terminology reasonable adjustment plan." (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017, Terminology section)
Neurodiversity-affirming	"...ways of providing health, education or social care services that affirm and support the identities of autistic children with a focus on modifying environments or tasks." (Wagland et al., 2025)
Quality appraisal for diverse studies [QuADS]	"Quality assessment with diverse studies (QuADS) is an appraisal tool for methodological and reporting quality in systematic reviews of mixed- or multi method studies." (Harrison et al., 2021, p.144) In practical terms of the National Guidance, QuADS is a checklist that was used by researchers to evaluate the quality and transparency of studies that have been included in a systematic literature review. It is especially useful when the systematic literature review includes studies using a variety of research methods, as it enables diverse designs to be assessed consistently and fairly.
Staff	"Anyone working for an education provider, including early childhood specialists, teachers, principals, teacher aides and administrators." (NCCD, n.d.)
Trauma-informed practice	"In an educational context, trauma-informed practice is a strengths-based framework in which education systems, schools and school staff understand, recognise and respond effectively to the impact of trauma on students." (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, New South Wales Government, 2020, p. 4)

Term	Definition
Universal design for learning (UDL)	"An approach that considers the needs of all learners from the beginning. This results in flexible teaching that enables everyone to access education. For example, if a school ensures all the videos in its libraries have subtitles, this can assist all students, including those with hearing impairment." (NCCD, n.d., Glossary section)

Our values

Inclusion
Valuing lived experience

Innovation
Solutions for long term challenges

Evidence
Truth in practice

Independence
Integrity through autonomy

Cooperation
Capturing opportunities together

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