

NAIT Guidance: An autism lens on the Six Principles of Nurture

Introduction

Nurture groups, nurturing approaches and trauma informed practice are widely used in current education practice. There is acknowledgement that adverse childhood experiences can impact upon long term health and wellbeing outcomes. There is almost no peer reviewed, published evidence about how nurturing approaches apply for autistic learners (or those with related neurodevelopmental differences).

Although observed challenges can overlap, the reason for the support need can inform the best approach to take. For example relationship difficulties or distressed behaviour are common when children have socially driven needs, as a result of poverty of experiences in the early years, neglect, abuse and trauma. Equally, learners with neurodevelopmental differences including autism can experience challenges with social relationships and distressed behaviour arising out of difficulties understanding and responding to communication, social and sensory demands in different environments. Where socially driven challenges exist alongside autism, there is a need for an autism lens on the relationships based approach taken to assist social-emotional growth.

Across the autism spectrum there are children with co-occurring language or intellectual disability as well as those with strengths in language and learning. Autistic children are able to form secure attachments although the risk of insecure attachments increases with severity of intellectual disability and in children with more marked social interaction delay. Rates of secure attachments in autistic children range from 40% to 63%, compared with 60% in the typically developing literature.

When using nurturing approaches with autistic learners we need to apply an autism lens. It's important to have a good understanding of the individual child, the principles of nurture and autism and to be able to use all of this together to plan to meet the needs of the child. This approach then needs to be applied within the wider school and to be translated to all settings and all people.

This guidance, written following consultation with a range of education professionals from across Scotland, considers the range of adaptations that can be required when planning to meet an autistic learners needs within a nurturing school context.

Adaptations and links to the six principles of nurture, which provide an autism lens, are offered below.

Children's learning is understood developmentally

- Take account of language skills; social communication stage; sensory preferences; individual and sometimes idiosyncratic motivation and interests; cognitive stage in relation to theory of mind, executive function and context blindness <https://www.thirdspace.scot//wp-content/uploads/2019/11/NAIT-Cognitive-Theories-Summary-November-2019.pdf>
- Take account of developmental stage in relation to self and mutual regulation strategies <https://www.medbridgeeducation.com/blog/2020/01/scerts-emotional-regulation-whats-the-end-game/>
- Autistic learners may have obvious developmental delay but some do not. They may 'mask' difficulties and generally we do not always have a sophisticated understanding of the levels of social communication development <https://www.socialthinking.com/Articles?name=social-thinking-social-communication-profile>
- Collaborative working and multidisciplinary teams are important

The classroom offers a safe base

The most important things to make the classroom feel safe are that the people and the routines are **predictable and desirable**. It is important that 'good things just happen' and that children don't have to earn enjoyment.

Staff need to be flexible enough to identify signs of stress – which may not be the same as for other children.

NAIT Key Messages highlight that the following can help:

- An understanding of developmental stage and autism, so that demands match capacity
- An individual timetable (developmentally relevant)
- Listening and communicating with parents
- A consistent individual Safe Space (see [NAIT Safe Space Guidance](#))

- Planned movement breaks (See [NAIT Movement Breaks Guidance](#))

The importance of nurture for the development of wellbeing

- Nurturing behaviour in adults might look different for autistic children at different stages and the most important thing is to know the individual and their preferences.
- Things that are comforting might not be conventional/ expected.
- Not talking to an autistic child can often be more comforting than talking.
- Some autistic learners find deep pressure touch calming but light touch alerting and distressing. Unexpected touch can result in strong reactions and knowing when to expect touch to happen can be challenging for some.
- Autistic children need adaptation to support their sensory arousal, e.g. the thing they need to feel regulated is an adaptation to manage the noisy time of the day in school, rather than talking about how they feel about the noise that's bothering them.
- Adults should aim to modify the environment to make it less overwhelming and, as they develop language, support the child's cognitive learning.

Language is a vital means of communication

- Always adapt to the child's language level.
- Adults can support by reducing their language (See NAIT [Strategies to Support Language Partners to Initiate and Engage in Social Communication](#)).
- Autistic learners may learn language differently to typically developing children. They may use words or phrases they have learned but don't fully understand and if under stress, may not be processing language they hear.
- Language does not have to be spoken and at times the adult's ability to interpret a range of communication signals is more important than the child's ability to use language.
- Allow for different preferences in use of eye gaze and nonverbal communication meshed with speech.
- Do not assume that autistic children with good language are ready to use 'meta cognitive' strategies which involve complex language and social understanding or that they will be able to explain 'why' they did something.
- Rather than focus on teaching vocabulary related to emotions, it is really important to understand this developmentally. There are many concepts children need to know before they fully understand emotion words (e.g. like and don't like, big/ lots compared with small/ not much).
- It is more important to understand arousal levels than specific emotions – for example being really happy and super excited can be just as disruptive as being angry. There is no wrong arousal level but there are expectations of the size of our reactions in different contexts and at different developmental levels.
<https://www.zonesofregulation.com/learn-more-about-the-zones.html>

All behaviour is communication

- Compliance is not the goal for autistic children (See [Amy Laurent Ted Talk](#))
- Use anticipatory supports. Disrupted expectations and developmental mismatch in expectations are common sources of distress and we can seek to anticipate and avoid these.
- Internal states can also be reflected in an individual's behaviour and level of regulation, e.g. pain, seizures or other physical conditions and it is important to consider and address these. It is important we do not misattribute communicative intent to actions which are a response to an internal physical state or experience
- Remember that 'behaviour' can also be a non-intentional communication that we interpret and that indicates something in their internal or external environment is not right. Those who know the individual well can interpret signals but we must be aware that the child may not always be able to explain the experience that led to their distress.
- It is important not to see behaviour as only a 'within child' issue but as something that is interconnected between the individual and the physical and social environment, in the 24 hour life of the child. E.g. often making things more predictable at school can lead to reduced stress at home.
- An autism lens on this is provided by Barry Prizant, when he asks us to think 'Why Why? Why?' (Prizant, B. M., & Fields-Meyer, T. (2015). *Uniquely human: A different way of seeing autism*. Simon and Schuster).
- Understand that 'behaviour' can signal distress and can be an attempt to avoid the undesirable. Avoid talking about or listing 'behaviours' the child has displayed, without placing this in context of the sources of distress.

- Seek to understand the relationship between the 'behaviour' and the predictability and desirability in the child's life.
- For autistic learners it is important to understand developmental stages of self and mutual regulation and support with relevant strategies <https://www.thirdspace.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NAIT-Anxiety-Related-Absence-Guidance-2020.pdf>
- Remember they are unlikely to be being manipulative or deliberately winding you up – they are seeking predictability and desirability.

The importance of transition in children's lives

Autistic children may need preparation and practice for big and small transitions and change.

- Think about all daily transitions between activities and events which require a shift of attention and stopping and starting.
- Use timers and timetables
- Prompt when changes are expected (e.g. 5 minutes left)
- Change one thing at a time

Other common transitions to plan for are:

- Arriving at and leaving school and transitions between classes
- Outings and residential visits
- Staff changes

Autistic children might notice changes we don't think about e.g. the teacher getting a haircut or changing scent.

Individual child planning

In addition to using an autism lens to make adaptations to the six principles of nurture, we need to match our approach to the individual learner's plan. It is important to agree a learner's targets first and then identify how to meet the targets:

Step 1: Set appropriate targets based on assessment of the individual and their context. Processes and assessment frameworks used to set targets should be relevant. The Boxall profile and targets are not designed with autistic children in mind and we would not recommend relying on the Boxall Profile for planning for autistic children. In autism we might use, for example, a SCERTS based approach.

Step 2: Identify how best to meet that learner's targets. Rather than thinking, 'Could I make nurture work for an autistic learner?' we should be asking, 'What is my target for this child and what is the best way to meet that target?' There may be many adaptations and approaches that you **could** put in place, but which **should** you put in place? An additional person is not a strategy or the first thing we should consider unless there are associated adaptations and the extra staff have a clear role in implementing strategies to meet a well-defined target as part of a team approach. For example, it is better to adapt expectations for participating in assembly, than to assign an adult to 'manage the child's behaviour' in a situation that is too difficult for them.