

# EDUCATOR TIP SHEET:

WV Autism Training Center

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## How To Set up an Autism-Friendly Secondary Classroom

High school students on the autism spectrum thrive in environments where structure, predictability, and respect for differences are built into the classroom design. Creating an autism-friendly classroom doesn't require a huge budget, just intentional choices in space, communication, and routine.

### PHYSICAL LAYOUT

- **Clear pathways:** Keep desks and supplies arranged to minimize sensory overload and crowding.
- **Designated quiet space:** Even a corner with a chair and noise-reducing headphones can help.
- **Visual cues:** Use labels, signs, or color coding for materials and classroom zones.

### SENSORY SUPPORTS

- **Lighting:** Avoid harsh fluorescents; instead, use lamps or natural light, which can reduce stress. You can also consider light filters that are certified flame-retardant. *(Image 1)*
- **Sound:** Provide or allow students to use noise-reducing options such as earplugs or headphones. Do not assume a student is listening to music and not listening to instruction. The use of headphones may be imperative to their sensory needs. Also, reduce background noise as much as possible. If your district requires a doctor's note for this accommodation, consider advising the parents to submit one to the school and advise the IEP team of this need. *(Image 2)*
- **Movement:** Allow flexible seating such as wobble stools, standing desks, or beanbag chairs. Students regulate better when they can move. If you have a student with autism, consider building in movement breaks to your daily schedule.
- **Co-Regulation:** Model calm breathing or offer sensory breaks when students show signs of dysregulation.



Image 1

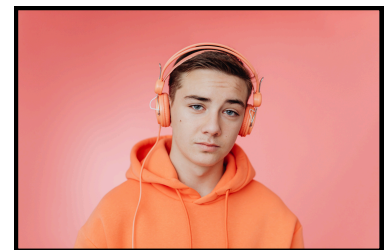


Image 2

### COMMUNICATION SUPPORTS (VISUALS)

- **Visuals:** Post daily agendas where everyone can see them. Update the schedule as needed. Consider adding task analysis and pictures to the schedule for more support. Consider using visual task analysis for multi-step assignments.
- **Clear instructions:** Break directions into smaller, more manageable steps or chunks. Use both verbal, written, and video formats. Provide examples of completed assignments.



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## PREDICTABILITY & FLEXIBILITY

- **Consistent routines:** Begin and end class the same way to reduce anxiety (e.g., bell ringers, warm-ups, exit tickets).
- **Advance warnings:** Give a heads-up before transitions, fire drills, or schedule changes. Consider using visual timers for tasks. When possible, let your students know when you will have a substitute and try to get the same substitute. Use social narratives or visual stories for these events.
- **Choice when possible:** Even small choices like where to sit or which problem to solve first can support independence.

## CLASSROOM CULTURE

- **Normalize differences:** Frame supports as “tools for everyone” so students don’t feel singled out. UDL is a wonderful way to achieve this.
- **Peer education:** Encourage empathy and collaboration through group norms, rather than spotlighting autism.
- **Strength-based lens:** Highlight student talents and interests as much or more than their challenges.

## TEACHER SURVIVAL TIPS

- **Start small,** pick one or two strategies to implement first.
- **Ask** students what helps them; they often know best.
- **Flexibility** is your friend! What works for one student with autism may not work for another. What works for one student one day may not work for that same student the next day. Consider regulation and capacity.
- Read the **entire** IEP. An IEP is more than a legal document, it’s a roadmap for how a student learns best. While sections such as accommodations and goals are important to read, the rest of the document can give you a bigger picture as to why the student has those accommodations and goals.
- **Talk** to the autism specialist or special education teacher for tips. Keep an open line of communication between you and the student’s family.
- **Ask** for help and support. Review the IEP with the case manager; ask for tips on how to provide and document accommodations. Talk to the administration about your needs. Form bonds with other teachers and provide support to each other.
- **Continue learning** about neurodivergence; this isn’t just a special education topic. Neurodivergence is constantly changing as new research is conducted. Neurodivergence is a vast group of individuals and goes beyond autism.

## CLOSING ENCOURAGEMENT

An autism-friendly classroom doesn’t just help students with autism; it benefits every learner. Structure, clarity, and respect are universal supports that build a stronger, calmer learning environment for all.

