ABOUT
AUTISM AND COMPLEX COMMUNICATION NEEDS

Complex communication needs is a broad term, which describes learners with difficulties understanding speech, using speech or with little or no speech. The numbers of how many learners have both a diagnosis of autism and complex communication needs is not clear, however up to 25% of Autistic students do not use speech to communicate. This means communication differences are 'a core characteristic of Autism' (Chan, 2022).

Each learner living with autism and complex communication needs is a unique individual. Educators and leaders should make sure adjustments are tailored to their needs. When you understand the impact of autism and complex communication needs you'll be better able to adjust to the learner's needs.

See the online practice guides to find out more:
edi.sa.edu.au/practiceguidance

Autism and complex communication needs

Complex communication needs describe children and young people with difficulties in receptive and expressive communication, and can present as

- limited spoken language
- vocalisations
- unintelligible or difficult to understand speech
- speech presenting as intermittent.

Supporting learners with autism and complex communication needs primarily focusses on the use of augmentative and alternative communication supports or tools (AACs) and/or working with a communication partner. The teacher and the child's support system (including communication partners and allied health care professionals) should collaborate to identify student strengths and communication priorities to build both social and learning opportunities.

Impacts of autism and complex communication needs on learning

In a learning environment, learners with autism and complex communication needs can experience:

- difficulty with comprehension
- difficulty expressing their wants and needs
- inability to speak, but expressive abilities with gestures and behaviours
- sensory and physical support needs impairing receptive communication.

Strengths of learners with autism and complex communication needs

Can include:

- a desire to communicate with significant valuing of all communicative modes
- expressive abilities using gestures and alternative communication modes
- visual thinking and auditory memory
- unique thought processes that support innovative solutions.

Government of South Australia

Department for Education

AUTISM AND COMPLEX COMMUNICATION NEEDS
ADJUSTMENTS

EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTMENTS

In-class communication

- Provide extra time for students to process what is said, and to consider and express their response.
- Use clear language with an appropriate tone of voice.
- When giving instruction, keep sentences short and clear. Reduce information to focus on key learnings.
- If you do not understand what they are saying ask for more information as they might use another way to show you.

Professional collaboration

- Work with the learner, their family and support team.
- Ask the learner about their strengths and interests using visual supports or their communication system.
- Work with the family to understand and learn about their child.
- Work with the allied health team to better understand the individual communication tools, child profile and preferences.

Social development and emotional wellbeing

- Use alternative and augmented communication strategies and tools for social as well as learning purposes, providing a powerful motivator for engagement.
- Involve peers when working with children with complex communication needs. For example, when talking about recess, invite other students to talk about events and incorporate their communication system..
- Promote turn-taking and use class norms to ensure all students engage in meaningful wait time.

Environmental design and access to their communication system

- Ideally the communication system is with the learner at all times or an acceptable alternative is offered. If not possible problem solve with team an alternative solution such as a laminated language display.
- Use these visual tools as universal environment supports. When communication is authentic and shared, it will increase.