ABOUT
AUTISM AND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

Autism and intellectual disabilities are separate but commonly co-existing diagnoses. Learners diagnosed with autism and intellectual disabilities differ significantly from learners with a sole autism diagnosis, requiring careful adjustments and interventions in the learning environment. The intellectual disability diagnosis increases the likelihood of autism.

Challenging behaviours increase with the severity of the intellectual disability.

Each learner living with autism and intellectual disability is a unique individual. Those who support learners with autism and intellectual disability make sure adjustments to their educational program and learning environment are tailored to their needs. When you understand the impact of this diagnosis, 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

Government of South Australia

Department for Education

Understanding Autism and intellectual disability

A diagnosis of autism with a diagnosis of intellectual disability will most commonly appear as a learner who displays higher rates of stereotypical, repetitive behaviours that can create challenges for classroom integration.

Intellectual disability and autism are both neurological conditions that can affect a person's ability to communicate and learn.

Children with autism and intellectual disabilities belong to many different subgroups of intellectual strengths and weaknesses. A learner with autism and intellectual disability can experience difficulties with impaired verbal and non-verbal communication.

Strengths of learners with autism and intellectual disability

May include:

- understanding and working with rules when the rules are clear about what should be done, and when
- being very responsive to structured, explicit teaching of social interactions
- direct communication
- ability to focus intently on things of interest to them.

AUTISM AND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY ADJUSTMENTS

EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTMENTS

Setting tasks and activities

- Explicitly teach how to use visual schedules.
- Provide opportunities for students to make choices, but keep the choices simple, consequences clear, and reduce the clutter when presenting choices.
- Allow extra time to process instructions and complete tasks.

Communication

- Give simple, short and specific instructions and provide 'wait time' for processing, particularly when asking question.
- Involve peers in designing social communication/play activities, so that they are authentic and relatable.

Environmental adjustments

- Place visual prompts in close proximity to the zones where they will be used; for example – a drink bottle routine above the water fountain, a line-up routine outside the classroom door.
- Ensure uncluttered spaces to reduce visual overstimulation and assist the learner in focussing on tasks.

Social development and emotional wellbeing adjustments

- Use evidence-based adjustments (such as those in the practice guidance resources for students with Autism) to design and teach socially acceptable ways to respond to situations, initiate social interactions or maintain social engagements.
- Be structured and consistent in behaviour management strategies and classroom rules.
- Provide opportunities for a simple game with structure during recess and lunch times. Break times can be extremely difficult for this group of learners. Remain close to support and reinforce all participants.