

Introduction to SOS Kilkenny

SOS Kilkenny is an established and respected provider of specialist supports to adults with intellectual disabilities and autism in Kilkenny City and County. We support people with dignity and respect to develop and use their abilities, to connect with like-minded people, to be active and valued members of their community and to lead a life of their choosing.

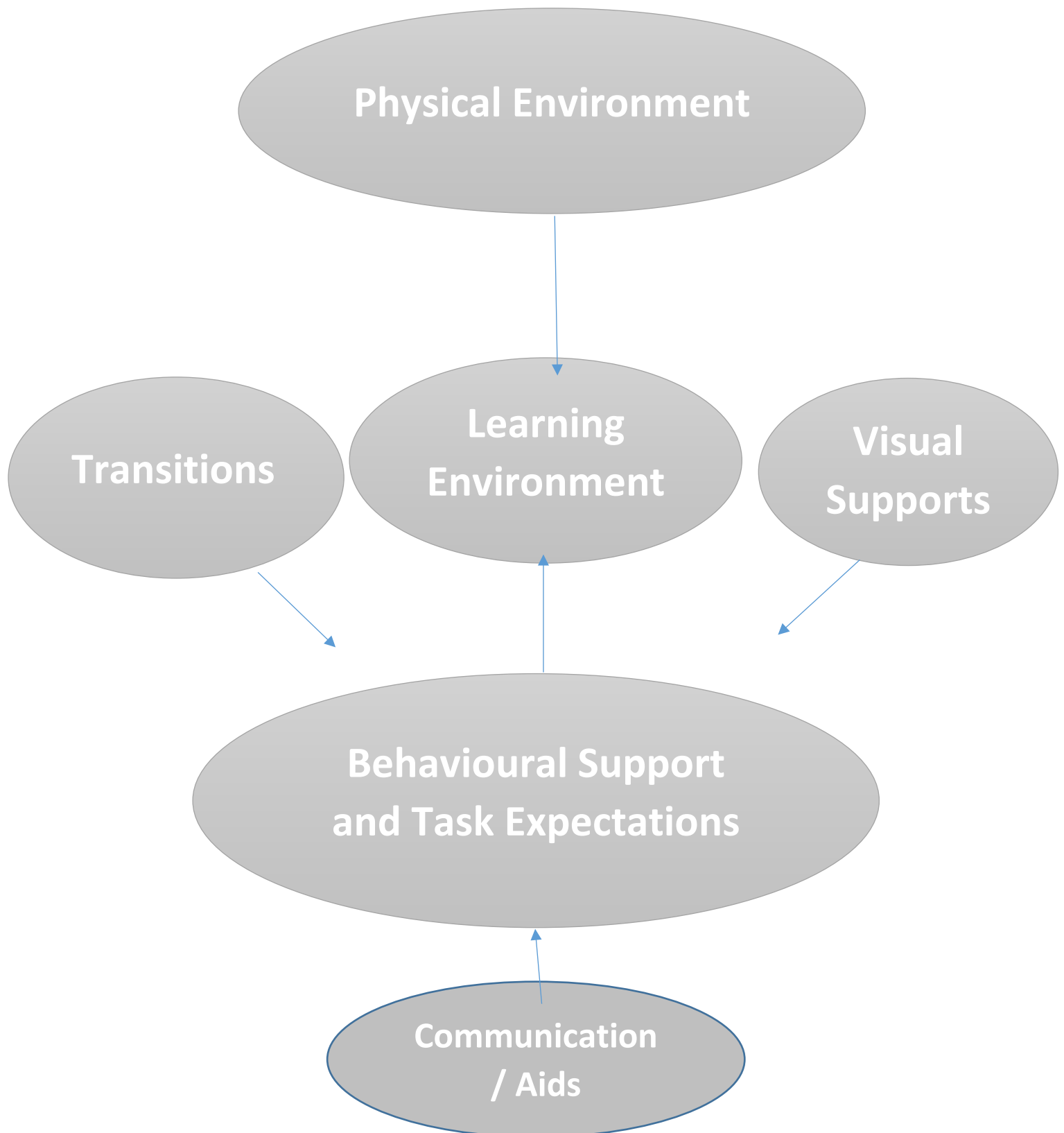
We support people to live well at all life stages through our programmes which include education and employment, sports and fitness, creative arts and media, horticulture and community engagement.

We work with our partners on the ETB to provide lifelong learning in a many aspects of the education including communicative, social, vocational, personal, community and health related topics to mention a few areas covered.

The aim of this short programme is to offer an insight and an aid to help teacher/trainers, programme developers to see learning through the eyes of the person with an intellectual disability and from our knowledge how to best support people with disability to maximise their learning potential.



Learning Participation Overview



Introduction

It is essential to provide a learning environment that is responsive to an individual's strengths and needs as this is imperative if we are to promote engagement and participation.

The quality of this learning environment is central to supporting the diverse learning needs in the areas of communication, social, emotional and wellbeing needs.

For a learner with autism it is necessary to provide that individual with a comfortable, calm environment which promotes and encourages engagement and in turn learning.

A learner with autism will experience some level of sensory sensitivity and communication difficulties which can be minor to major barriers to learning if not addressed.

Environmental adaptations will be necessary but should not decrease the independence or dignity of the individual learner. This can often be supported by offering choice, communicating with the individual learner and the support staff.

Creating an autism friendly environment works best in the context of positive, supportive and caring relationship between learner and tutor and between the learner and their peers.

It must be said that this point that this relationship will foster over time as the learner becomes familiar with the environment and the people they encounter along the way.

Learning Environment

- Providing visual timetable and schedules for classes to allow the learner to understand the structure and sequence of the day/ week.
- Creating an environment that is sensitive to language, social and emotional needs of the learner, including a time out space.
- Accommodating sensory differences presented by learners.
- Identifying support needs of individual learners and accommodating these needs.
- Planning transition and providing enough time and information when transition is necessary.

Physical Environment

Physical environment Distractions in the physical environment can contribute to a student's anxiety and sensory processing difficulties. A structured autism-friendly environment provides a calm and comfortable space to support learning and participation.

- Reduce the noise level
- Remove any distractions where possible allowing the individual learner to focus and reduce possible anxieties.
- Time out space
- Unclutter the space by removing posters from wall etc.
- All areas of the classroom should be accessible, free from obstructions and allowing students to move freely.
- Arrangement of materials should be carefully planned to allow accessibility and easy management
- Make the environment as fragrance free as possible for students who are over-sensitive to certain smells. For example, using fragrance free cleaning products etc.
- Often bright coloured clothing, patterns etc. can be a distraction to people with autism also.
- If physical contact is necessary (e.g. helping a learner to complete a task), provide prior warning that there is going to be contact and seek learner's permission/ consent. Allow for adequate personal space.
- Eye contact should always be intermittent as people with autism are often uncomfortable with eye contact.
- If possible, give prior notice of loud noises such as scheduled fire alarms etc.

Low arousal in a behavioural support context, a low-arousal environment refers to the use of calm, non-confrontational, positive behavioural approaches, beginning with the least intrusive intervention.

This provided the learner with a low-arousal, well-structured learning environment promotes learning and helps to reduce anxiety and the emergence of behaviours of concern. This is supported when the classroom learning environment is calm and organised in a way that maximises students' ability to concentrate.

Allowing students more time to process information, especially verbal instructions, helps them to remain calm and self-regulated. Clear information should be given in the format best suited to the student, with care taken to avoid them feeling overloaded.

A time out space will be essential for a learner with autism as they will experience sensory overload at different time and will require the ability to regulate in a manner that will meet the needs of that individual learner.

Visual Supports

Many learners with autism will benefit from lots of visual learning props and aids to help reinforce learning.

- Visual schedules or timetables can help learners to be aware of and prepare for upcoming lessons, activities, and events.
- A weekly timetable helps to ease uncertainty about upcoming events.
- Lots of visuals on worksheets reducing the amount of language being utilised especially where someone's literacy is challenged.

Behavioural Support

Autism is a complex developmental condition that involves persistent challenges in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and restricted/repetitive behaviours. The person with autism may require additional supports or in many cases has already learned to adapt to changing environments.

Usually the person with autism will have support staff accompanying them especially during the transition stage while the learner adapts to the new environment and develops a relationship with the tutor and other learners.

Behaviours often present

Some learner will seek out increased input to regulate themselves when they feel overwhelmed. They may feel overloaded by the varied and unpredictable stimuli from the environment and their own bodies, or may feel anxious due to other factors

- Such as social demands,
- Academic pressures,
- Unpredictable changes,
- Transitions.

Some students may then engage in familiar and repetitive sensory behaviours. This is often referred to as 'stimming' and many autistic people describe how these behaviours feel regulating and pleasurable. Examples of stimming include pacing, spinning objects close to eyes, flicking fingers and rocking.

Stimming provides the learner with predictable input which they enjoy, and this helps them to cope with the unpredictable and overwhelming demands around them. If the stimming behaviour is helping the learner to remain calm and regulated, it should be allowed to continue, as it will then facilitate engagement in learning and interaction.

Some stimming activities can distract from on-task behaviours. If this occurs the learner should be directed to scheduled times and places for the stimming activity. This could be the time out space designated.

If the repetitive behaviour increases in intensity, or is causing harm (e.g. banging head) it may be an indicator that the learner is distressed and requires intervention, such as a calm break or the removal of a trigger.

Low Arousal environment

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- Clear behavioural and task expectations help to promote consistency and predictability for students and support positive relationships with adults and peers.
- Behavioural and task expectations should be kept to a minimum and be clearly displayed in a format that is readily accessible and understood by the student. This may include the use of pictures, drawings and/or words. Ensure they are age appropriate to the adult we are working with.
- Teaching behavioural expectations learners with autism may not implicitly understand what is required of them so we do need to explain using teaching aids that work of that individual to ensure they are on the same page.

Social stories

Learners with autism often have difficulty reading social cues and determining what behaviour is appropriate in different settings. Strategies and approaches therefore need to include targets that involve explicit teaching of the unwritten rules governing behaviour and social interactions, as part of functional life skills.

A social story is a short narrative used to explain social situations in a clear visual way. They clarify how people are expected to behave in specific situations and can also be used to help explain the behaviour of others.

Social stories can be used to explicitly teach 'how', 'why', 'where' and 'when' behaviours should be practised. Symbols can help to reinforce meaning to teaching social concepts such as appropriate personal space when initiating dialogue with peers

Transition

A transition may involve a move from one activity to another, from one location to another and/ or from one stage of life to another.

While preparing for and negotiating change is important for all learners, it is particularly crucial for learners with autism as they may become overwhelmed or distressed by changes to their environment and routine. Therefore, transitions should be carefully and sensitively managed by all involved.

- To facilitate change from one activity to another, it can be helpful to present the learner with a photo of the location of the next activity.
- This allows the learner to see where they are expected to go and provides additional predictability to them during the day.
- Information can be presented in a range of formats, such as, drawings/illustrations, written words or the use of an object. This will be very individual to each learner.
- Transition should be a gradual and considered process constantly involving the learner of the decisions.
- The learner should also be front and centre of all decisions being made and reviewed regularly to ensure the transition is a successful one.

Communication

“I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-colour movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures.” (Grandin, 2006).

- So many people with autism have some level of communication difficulty and this can cause great stress and anxiety if not handled in an appropriate and effective way.
- Since spoken or sign language can be experienced as transient, students often benefit from having visual supports to help them in processing and understanding language.
- Visual approaches when working with the learner can be a lot more productive than relying on language to convey a message or to teach a concept.
- Reducing the language and introducing visuals, using practical demonstrations, modelling, physical prompts, multi-media etc. will all aid the learners positive and productive experience.

Communication Aids

- LÁMH- Sign-supported English, or a combination of whereby a learner expresses themselves using signs and symbols
- Communication boards and communication books, where the learner can express their knowledge through gesture or pointing to words, photos and/or symbols
- Assistive technology tools such as speech to text software may be useful for learner who can express their knowledge fluently with verbal language, yet struggle to express their knowledge in writing
- Communication cue cards are used primarily with learners who are verbal. They can be a reminder of what to say and provide an alternative means of communication in stressful situations
- Conversation books can use text, pictures or photographs to support the development of conversation skills
- Voice output communication aids which can generate digitised speech when the learner presses a symbol or button.
- Choice boards: A choice board is a visual tool that allows a student to select between two or more choices. Helping them to make decisions and choices.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE COMMUNICATION AIDS THAT A LEARNER WILL CARRY AND ENCOURAGE THE LEARNER TO USE THE AID IN THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.

Communication Passport

A communication passport is intended to give a brief snapshot about the person's likes, dislikes, how they communicate and how best to communicate with them. It is different from an in-depth person-centred plan or an essential lifestyle plan.

Communication passports are a tool for supporting people who cannot easily speak for themselves by making information from formal assessments easily accessible to all. A good communication passport accurately describes communication strengths and needs, and contains information about the person in a very clear way.

This could also include learning styles that best suit the individual allowing them to reach their potential.



Learning Environment

It would be important to say that when you are deciding to go with a group or individual learning setting that taking the time to introduce yourself, getting to know a little about your learner is key to success. This may require you sitting in an informal setting prior to starting working with the learner for a chat and cup of tea etc.

Inviting the learner to visit the education centre to see where they will be situated before commencing the course. Allowing them to become familiar with the environment. This will help to reduce their anxieties and stress when they arrive for the first day or week of the course.

Learning in a group setting

If many and varied reasons we will opt to have group sessions for learning activities. This can be a very successful and rewarding option for a learner with autism but will require a certain consideration.

- Students with autism benefit from having a clear understanding of the purpose of the group task and an explicit description of their role within the group as well as clarity on the roles of others.
- Careful structuring of the group activity and providing frequent practice and reinforcement of key group language skills such as listening, sharing attention, turn-taking, and role play can also support the student's participation.
- It is also important that students are supported to use strategies to seek clarification or request assistance during group learning activity.
- Allow for the opportunity to take time out when required.
- Small groups with student ability and interests matched would be preferable.
- Short sessions with regular breaks to allow movement would be imperative.
- Ensure you have adequate space between learners as people with autism like to protect their personal space.

Learning in a One to One setting

- This option is sometimes the most suitable and benefits the individual learner more than a group setting. It can be a more successful option for an individual learner but again will require certain considerations to maximise the benefits of the learning opportunity.
- The tutor can focus on the specific subjects and areas your learner may struggle with.
- There are fewer distractions if your autistic person is finding the group setting to be too overwhelming, with little noise or distractions from other learners, which can often impact on the person's concentration and performance.
- Tutor can move at a pace that is more suited to that individual learner.
- Allow the learner to take time out as required.
- Short sessions with regular movement breaks.
- Limit the demands on the person.
- Intermittent eye contact.

Interventional strategies.

When an individual with autism becomes overwhelmed and anxious they will often display some of the following behaviours.

Learners experiencing heightened emotions such as anxiety are often hyper vigilant, which can lead to an increase in their perception of threat, or in their experience of sensory stimuli as overwhelming.

This may then lead to them becoming less compliant, they may exhibit behaviour such as avoidance, repetitive behaviours such as rocking, spinning, etc. Occasionally you may have a situation where the person leaves the room or hits out at others.

They use the least intrusive intervention to support the learner to calm down more quickly and effectively. This process involves:

- The Tutor/Supporting staff appearing calm (even if that is not how they are feeling!)
- The Tutor/ Supporting staff reducing all demands and minimising verbal interaction
- The Tutor/Supporting staff giving the student space, staying outside of the student's line of vision
- The Tutor/Supporting staff avoiding any nonverbal cues that may further trigger the behaviour
- The Tutor/Supporting staff monitoring safety needs (e.g. consider removing other students)

Adapting learning to meet the needs of individuals with learning difficulties

- Select the topic to be taught
- Identify the subject material
- Decide the learning goals and objectives
- Decide the way the lessons will be taught basing this on your knowledge of the learners
- Identify any learners who will require additional modification of the materials and adjust accordingly
- Use technology
- Use visual supports to aid learning
- Where possible introduce practical tasks which learner can participate in
- Interactive / group activities / discussions encourage peer to peer learning
- Teach the lessons, review and adapt as required
- Provide extra tuition and assistance as required during the session
- Repetition is an essential part of learning as people with an Intellectual disability have difficulty of the most part retaining information
- Create plenty of opportunities to practice new skills learned throughout the sessions
- Plan appropriate methods of assessing the progress of students based on the learning goals and objectives

Preparation of worksheets

- Use materials within the learner's experience
- Introduce new concepts in a familiar context
- Use plenty of social cues- words, symbols, pictures and diagrams
- Ensure pictures, illustrations tie closely to the task
- Give the learner plenty of opportunity for success offering lots of praise.
- If possible, try out several versions of the same worksheet to discover what works best for the learner and also allow as you to ensure that the learner has grasped the concept
- Differentiate clearly between text and illustrations
- Highlight new words/ vocabulary that the learner may not be familiar with and explain
- Use type or print and not handwriting
- Use uncluttered layout- too busy and it will cause confusion
- Use simple and familiar language
- Keep sentences short and concise
- Avoid ambiguous language
- Use active rather than passive words
- Break up continuous text

Characteristic of a typical learning profile of someone with an Intellectual Disability and or Autism

- They tend on the whole to be exceptional visual learners
- Learning difficulties range from a mild to a severe intellectual disability
- Visual processing and visual memory tends to be stronger than auditory communication
- Strong use of gesture and motor response
- Sensitivity to failure and emotional cues
- Speech and language difficulties are often present
- Verbal short term memory is often a problem
- Developmental delay in working memory
- Retaining information can be a difficulty for the person
- General cognitive impairment

Explicit instruction paired with tutor prompts and positive reinforcement of learner's responses have been shown to be effective in teaching with autism and general learning difficulties. This includes modelling how to start and succeed with a task and providing sufficient practice opportunities. Visual structured teaching approaches can also support effective instruction and positive learning outcomes.

Here's my story



Meet Sally

Sally is a 50-year-old lady with Cerebral Palsy with a moderate intellectual disability. Sally mobilises using a wheelchair and has partial use of one hand due to having a hemiplegia associated with the diagnosis of Cerebral Palsy. Sally is in paid employment two afternoons a week and attends part time education also. Sally is supported in her employment. Sally communicates verbally and has a good level of understanding.

Let's hear Sally's story

"I love my job. It helps to keep my mind active, this is very important to me as I cannot keep the rest of my body active."

I work best when staff take some time out with me on my own. I find this is very helpful. I will need to be shown how to complete a task a couple of times before I feel confident to do it independently. In my job, I work on a computer. I input data onto spreadsheets by copying, pasting and typing. My support staff will help me by moving the mouse to the opposite side as I already mentioned I have partial use of my right hand. I am able to type independently with my left hand. There is no need to do it for me. I will ask for help if I need it.

"Sometimes I will be slower than other, but I will get the job done."

The name and image used are fictitious to protect the identity of the individual.

Here's my story



Meet Sophie

Sophie is a 32- year old lady with Downs Syndrome, and a moderate intellectual disability. Sophie is currently employed by three different employers. She is a well-respected employee and is unsupported in all 3 roles, meaning she works completely independently in her employment roles. She is also a well-known and a valued member of her community.

She communicates verbally and has a good level of understanding. She has in the past attended training courses but at present does not do so.

Let's hear Sophie's story

"I am the same as the girls we are a team"

Sophie is talking about her job in the hair dressing salon where she is made to feel part of the team. It has been a very successful supported employment placement where inclusion has been shown to be a top of the priority for staff there.

"I love my jobs and I am good at them. I feel part of the team where I work"

Sophie says" I like to do my own work and I will ask for help if I need it."

Sophie says she like to be shown how to do things not once but often twice or three times and given time then to practice a new skill. Sophie is a visual learner and depends a lot on visual prompts and aids to help her learn.

Sophie loves to dress up and as she says "I like to look pretty and I love when people tell me I look nice" Sophie is like any other girl she loves to be complimented on her look. "It makes her feel good."

Sophie also works part time in a hotel in the restaurant and as she is a very social able person she enjoys her interaction with the public. "I love chatting with the customers and making new friends I am easy to get along with."

"They all know my name."

Here's my story



Meet Danny

Danny is a 24- year old man with a diagnosis of Autism. Danny has a moderate intellectual disability and had communication difficulties. Danny uses Lámh (Sign Language adapted for people with intellectual disabilities). Danny also carries his communication passport with him when meeting new people or engaging in a new activity. Danny thrives on routine and he loves to keep his day as busy as possible. Danny likes to be notified in advance of changes to his routine. If Danny is not supported with change and given ample time to adjust to change he will become upset and frustrated due to high levels of anxiety caused by the changes. Danny will disengage from the activity.

Let's hear Danny's story

Danny lives at home with his supportive family and attends a service five days a week. Danny receives 1:1 support in his day service. Danny becomes overwhelmed in large group settings this causes him distress. Danny will often disengage from activity and will be seen to be covering his ears and start rocking in his chair continuously. This is how Danny regulates. He doesn't like fuss and wants to be left alone at this time. He will seek reassurance at this time from his support staff. Danny will use a thumbs up gesture to communicate that he is happy to continue.

When learning Danny will require lots of visual aids/ prompting and reducing the verbal demands will be essential. Danny is happy and eager to learn with the proper supports. Danny will thrive in a well-structured, small class room setting with attention being paid to the needs and requirements of someone on the autism spectrum.

