

Points for reflection

“Progression is often uneven across different aspects of development. This is to be expected and is quite natural. Understanding this helps to provide experiences, opportunities and interactions which are more developmentally appropriate.”

“All babies and young children develop their individual skills, knowledge and attributes at different rates according to who they are. The guidance can be used to support children with more complex needs by taking this into account.”

“Whilst there are many individual differences and variables in respect of needs and support, prevention and early intervention are essential if children are to be provided with the very best start in life.”

“Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) recognises that children and young people will have different experiences in their lives, but that every child and young person has the right to expect appropriate support from adults to allow them to grow and develop and reach their full potential.”

Realising the Ambition: Being Me

A bit about support strategies

To have quality conversations about children we need to reflect on our practice and the skills we use to support children. We also need to have a shared knowledge and understanding of the vocabulary relating to support strategies.

Our aim in supporting a child with Additional Support Needs (ASN) would always be for them to achieve the best possible level of independence. There is a wide range of strategies which might be used for different children and situations, some of which are described in this document.

Flexibility in your approach is a core message. Each skill could be used to support several different situations providing it is tailored to the individual child you are supporting. Children will respond in different ways and keeping a record of what does and doesn't work helps to build a picture of successful approaches for that individual.

Hints and tips!

Using solution focussed principles can be a helpful approach when reflecting on your practice. Consider:

- Small changes lead to bigger changes.
- Everyone has their own way of solving problems.
- If it works, do more of it; if it doesn't work, try something different.

Using Milestones to support learners

Education Scotland has produced a framework of materials, Milestones, to support practitioners to identify the progression of children's learning and assist with tracking and monitoring. There are three sections within the framework: the Foundation Milestones, Literacy and English and Numeracy and Mathematics. The guidance and support materials are specifically designed for learners with complex ASN. There is a wealth of resources including videos and PowerPoints available to explore on the [Milestones to support learners with complex additional support needs](#) webpage.

Engagement

We need to build up joint attention skills to engage the child in play and learning. To do this successfully we need to know their developmental level, specific interests/motivators and activities which sustain their attention best. Once engaged you can then match the most suitable support strategy to the activity. Remember fun is the best motivator!

Recommendations from parents/carers and supporting professionals

When working with a child with ASN it is important to make sure you have a clear understanding of the child's needs, the types of support they respond to best and what motivates them. You could do this by:

- Talking to the parents/carers about what works well at home.
- Becoming familiar with the child's strengths, pressures, interests and motivators.
- Identifying current targets and recommendations from staff and partners to the plan. Information may also be found in Personal Care Plans; Being Me, Form 1s, Child's Plans and reports from professionals, etc.

Useful Contents for a Support Strategy Toolbox

Observation

Never underestimate the value of purposeful and objective observation.

“Careful observations form part of building a picture of where a child is in their learning and determining what they need from us and the environment around them to assist further learning.”

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You could read [EASEYS for ASN Meeting Additional Support Needs](#) for ideas to support making effective observations.

Use of spaces

[Space to Grow – Design guidance for early learning and childcare](#) is a useful document from the Scottish Government to refer to when organising the indoor and outdoor spaces available to you. Some children’s play and learning can be compromised by some of the environmental challenges in a setting. The nature of a child’s individual needs may have practical implications e.g. reduction of background noise or room for wheelchair access. Reasonable adjustments can be made to reduce environmental barriers to learning and therefore increase the opportunities for a child to participate. Even small changes should be considered to optimise the play and learning spaces for an individual child. Examples might include:

- providing a distraction-free area to encourage attention or for teaching new skills in;
- creating a low arousal space to provide quiet time or to meet other sensory needs;
- clearly labelling storage to promote independence by using objects of reference, photos, pictures, text, etc;
- providing a range of different play environments for the child to have access to or choose from; and
- providing a good flow of space or clearly marked areas for children with visual impairments or mobility needs.

Interactions and Experiences

“What do the children’s actions, emotions and words tell you about what they require from you and others [their interactions]... to grow and develop in every way?”

Realising the Ambition: Being Me

Ask yourself the question, “What is **this** child interested in doing?” Following a child’s lead in play shows them that we are interested in what **they** are doing and value **their** play. Build your interactions around this.

It’s also important to strike a balance between child led and adult led play so carefully consider when you step in or step back. We scaffold children’s interactions to build confidence, to provide opportunities for challenge, to promote independence to develop social play skills.

“We have a key role to play in providing motivating learning provocations and appropriate challenge. Our richer knowledge of the world helps young children to make progress in their learning. This is what Bruner meant by “scaffolding”. Children and practitioners working together can take learning further than the child could by themselves. (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).”

Realising the Ambition: Being Me

Strategies that support interactions in play:

- Find their interests and strengths and play to them.
- Use some of the Words Up Key Message strategies such as ‘[Copy and Add](#)’ within the play situation. As you copy and add to their language you can also try adding to the child’s play by doing something different with the same toy.
- Try to develop a non-threatening balance between copying and adding and ensure the child feels comfortable with the pace you are going at.
- Consider how you position yourself when playing or talking with the child; maximise their vision and hearing.
- Consider trying some strategies from [EASEYS for ASN Intensive Interaction](#) or the [Selfie Steps](#).

Support strategy toolbox

Developing attention skills

Some children need help to build and sustain their attention. We need to consider what we do to gain their attention, how we might extend the time they attend, and build in strategies to help them shift attention. Strategies which could support developing attention and concentration might include:

- Which activities are they motivated by? When are they having the most fun? Use these activities as a starting point.
- Consider the time of day. Does the child perform better at the start of a session, or do they need a settling in time in a quiet space after they have just been dropped off? Are they more alert after snack or lunch or does eating make them sleepy? Are they more tired after the weekend, or do they tire as the week progresses?
- Work on joint attention, as a play partner, practice gaining the child's attention, encouraging them to focus on you by using an animated voice and facial expressions. You could try using funny glasses, hats, etc. Try some ideas from [Play Ideas: Mirror Play](#).
- Be realistic about an appropriate duration of an activity. What would you expect from the child's developmental level?
- Try shifting and sharing attention to focus on something like a cause-and-effect toy with the child. Over time aim to build up the duration of the attention to the game. Try some ideas from [Play Ideas: Bubble Play](#).
- Consider different ways of presenting the same activity and the different places and positions you could use. Variety can keep things more interesting although some children do prefer continuity.
- 'Chunk' or break up bigger activities into smaller bite-sized chunks and using sensory/movement breaks in between these steps can help some children stay engaged in play for longer.
- Consider using visual supports (first/then, now/next boards, choosing boards, etc), timers (sand, digital, countdown, etc) to cue the child into an activity.
- Alter your expectations and plan accordingly. Work to the child's strengths.

Pause and wait... then wait some more

The Key Message 'Pause and Wait' is a strategy recommended in [Words Up Key Messages](#). This same principle can be applied not only to verbal communication but waiting allows time for a child to show thinking or a physical response. Although it may feel an uncomfortable wait for you it can be essential for many children with ASN. Pausing is an opportunity to watch for anticipation which may be a sign of recall (learning). Giving this extra time allows for a child to be able to make their own attempt before an adult steps in to support. This can build confidence and avoid over-supporting or deskilling the child. It is also a great way to measure the child's progress.

Supporting choice making

Some children with ASN can be overwhelmed by the full range of activities available in a setting. Offering a reduced choice can:

- help children give more focused attention on just one activity;
- may help reduce flitting between or in and out of activities;
- increase motivation as we involve children in decision making; and
- develop independence skills by allowing them to have more control over what is happening to them and around them.

All the above can help to reduce learned helplessness and passivity because we are actively involving the child in the decision-making process ensuring that we are [hearing their voice](#).

We may need to build in opportunities to teach choice-making skills using a small step approach. This needs to be individualised to the child's developmental level and where the choices are meaningful and motivating to them. At this stage you would refer to any advice and recommendations given by supporting professionals e.g. Speech and Language Therapist. Additional ideas can also be found in [EASEYS for ASN choice making](#).

Support strategy toolbox

Using motivators and rewards

It is essential to know the child you are supporting well, to effectively use motivation and praise. Some children are not motivated by the social rewards of affection, praise or attention and may find them difficult to cope with. Sometimes tangible rewards such as a favourite toy or activity, computer time, etc. can be more motivating. Personalise your approach to the individual, their developmental stage and their specific interests. Find out what works at home and use similar strategies in your setting. Some examples could include: putting stickers on paper rather than on the child or using 'Let's make a deal'.



Demonstrate or model the task

One purpose of demonstrating or modelling can be to let a child experience or observe an activity in its entirety. This can help children see the context, the sequence, the outcome and their possible role in the activity. There are benefits for some children in peer modelling while others learn well by copying adults.

Simplify the task

Break an activity down into small steps to identify your target step or skill. Support the development of this skill using an appropriate range of supports strategies e.g. hand over hand, backward chaining, visual sequences, etc. Then increase the challenge by reducing the prompts used or the level of adult support given.

Backward chaining

“When teaching skills to children with ASN, backward chaining refers to breaking down the steps of a task and teaching them in reverse order. This gives the child an experience of success and completion with every attempt. Instead of the child starting at the beginning and getting lost somewhere in the process the adult does all but the last step and lets the child complete the work. Then the adult fades back, doing less and less while the child does more and more, always ending with the child performing the final step.”

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We typically use this strategy when supporting early dressing skills e.g. pulling up zips; however, this can also be applied to the development of play skills e.g. an adult completing all but the last piece of a jigsaw, adult building a tower for the child to knock down, teaching 'where things belong' by starting with just one piece to put away, etc.

Repetition and Practice

The use of repetition is essential, particularly for children with more complex needs. Often a skill can require hundreds of repetitions before becoming fluent. Be confident in knowing what skill you are supporting and how you will know if the child is making progress. If you become 'stuck' or unsure discuss it with others supporting the child. Sharing your observations with others is what informs next steps.

It can be useful for children with more complex needs to use the shared language from [Milestones](#) Page 8: Continuum of Engagement: Experiences, Actively engages, Applies and extends.

Some children might resist repetition perhaps feeling that if they have done it once why would they do it again. Keeping the child stimulated during this period can require creative thinking and knowing what motivates them!

Skills maintenance

Skills may need to be re-taught over time or in new environments. This may arise due to complex needs or a deteriorating condition. You could also try practising in a different context or environment to help embed or generalise the skill.

Knowing when to step in and step back

There is a balance to supporting without deskilling. A more intensive and "close" support might be needed when teaching a child a new skill or routine and then this support could be faded.

Having the confidence to know when to step back and allow the child to demonstrate their learning or skills acquisition is an effective way of gathering information. We also need to be prepared to adapt our support on the days a child is not so engaged and step back in.

Prompts

The reason for using prompts with children with ASN is to help them work towards a greater level of independence. So, as we consider what prompts are best to use and how frequently we should use them, it is equally important to factor in prompt reduction in a careful and gradual way once a skill is being mastered.

Physical Prompts

Hand over Hand: This prompt is most frequently used with children who have a physical difficulty but could also be used with children who require extra support with fine motor skills. You need to make sure the child is not resistant to being touched before using this type of prompt and be aware if they begin to show any sign of being uncomfortable. The adult may place their hand over the child's hand to guide or lead them through a task promoting their active involvement.

Other physical prompts include hand under hand, gently tapping the back of a hand as a nudge, supporting a child less intensively by the elbow, or even pointing. Physical prompts may be accompanied by verbal prompts. As the verbal prompts stay in place, the adult fades the physical prompt e.g. hand over hand can be faded by lightening the touch to a simple touch on the back of a hand or arm to guide the child through the task.

Verbal Prompts

Verbal prompts include one-word instructions or a specific phrase. For example, when teaching a child with ASN to wash his hands, you might say "Turn on the water" to prompt the next step. You should be consistent with the phrase/word you choose so that the child links it to the specific step you want them to do. Consider the fading of verbal prompts by pausing as the skills become more familiar thus allowing the child to demonstrate their learning.

Gestures

Use of natural gestures e.g. pointing, shaking or nodding your head, facial expressions, body language, etc. can be used to support communication. **Makaton** might be recommended for some children by a Speech and Language Therapist as part of a total communication approach.

Visual Prompts

We all rely on visual structure and organisation: signs, labels, calendars, diaries, maps, etc. For children with ASN the benefits of using visual prompts are to promote communication, participation and independence. Visual prompts remain in place long after the spoken word has faded. They can help children to:

- cue into activities and stay on task;
- manage their emotions and anxieties;
- make choices;
- communicate their needs; and
- adjust to changes and know what is coming next.

A visual prompt can use a range of items: a 3D object, toy, photo, symbol, drawing, etc. In ELC settings we can use visual prompts for labels, timetables, sequences, photos to support turn taking, etc. Use whichever visual prompt best supports the child's level of communication. Follow advice and recommendations from professionals involved with the child and parents to ensure that whatever is being used meets the child's needs and is being used consistently across environments.

Useful websites, and publications

- [Differentiation in the Early Years](#)
- [Words Up Key Messages](#)
- [National Autistic Society - Communication Tools](#)
- [Highland Council Psychological Service – Supporting Learners](#)

