

NEURODIVERSITY > AUTISM > NAVIGATING SUPPORT IN EDUCATION

Navigating support in Education

Full transcript · 12 video clips · generated 22 September 2026

About this transcript. This transcript was produced automatically from the video audio. It has not been checked by a person, so names, place names, te reo Māori and medical terms may be wrong in places. The video is the record. If something here reads oddly, please check it against the video.

Watch the series: listeningtofamilies.co.nz/autism/navigating-support-in-education

IN THIS TRANSCRIPT

1. Autism - MoE - Neurodiverse children
2. Autism - MoE - Transition
3. Autism - MoE - Attendance
4. Autism - MoE - Individualised Education Plan
5. Autism - MoE - Specialist Schools
6. Autism - MoE - Teacher Training
7. Autism - MoE - Teacher Aides
8. Autism - MoE - School activities
9. Autism - MoE - Level of support
10. Autism - MoE - ORS funding
11. Autism - MoE - Exclusion
12. Autism - MoE - Key messages

1. Autism - MoE - Neurodiverse children

Hi, I'm Helen Wagstaff, Autism Coordinator with Christchurch Hospital. We've been making a few videos to help families with autistic children and I've approached a number of agencies and they've been really supportive in what we're doing. So today I'm joined with Tracey and Rachel from the Ministry of Education and Kim who you will have met before, a parent, and she's going to ask some questions and I'll leave you guys to introduce yourselves. Thanks for coming along. I'm Kim, I have two young people on the spectrum, a 20-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old son. I'm Tracey Rowan and I work for the Ministry of Education here in the Christchurch office and I'm the Principal Advisor for Learning Support.

Good morning, my name is Rachel Mink. I also work for the Ministry of Education. My role is the Chief Advisor for Learning Support for the Deputy Secretary for Gitae Ronga which covers all of Wellington and the whole of the South Island. Really nice to be with you today. Fantastic, thank you so much for coming. I'll let you get started Kim. What is the Ministry of Education's advice when parents suspect that their child might be neurodiverse? Right, well I think families know their children the best. When as a family you're starting to observe things that are just making you wonder about your child's learning and their development, in the first instance I think it's always a good idea to just talk to people that you trust and that might be a health practitioner, it might be kai kō in an early learning setting, it might be kaumātua, it might be a wise family member.

Just have those initial conversations and also feel absolutely for to call the local ministry office. You can call and ask to speak to the service manager for your area where you live. And the service manager will help you to understand the supports that are available for children throughout the education journey. So they will talk about the services that we provide, services that our resource teachers of learning and behaviour provide and hopefully in that conversation provide a level of reassurance that nobody's on their own. We're there to help and we're never the wrong door. So you know please reach out to us.

Another important role that the service manager has is to just help all of our education settings to be ready to welcome and include diverse learners. Because that's what our community is. So you know that's a big piece of our ongoing work to help those settings. But definitely we're there for families when you're starting to think about what's what's going to happen next for your for your child. When you suspect your child is possibly neurodiverse, will the school support them without a diagnosis or whilst an assessment is being made? They absolutely will provide that support. So our services and the education in any setting is not at all dependent on a diagnosis.

So for our services our focus is on understanding a child's strengths and their particular needs and making sure that they're getting the support that they need. Making a plan so that the child can be successful in whatever setting the family is choosing to send them to. So there absolutely isn't a need for a diagnosis. A diagnosis can provide information. That's an important piece of a puzzle. But there are other rich sources of information about a child. And so our planning is informed by a whole range of different assessments and information gathering and a diagnosis is not central to that piece of work.

Sometimes I find that some parents don't find that the case and that schools are quite insistent on a diagnosis and that the diagnosis is what's important before their child will get support. So I think that whenever there's a situation where a family is not sure about what a school is asking and why they are asking that, you know we are here to help facilitate that conversation with the school. Because sometimes that's just about a misunderstanding of what is needed and what is required. The school will be wanting to put their best foot forward in terms of creating an environment where a child is going to be safe and successful at school.

But we're here to help with facilitating a conversation about what people need to know in order to start building a really good plan of support for their child.

2. Autism - MoE - Transition

On the back of that, I'd like to talk about transition. Sometimes young people in the speech room need a lot of time to ease into school, becoming familiar with the classroom, the routines, becoming familiar with the teacher and the different eating times and play times at school. Is it possible to take longer to do that? They turn five, does it have to happen before they turn five or can we do that over several months? You absolutely can. And there just isn't a one-size-fits-all rule around transitions. I think transitions can be kind of equal parts worrying and exciting because it's a very significant milestone for the whole family.

I think the best transitions start early, a good six to twelve months before they start. Before the child is going to begin school. Because what we want is continuity between the early learning setting and the school. So it's great when the school teacher visits the early learning setting to see the little person in action in that early learning setting and to learn about the things that are working well, the things that the child loves and enjoys doing. So that they can start to build an environment and a plan that's going to be really welcoming and inclusive for that child when they start school.

So good collaborative planning where all of the key people are involved is very, very helpful I think. If the family feels that it would be best for their child's wellbeing if they had a sort of graduated transition, a graduated transition plan when they start school so that they don't start full time straight away then the legislation allows for that. It allows for a period of six months, doesn't have to take six months, but a period of time where the child might work towards full time attendance. Those plans are family led. It's not up to schools to impose them. It's up to parents to say, we think this would give our child the best start.

And I guess it also helps the school to be ready for the child. So we're not about making children school ready. You probably hear that quite often. But we're not about children being ready for school. We're about schools being ready for the children who are coming. So a good collaborative plan like that can really support those positive outcomes. I know a lot of families struggle with that and I'm always saying to them, go back to your early intervention teacher. They will organise and help with transition because it is something that is a big concern. They absolutely will. Often our RTLB are key people in the development of those graduated transition plans.

But the main thing is that those plans have a time frame. There's an end point when we're expecting that child to be fully participating and engaged at school. And that families are part of the ongoing monitoring and review of those plans. And I'm guessing the same sort of thing is available for children moving from primary to intermediate or from primary or intermediate to high school as well. Because that's the next area that a lot of families, you'd agree with that I think. Because we have transition plans for all of those five stages. So absolutely, those plans, we can have a plan. So they stop being called a graduated transition plan and they start being called a transition attendance plan.

Sometimes they're called a wellbeing plan as well. And that's quite nice because at the heart of that is the wellbeing of the child. And again, they should be family initiated, not imposed by the school. So those transition attendance plans can be for a period of six months and then they can be reviewed and they can be in further period of six months. But knowing that doesn't mean that they should last for that length of time. Really, we all want to work hard to help that child to attend full time to participate and engage with their peers all day, every day, if we can possibly achieve that. And I know in the past, for me as a teacher aide, I've written social stories which can be really helpful as well.

Going from year to the next year. Going from school to the next school. I think those are a great tool to be used. And so part of that planning, that transition planning, is thinking about what are the tools and strategies and who are the key people that are going to help this plan to be really successful and a positive experience for everybody.

3. Autism - MoE - Attendance

What support is there from the MOE that can help parents meet their legal obligations for sending their child to school each day? So I think there are lots of reasons why attendance at school can become challenging at particular periods of time. There are lots and lots of different variables that impact the ability of families and children to manage attendance. Sometimes those barriers to attendance sit in the education setting. And the Ministry of Education has a really important role to help to address those, whatever those barriers are that are sitting in the education setting. So that's a key role for us to help in those situations.

Sometimes the barriers are sitting in the community. Sometimes they're sitting with other agents. Some agencies and services who have waitlists or parents have experienced knocking on that door and it wasn't the right door and knocking on another door and it wasn't the right door. And all of that is hard. We understand that. We do have a really important role to play in helping parents to navigate the range of services and education options that are available. And that's for children and young people. So it's great if you can do a bit of research looking on our website at all of the different services and supports and agencies and education options that are available.

But probably even better than that is having a conversation with a real person. And talking to your service manager or somebody like me in the Ministry of Education office. So that we can just help you to navigate that. Understand what's available, understand what the options are and what the processes are for engaging with any of those options. We're definitely here to help with those things. Because we know that when those things are challenging, attendance and engagement is impacted in schools. We get that. But we are here to help overcome those barriers if possible.

4. Autism - MoE - Individualised Education Plan

I'd like to talk about IEPs, or Individual Educational Plans. What is an IEP? So, Individual Education Plan is a collaborative plan that's dynamic and live, where all of the key adults who know the child best would get together, and the child if possible, to contribute to that, to develop a plan that includes some very clear goals, aspirations for a child's learning and social development in the education setting. Not every child with learning support needs an IEP, but where those key adults think that there are some particular changes to the environment, adaptations, particular sort of... individualised tools and strategies that are needed for that child to work towards some particular goals that everybody agrees are valued and important for their child.

That's a good time to have an IEP in place. And IEP, is it always called an IEP? Sometimes it's different, isn't it? Sometimes it might be called a Collaborative Action Plan, a Personalised Learning Plan. Look. A Personalised Learning Plan. Variations on a theme. But they all have the same intent, a way of gathering everybody, sort of circling the wagons around a child, and working on a good, dynamic, robust plan that's got some very clear goals, some very clear outcomes, and is monitored and reviewed on a regular basis, with all of the key people having some input into that. OK, that sounds good.

Cool. What does it include in an IEP? Behaviour management and learning goals and all that sort of stuff? All of those things. They're just the things that people agree are important right now. Yep. You know, in the short... There might be some long-term goals, but often it's those shorter-term goals that people agree are important right now for that child. How do I get an IEP? Well, if you think that an individual plan for your child is needed, have a conversation with the classroom teacher or the SENCO at your school, or there might be a learning support coordinator at the school. You can talk to any of those people about the learning support needs of your child, but the classroom teacher would be probably your first port of call.

Yep. You can ask them about why you think that would be helpful, and I would say it is most likely that there would be an agreement, that we will develop that together. You can also talk about who the key people should be in that. If your child would enjoy being part of that discussion, then absolutely they can be part of that discussion. Teacher aides, if there's a teacher aide who has been working with

the teacher or with your child or a group of children that your child is part of, then they are often key people who know that child really well and know some of the tools and strategies that work really well with that child.

So they're often a very helpful contributor to an IEP. Great. That's fantastic. Thank you for answering that because I've got a lot of families who sometimes struggle with those things, knowing who's allowed to be at the IEP. Can I get one? So thank you. That's really good to hear. Great.

5. Autism - MoE - Specialist Schools

What are the benefits of special schools, as opposed to a local school for my child with autism? In Canterbury, we are great believers in local schools for local children. However, parents have a right to explore a range of options, and our specialist day schools are a really important part of our education network. They have an important role to play. If a child does seek an enrolment and gets a place in a specialist day school, sometimes that can be for a short-term intervention, and then they transition back to their local school, and sometimes everyone agrees that it's a good longer-term option for a child.

Both of those. Those are current ways that our specialist schools are used by families across Canterbury. If you're thinking about a specialist setting for your child, the first thing that you need to do is have a conversation with the Ministry of Education, because children can only enrol in a specialist setting by agreement with the Ministry of Education. Your child has to be AUS verified, and you have to have a Christchurch address to attend a Christchurch specialist day school. So first you need to have that conversation with us, and the service manager that you talk to will talk about a range of options, so that you've got a good idea about how to make a good decision about what you think would be best.

And then we would encourage you to visit a range of options. Visit your local school, your local mainstream school. Visit the specialist setting that's in your area, in the catchment where you are. Take those visits. And then if you're still thinking after those visits that a specialist setting is the right option, then the Ministry of Education helps you through the application process. That application then goes to a panel of the specialist day school, Tumuaki, those principals, and our lead adviser. And those specialist day schools do some prioritising, and so they might prioritise your child for a placement in that day school.

But they run at capacity. Children are moving in. Children are moving in and out of those day schools, and so there will be times when they don't have a place for your child. If that happens, and sometimes families feel really disappointed when that happens, but then we're here to help with what your other local schooling option is, and we're here to help to support that transition into your local school. You can apply again, the family can apply again, because places become available. So we're here to help with all of that, navigating all of those options.

6. Autism - MoE - Teacher Training

What sort of professional development do teachers do so they understand autism and how to best support a child? There's a lot of ways that the ministry can work with teachers. And I guess I'll start with the big ones first and then narrow it down to individual work with individual teachers. So a big part of what the ministry knows is that having a really confident and capable teaching workforce is a big part of having a really inclusive education system. So the ministry invests in a few different things. Some of the big ones, we provide about over 300 places on a specialist teaching programme.

So for people who have trained as teachers, they can go to be part of a Massey University programme and learn more about how to meet the complex learning and behavioural needs of a whole range of children, including those who have autism and who are neurodiverse. That's kind of a big scale one. That is obviously a commitment for teachers to do a little extra training. On kind of the next layer, we partner with organisations like Autism New Zealand to work through programmes like Tilting the Seesaw. So we have a number of learning support coordinators funded on that programme, and they work with teams around children through Autism New Zealand to have really good conversations over a couple of days and think about planning and delivering together in the everyday.

So we have a number of teaching and learning routines for that young person. And then of course, we have our resource teachers of learning and behaviour, RTLB, and ministry specialists partnering with teachers in those everyday environments where they're learning for everybody, including teachers and our specialists and whānau all together learn a lot from the young people that they engage with. And working through challenges together, problem solving, noticing, talking about it, sense making, and learning together around individuals, because, you know, you will know and the families will know that are out there that we might think we've got it sorted and then something will change.

So the learning is continual. So we are able to provide some of those key components that are broader. We also have part of that we provide to teachers as a website called inclusiveducation.org.nz. And we've got a number of guides on there around particular types

of learning need and how teachers might think about that in their context. And that's probably what we call it, Inclusive Education.org.nz. So if they're looking for people just in time learning, if they've got a question or a wondering around a learner in their classroom, they might go and check that out. And it might help them have a few questions to come and work with the people who might be coming into school to help them as well.

So a range of ways we help teachers learn. But the learning's never done, I think, is a key message. And the ministry have got a number of ways you can keep learning together, the teacher, the family, and the ministry teams around children. That's great. There's one organisation, that I often recommend to families to tell teachers about, is Altogether Autism. And I work together with them a lot. And they provide information and translation for families, but they also can provide information for teachers. They've got a sheet that they can take, and then the teachers, they just send that information straight to the teachers.

So I think that's another one that's really good. But Tilting the Cecil also, I hear lots of good stuff about that too. So yeah, it's good. Thank you. Are teachers trained in understanding neurodiversity in particular autistic traits, sensitivity, strengths, use of visuals, and things like that? Yeah, so is there a question around in the initial teacher training? We, the ministry, don't have a lot of control over the content. And obviously there's a range of way teachers learn to be teachers, particularly if they're going into a secondary or primary or an early learning. So there is, from what I understand, in terms of the initial teacher training, some programmes do include parts, but what we know is that it's a very complex and big area.

And so some of that just-in-time learning is useful as well. So what the ministry does provide is some professional learning and development for early and career teachers. And some of that covers supporting students with diverse learning needs. But I think the key message really is that some of those, some of the things that we're looking for, some of the things that we're looking for in the learning and development process, are really about tuning into or looking for help around identifying and understanding as learning that is done on the job and how you can reach out and get support around that as through your local ministry teams.

And increasingly, our ministry specialists are working with groups of teachers or whole schools around not just autism, but kind of universal design for learning. And how do we think about planning and teaching for all from the outset? So it's not about making things different or separate. It's actually about learning and development. So it's not about making things different or separate. It's actually about learning and development. And so we're actually including the planning for all from the beginning. And so the ministry have got some new modules that are out available for teachers to be part of teams around that sort of thinking and planning and identifying, noticing and responding to needs in that way.

So no, not specifically around autism in initial teacher training. We hear about that a lot as a need, but there's a, I think there's an important component of learning about things while they're in front of you that makes it real as well. So there's a balance to be achieved there, isn't there? Yeah.

7. Autism - MoE - Teacher Aides

I'd just like to talk about teacher aides. If your child doesn't qualify for AUS funding, however they require a full-time teacher aide to be able to attend school, without the support, can they only attend part-time? How can we access funding for this? So I'll do that one in two parts. Every child has the right to be at school and be part of all of the activities that are there. And the ministry are here to help that to be realised. I'm not saying that's not challenging because I understand that it is. So there's a real important part there around when there's a feeling or a thought or a belief that we need full-time teacher aide.

We need to understand what parts of the day are really making us feel that way and how can we think and plan together to address that. So in those situations, reaching out to the local team, is a really important, well, first to school and then with the support of ministry teams coming to a plan around that. AUS funding is not the only way that learners can receive teacher aide time. I think that it's important to know that a number of supports from the ministry can be supported. So the specialist inputs that might come from resource teachers of learning and behaviour or a speech language therapist or other types of specialists that support schools around their planning and responding to need, come with teacher aide resource as a contribution to make that happen.

So the AUS teacher aide time is more long-term because of the verification and the understanding that that is going to be a need for the whole of all of the school years. Some of those other teacher aide supports can be more specific or targeted around a point in time. So again, to get a really clear understanding, reaching out to the ministry team about what is available and how those resources, particularly teacher aide time, will best support the plan in place for that young person because we want it to be around them being independent and happy at school but everybody feeling safe and confident in what's happening while they're there.

The other thing to say there is that the ministry also provides school with some money for them to choose how they spend around the school year. So they can spend it on supporting learners within their school community. So there is within school supports that includes the systems that might be, include their special needs coordinator or SENCO or a learning support coordinator. So those are really good

people to talk to as well about how do we move past getting stuck on the fact that we haven't got this for full-time, but what have we got and how we can think about using that really smartly around the plan that's in place for a learner.

So yes, teacher aide, teacher aide comes with oars, but it can be the resource that can go in with other supports as important to understand those as well and the ministry can help you to do that.

8. Autism - MoE - School activities

The school is saying my child can't attend trips and camps without me being in attendance to support that. I can't always attend, working and other children. How do I ensure my child doesn't miss out? It's a really challenging one, isn't it? Because we want, everybody wants all of our children, all of our learners to be involved in all of the activities that education brings, including some of those extracurricular ones. I think the most important thing to do is these things aren't usually a surprise. We know they might be coming up. We know that we might be, we should plan for things that are out of the ordinary because that helps us take away the worry.

So I would encourage in those situations, again, conversations to be really open about what the worries might be from school's perspective, what the worries might be from a family perspective. Because sometimes we hear about families saying, well, I don't want to send my young person because I'm worried about X, Y and Z. So having really clear and open communication channels is my biggest recommendation. And where those conversations are breaking down or we're getting stuck, talking to your local ministry team is a really good idea to work through some of those. And so it might be that there's worries that are coming out and the action saying, well, we just can't do it or it's too hard.

And what we want to get. Through is understanding the worries and planning for those in advance. It's similar to when perhaps a teacher aide who knows the learner really well might be away. We need to plan for those in advance. How do we make sure that there is more than one person who understands a child and their needs and what is going to make a day go smoothly? So we plan for the things that are out of the ordinary in advance. And we're having conversations that are honest and open about what the worries are and how we can work together to reduce. So it's, yeah.

9. Autism - MoE - Level of support

Who is ultimately responsible for ensuring special needs kids have the same opportunities to learn and participate as difficult children? As with lots of things in education, that's a real team effort. So the school that they are enrolled in are responsible for the teaching and learning that happens in the school day. And where schools think they need some extra help, they can absolutely reach out to supporting agencies that might be from education or other people that we work alongside in health or social sector. But, yeah, fundamentally, it's a team effort and where we need to be focused is where those things are becoming challenging, that people are reaching out and understanding what supports are available.

So, again, if as a family you're having a worry or offline. Often schools will reach out and say, we've got a wondering or a worry about how we might approach this situation. A call to the local office to get a sense of where things are at, because things change over time as well. So things might start really well. We should never assume they're always going to go really well. Or likewise, things might start a little rocky and then we can come to a better place. So reaching out and having a conversation. But I think it's important to realise we all have a role to play there. And an important part of...

Of fulfilling that role is working together for the best outcomes for ākonga, yeah. Can the school require me to keep my child home when the teacher aide is sick? Or if the teacher aide finishes early, can they send my child home? The short answer is no. Yeah, the law allows for children to be, every child, including those with additional needs, to be at school for all of the hours that school is open. What we would really like is that there is some really good thinking. And planning in advance of those situations, so that we don't find ourselves in that place. I think it often is that some of our learners who are autistic have a really favourite special person in a school.

And that's awesome. We really love to hear that. But we also know that people do get sick or they have a family emergency. And we need to be planning ahead so that we know there are safe people in the school, that learners will have a day that is not disrupted. We really minimise that disruption for learners, but also for the wider school. So, no, they can't ask them to go home because there's a school need. But the way to avoid that might be to be thinking about those things in advance.

10. Autism - MoE - ORS funding

Thinking about AUS again, what is the process to apply for this? So just quickly, just to explain, AUS, we use it as a word, AUS stands for the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme, and it is a specific piece of resource that is available to some children who have very high levels of learning need, and they will have those for the whole of the time that they're in school. The process is really collaborative and involves the completion of a form. Sometimes it's an early childhood form, if the child hasn't started school yet, or there is a school form. And there are a number of different types of information we collect, depending on the specific needs of a learner. So the best thing to do is to have a look at the Ministry of Education website, which involves a breakdown of each of those criteria, and that will help you understand the types of information that will be collected as part of that joint application process. That should involve all the important... Adults in the child's life, the educators, the team they might be working with, and of course, the whānau.

11. Autism - MoE - Exclusion

What are the rules about being excluded from school? So there are absolutely guidelines that the ministry publishes around any of those kind of disciplinary actions that boards of trustees might choose to take after an event has occurred in a school. So that covers things like stand-downs, suspensions, exclusions and expulsions. The key message is that those measures should never be, they should never be the first resort. They should always be the last resort. And there's some quite clear guidelines around the process that helps boards of trustees and parents and broader school communities to understand the process. But again, the best place to have a look at those is on our Ministry of Education website. And if you've got any worries or questions, absolutely giving a call to your local ministry office to just get some more information if that website information doesn't answer all of the questions. You might get particularly around if it is around a learner with additional learning needs like autism. Thank you. Awesome. Thank you very much.

12. Autism - MoE - Key messages

I'd like to thank both Tracey and Rachel for your time today. And just wondering, just briefly before we say goodbye to you, could you touch on the most important things that you think that you'd like parents to know and understand? Well, for me, I think the most important thing is that you understand that you are not alone navigating the education system. And so in Canterbury, our local Christchurch office is here to help you. And we're here to help with all of the ups and downs that might occur throughout an education journey. If you are having difficulties or confusions, concerns, barriers in an education setting, please reach out because we're very, very happy to help you and to facilitate.

Thank you. A solution, a resolution to whatever the situation is. We also love to hear about good stories, you know, inclusive practice, things going well in an education setting because then we can bottle those and share them as models across the sector. So we love hearing when things are going well, but we're also very happy to hear about something we can help with because that is our job. Thank you. Fantastic. Thank you. Rachel, have you got a... I agree with all of what Tracy has said. And I think a real, we're always evolving and learning. Education is about learning. That's not just our students in schools or our children in early learning services.

It's a commitment to all of us learning together. And so when we have something that doesn't maybe go how we thought it was going to go, important to take that into account. And I think it's important to take an opportunity to make sense of that and think about what we might do differently in the future. And that's why we really value those voices that Tracy spoke about from whānau, both the good and the tricky, because there often is a way through. And the last thing we want is for people to be feeling alone in that process because there's a number of things to be thinking about in everyday life.

So reaching out, but also knowing that we take that on board and we take it away. And we have another thing. And that's that partnership between what happens in our local teams as well as the wider Ministry of Education. And that information is often integrated into strategies and thinking about the way forward. But our ultimate goal is that education in New Zealand is a really inclusive, safe place where everybody has a sense that they belong. And that's fundamentally what we're all here to work towards. So thanks. Thank you so much, Tracy and Rachel, for coming along today. We really value you talking to us and helping to answer some of the questions from our autistic community.

So thank you. You're very welcome. Thank you.