Australian Education Research Organisation

Teaching practices for Autistic students and students with ADHD

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Autistic students and students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) make up a significant and growing number of Australian school students. Around 4% are Autistic, while 6 to 10% have ADHD. There is also a lot of overlap between these groups. This means it's important for school leaders and teachers to understand the teaching practices that best support them.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has brought together research from 2014 to 2025 in our discussion paper, Teaching Practices for Autistic Students and Students with ADHD. This paper looks at the evidence for practices chosen for their relevance and practicality. Many of these practices align with AERO's model of learning and teaching.

This research summary provides an overview of the key findings. This includes the practices current evidence supports, where the evidence is still developing and resources with more advice on these practices.

For more information about this research, including how these studies rate against AERO's Standards of Evidence, see the full discussion paper.

Summary of findings

This discussion paper included 53 studies. The design and settings varied between studies. Many involved multicomponent interventions – that is, approaches that combined several strategies at once rather than using one technique in isolation. While this reflects real-world complexity in schools, it also complicates attempts to isolate individual practice effects.

The evidence base also has notable gaps. Most studies:

- used small-sample, single-subject designs
- were conducted in specialist rather than mainstream settings
- skewed heavily male.

Only 6 studies included students with ADHD. None examined co-occurring diagnoses.
First Nations classroom evidence was missing.

Within these limitations, some clear insights still emerged. Explicit teaching has the strongest evidence for supporting Autistic students across literacy, numeracy and science. Other practices – including feedback, peer-assisted learning, visual supports, clear routines, technology and environmental adjustments – show promise, particularly when used in combination with explicit teaching practices.

For students with ADHD, the evidence is much thinner and tends to focus on engagement rather than academic achievement.

Taken together, the findings point to a practical conclusion. Across the practices reviewed in the discussion paper, the approaches that effectively support Autistic students – and, where available, students with ADHD – are already core elements of high-quality teaching. Practices such as explicit teaching, visual supports and predictable, well-structured routines can be used with adjustments in clarity, structure or intensity as needed. Teachers don't need to adopt new methods to be inclusive. Small, purposeful adjustments help meet the needs of Autistic students and students with ADHD. Combined with existing evidence-based teaching practices, they support access to learning for all students.

Evidence summary matrix

Table 1 provides an overview of the practices in the discussion paper, along with an indicator of their effectiveness for both Autistic students and students with ADHD.

Table 1: Evidence summary matrix

Practice	Evidence of practice effectiveness	
	Autistic students	Students with ADHD
Teach explicitly – Break up and explain	Strong	Limited
Explicit teaching – Model, scaffold and prompt	Strong	Emerging
Use of feedback	Promising	Emerging
Use of peer-assisted learning	Promising	Limited
Use of rules and routines	Promising	No studies
Use of visual supports	Promising	No studies
Use of technology	Promising	No studies
Use of environmental adaptations	Promising	No studies

Findings by individual practice

This section groups practices based on the overall strength of the evidence. These groupings primarily reflect findings for Autistic students and are based on AERO's Standards of Evidence. Where the evidence for students with ADHD is different or more limited, this is noted within each practice description. See the full discussion paper for more information.

Practices with a strong evidence base

These practices have been validated through high-quality research and consistently demonstrate positive outcomes across multiple studies and contexts.

Teach explicitly – Break up and explain

Structured, teacher-led instruction that introduces new concepts in small, clearly explained steps, models skills and gradually releases responsibility to students.

Findings: Explicit teaching has the strongest evidence for improving academic outcomes for Autistic students across literacy, numeracy and science. However, it was often alongside visual supports or technology. This made individual effects hard to isolate. Evidence for students with ADHD is limited.

Applying the practice:

- Use explicit teaching universally.
- Adjust intensity for students needing additional support.
- Combine with visual supports for greater impact.

Practice support resources

- **How explicit instruction optimises learning** (AERO) – an introduction to explicit instruction, with a focus on explaining how it contributes to positive outcomes for students' learning achievement and dispositions
- **Teach explicitly** (AERO) – practice guide on how to explain, demonstrate and model learning content explicitly in ways that manage cognitive load to support students with building foundational knowledge before they practise independently
- **Use task analysis for skill development** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to break complex skills into manageable steps using task analysis to support student independence.

Teach explicitly – Model, scaffold and prompt

Teachers demonstrate and think aloud, providing temporary scaffolds that are reduced over time and using prompts (verbal, visual or gestural) to activate prior knowledge and guide student responses.

Findings: For Autistic students, modelling improved outcomes in writing and maths problem-solving. Video-based modelling showed particular promise for building academic skills and independence. For students with ADHD, prompting increased engagement and on-task behaviour. Although the overall evidence base is still developing, findings are strong for Autistic students and emerging for students with ADHD. No studies examined cooccurring Autism and ADHD.

Applying the practice:

- Combine modelling and prompting with structured explanation.
- Use video-based modelling to build independence and support skill generalisation.

Practice support resources

- **Scaffold practice** (AERO) – practice guide on how to select and use scaffolds to support each phase of the learning process as students retain, consolidate and apply their learning
- **Structure tasks using work systems** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to use visual work systems to organise tasks so students can work more independently and with greater predictability
- **Use instructional sequences** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to teach skills through structured, step-by-step instructional sequences that build understanding and reduce cognitive load
- **Create assignment exemplars** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to use clear exemplars to show students what success looks like and support them to meet learning expectations.

Practices with a promising evidence base

These practices are supported by emerging or limited research that shows positive potential. But further study is needed to confirm their effectiveness across settings.

Use of feedback

Feedback provides students with clear, specific and timely information about their performance to help them close the gap between current understanding and intended learning.

Findings: Feedback and reinforcement improved engagement and behaviour for Autistic students and students with ADHD. Behaviour-specific praise, nonverbal cues and combined verbal–tangible reinforcement showed the strongest effects. Precise, scaffolded feedback with visual supports worked best overall. However, the evidence base remains limited and findings for ADHD are still emerging.

Applying the practice:

- Provide precise, goal-focused feedback supported by visuals.
- Complement verbal praise with nonverbal and tangible reinforcement.
- Adjust the frequency of behaviour-specific praise to suit mainstream classroom routines.

Practice support resources

- **Monitoring progress** (AERO) – practice guide on how teachers can check students understand and can apply new knowledge and skills, and give additional instruction, guidance or feedback where necessary
- **Acknowledgement and praise** (AERO) – a video of teachers from a range of schools discussing and demonstrating how to use acknowledgement and praise to recognise students who meet or exceed expected classroom behaviours
- **Provide feedback on learning and behaviour** (inclusionED) – guidance on giving clear, timely and specific feedback that helps students understand their progress and adjust their behaviour and learning strategies
- **Actively supervise your class** (inclusionED) – guidance on how teachers can use movement, scanning and positive interactions to maintain engagement and positive classroom behaviour
- **The impact of feedback on student attainment: A systematic review** (Education Endowment Foundation) – a summary of evidence on effective feedback strategies, explaining what makes feedback impactful and what schools should consider when implementing it.

Use of peer-assisted learning

Peer-assisted learning (PAL) is a structured approach where students support one another's learning – through tutoring or group models – to boost engagement, collaboration and consolidation of knowledge.

Findings: Research shows PAL improves academic engagement and achievement in literacy and numeracy for Autistic students. It also supports them with positive social interactions. Evidence for students with ADHD is limited. Only one study included students with both Autism and ADHD. None focused solely on ADHD.

Applying the practice:

- Use PAL as a low-cost way to consolidate learning and increase active participation.
- Ensure students receive training beforehand.
- Monitoring for misconceptions.
- Providing timely feedback and additional support when needed.

Practice support resources

- **Peer tutoring** (Evidence for Learning) – an overview of the evidence on peer tutoring, outlining its impact on learning progress, how it works and what schools should consider when implementing it.

Use of rules and routines

Rules and routines establish predictable, structured classroom expectations by explicitly teaching and practising clear statements and step-by-step procedures until they become automatic.

Findings: Research, focused primarily on transitions, shows that structured, antecedent-based transition routines reduce disruptive behaviour but have limited impact on academic engagement. The evidence base is small overall. No studies were identified for students with ADHD.

Applying the practice:

- Intentionally plan and teach transition routines.
- Preparing students before changes occur.
- Use visual schedules and structured transition supports that are integrated into broader instruction.

Practice support resources

- **Establishing and maintaining rules** (AERO) – guidance on establishing and maintaining classroom rules, describing how rules allow teachers to clearly state the behaviour expectations for all students in the learning environment
- **Teaching routines** (AERO) – an explainer on teaching routines, describing how explicitly teaching routines provides structure, predictability and consistency to support student learning
- **Establish classroom rules** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to create clear, positively framed classroom rules so students understand what behaviours are expected
- **Establish classroom expectations (Secondary)** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to set and teach consistent expectations that support predictable, supportive learning environments
- **Consistently use routines and schedules** (inclusionED) – guidance on how structured routines and visual schedules can create stability, reduce uncertainty and help students stay organised and engaged.

Use of visual supports

Visual supports make information clear and predictable by helping students anticipate activities, follow routines and engage in learning through digital or traditional visual tools, alongside other practices.

Findings: Visual supports are linked to reduced challenging behaviour, improved engagement-related outcomes, greater independence and smoother transitions for Autistic students. They have particularly strong effects when combined with practices like video modelling or roleplay. Teachers rated individualised schedules, task cards and timetables as especially effective. However, no studies examined outcomes for students with ADHD or co-occurring autism and ADHD.

Applying the practice:

- Embed visual supports into daily routines.
- Pairing them with other evidence-based strategies.
- Consider individualised schedules, timetables and task cards while using visuals judiciously to avoid cognitive overload.

Practice support resources

- **Use visual schedules** (inclusionED) – guidance on how visual schedules can help students understand what's happening, what comes next and how to navigate the school day with greater independence
- **Use visual schedules (Secondary)** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to adapt visual schedules for secondary students to support organisation, transitions and workload management in more complex learning environments.

Use of technology

Use of digital tools, software and devices that enhance learning by providing personalised, multisensory experiences, flexible pacing and tailored content when integrated with evidence-based teaching.

Findings: Technology shows promise for improving engagement and learning for Autistic students. Evidence supported using video-based interventions to help teach academic skills and support on-task behaviour. The results for tablet and app-based tools – especially in maths and writing – were mostly positive when used with structured practices. Co-designed educational games boosted engagement. Findings for computer-assisted instruction were mixed. No studies examined outcomes for students with ADHD or co-occurring autism and ADHD.

Applying the practice:

- Use technology intentionally alongside universal teaching strategies.
- Select tools that support targeted skills.
- Video-based interventions suit focused academic learning.
- Use tablet and app-based tools with structured instruction to support flexible pacing and personalised learning.

Practice support resources

- **Using digital technology to improve learning** (Education Endowment Fund) – a guidance report summarising how digital tools can be used effectively in teaching, outlining what works, what doesn't and key considerations for schools
- **Use technology to support written expression** (inclusionED) – guidance on how technology can support students' written expression by reducing barriers and enabling them to demonstrate their ideas more effectively.

Use of environmental adaptations

Adjusting the physical or sensory features of the classroom – such as noise, layout or sensory input – to support students' learning, comfort and wellbeing.

Findings: Adaptations targeting noise showed the clearest benefits for Autistic students. Reduced background noise improved task engagement. Noise-cancelling headphones supported on-task behaviour. Sound-field amplification improved phonological processing. Individual responses varied, however, and the evidence base remains small. No studies examined outcomes for students with ADHD or co-occurring autism and ADHD.

Applying the practice:

- Reduce background noise where possible.
- Consider noise-cancelling headphones during high-noise activities.
- Use sound-field amplification to ensure teacher speech is clear.
- Combining these auditory supports with other evidence-based practices such as visual support.

Practice support resources

- **Supporting students' diverse needs – Sensory differences** (AERO) – practice guide on how to introduce helpful practices for students with sensory differences so they can successfully engage in learning and experience success at school
- **Supporting students' diverse needs – Physical needs** (AERO) – practice guide on how to support students' physical needs so they can engage in their learning and experience success at school
- **Organise your classroom** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to arrange the physical classroom environment to support smooth movement, reduce distractions and promote positive learning behaviours
- **Organise your classroom (Secondary)** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to structure and manage secondary classrooms to improve organisation, support independence and create predictable learning spaces
- **Improve your classroom acoustics** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to reduce noise and enhance sound quality so students can hear instructions clearly and stay engaged
- **Improve your classroom acoustics (Secondary)** (inclusionED) – guidance on how to improve acoustic conditions in secondary settings, where larger spaces and complex timetables can make listening and communication more challenging.

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