Being Friends with Bodie Finch
Autism Inclusion Support

Teachers’ and parents’ handbook
FOREWORD by Rebecca Thompson

In order to promote a culture of inclusion (Cologon, n.d.), we must empower and inform entire communities about the richness of diversity, not just the benefits of inclusion. This means promoting peer assistance and advocacy where possible (Cook, Klein & Tessier, 2005, p.217).

How often is it that we walk a mile in another person’s shoes? How often can we describe how it feels for someone else?

In ‘Being Friends with Bodie Finch’, Candy Lawrence (pictured left) has created that ‘mile’ for the reader with her account of the daily school life of a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and his peers. This wonderful snapshot of the trials and triumphs of sharing an educational environment provides insight into how children with ASD can be perceived, how their actions affect their peers, and the role that teachers, peers and parents play in supporting these complex relationships.

It is a child’s right to access, participate and belong - to be included\(^1\). There is a willingness to invite children with additional needs into services; educators and directors alike know the benefits of inclusion. However, barriers such as the impact of inclusion on typically developing children, not to mention on teacher time and resources, consistently reappear on staff meeting agendas.

In my capacity as an inclusion consultant, I have entered many classrooms over the past two decades. The story of Bodie Finch strikes a familiar chord. When I visit services to support the successful inclusion of children like Bodie Finch, teachers raise concerns that they do not have the skills or physical resources to include children with disabilities; often they ask for ideas about how to talk to the other children about the child with ASD. This vibrant and articulate children’s story includes many layers and provides sound strategies, and it will be an invaluable resource for all concerned.

In partnership with the Handbook for Teachers and Parents, the book prompts discussions we may have never considered having with the peers of the child with ASD, and allows peers - and their parents - to see the world through Bodie Finch’s eyes.

- Rebecca Thompson (M. Ed., Inclusive Ed.), Educational Consultant

\(^1\) The Convention of the Rights of Persons with a Disability (Article 24, UN, 2006)
Why a handbook for a picture book?

‘Being Friends with Bodie Finch’ looks at the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schools *from the point of view of the other children*. It is intended for children from ages approximately 4 to 8, but older and younger children may also enjoy it.

There are many sources of information about the autism spectrum which concentrate on the characteristics and needs of the child with autism. However, very little is available to help the other children and their parents – those who are asked to include a child with autism in their world *without an understanding of why and how that child is ‘different’* - those who must make sense of why that child may behave in a way which seems antisocial and why that child is given a different set of resources and boundaries.

This handbook, a collaborative work by author Candy Lawrence and inclusion support educator Rebecca Thompson (*pictured right*), is intended to help fill that gap.

There are many, many opportunities for intentional teaching by both teachers and parents in this story. This handbook will help you, the caring adult, to find and use them. Once you’ve explored the teaching points in this story, you’ll probably see many similar opportunities in other stories you read to your children.

We don’t intend you to do everything the handbook suggests, and certainly not all at once! They are ideas to inform you, to stimulate your own thinking about your children’s needs, and to guide you in how to talk to them and get them to open up about the ‘hard stuff’ they may be feeling in this circumstance.

Deeper perspectives on how teachers can interact successfully with both children with autism and their families have been provided by Rebecca Thompson, who provides active inclusion support and can be contacted via her [Stone and Sprocket Facebook page](#) or her [Stone and Sprocket website](#).

The best idea for teachers and parents who are new to autism is to read the story yourself, then read the whole handbook and notice which points resonate with what you’ve seen in your particular child or children as they play with or alongside children with special needs.

Read the whole story to the children uninterrupted first. Then you might like to flip back through the pages to some place that seemed particularly relevant to your child or children, and try a ‘provocation’ (some little stimulus which invites the child to respond) as suggested in the handbook – and really listen to your children’s responses. The children will give you cues about what they are interested in pursuing.
A gentle word of warning: let’s remember to always think about Bodie Finch as a fictional character, not a blueprint. It’s important to understand the following:

**If you’ve met one child with autism, you’ve met one child with autism.**

I recommend strongly that you watch this video in which Amythest Schaber, a young autistic woman, explains with stunning clarity what autism is and some of the ways it can manifest in different people.

*What is autism? Ask an autistic!*

Amythest is right - it’s a huge subject, and one short video or one children’s picture book cannot possibly capture every aspect of autism. Thus, the characteristics of Bodie Finch do not and CANNOT represent every child with autism. I have given my Bodie character some of the most frequently-encountered characteristics, but autism is complex; individual children with autism diagnoses will demonstrate very different competencies in different areas. This is beautifully explained here:

*The Autism Spectrum*

So, for example, not all children with Asperger’s syndrome will demonstrate Rain Man-like mathematical brilliance or similar savant qualities. Not all non-verbal children with autism will progress to speech, and any progress may be far slower than that demonstrated by Bodie. And so on.

A final point to consider: if a child is behaving like Bodie, *that is not a diagnosis* and we must never assume such a thing. As teachers and as parents of other children, we are not qualified to make a formal diagnosis. Our concerns can be expressed, recorded and discussed, but we refer to qualified health professionals and get a result before we use the word ‘autism’. This video explains that parents and teachers play an important role in diagnosis, but please, let’s not jump to conclusions based on anecdotal evidence alone:

*How we now define and diagnose autism*

The strategies used in this book are safe to try when the disturbing or distressing behaviours seen here are exhibited, regardless of whether the child has an autism diagnosis.

Successful inclusion makes the world a better and more empathetic place. We hope you enjoy your ‘Bodie Finch’ experience.

- Candy Lawrence (Dip. Mus. (Ed.), A.Mus.A. (Mus.), Dip. Children’s Services), author

Being Friends with Bodie Finch - Teachers’ and parents’ handbook
First impressions are a natural part of any new relationship. Children will verbalise those initial impressions using ‘like/don’t like’.

We adults like to pretend that children are innocent, pure little beings and so can be ‘friends’ with every other child they encounter – but if you think back and consider your own childhood experiences, you’ll probably agree that young people experience negative feelings about their peers just as much as adults do.

‘Friendship’ is an important concept for children to understand if they are to develop the relationship skills needed to navigate peer pressure, bullying and other challenges later on, so let’s define it carefully at the start as being based around compatibility, not just being placed in a room with random people of the same age.

Our job is not to deny or bury children’s uncomfortable feelings, but to acknowledge them and to teach our children how to express and respond to them - how to show respect for others’ emotions too, and how to respond to challenges in a way that doesn’t rebound negatively on anyone.

Try not to jump to conclusions about a child’s expression of ‘I don’t like’ (whether something or someone). It’s important to listen and to explore the experience the child has had, to get a clear picture of what exactly is making them uncomfortable.

Zara goes on to describe the behaviours that have given her the ‘don’t like’ feeling, but many children will need help to draw out what’s behind that ‘don’t like’.
If you have a child with autism in your group, you can open the floor for dialogue about that child’s play activity at a time when he or she isn’t present. E.g., ‘I've noticed that Bodie likes trucks. What have you noticed?’ It will probably become evident quite quickly if the children are experiencing strong emotions about their new group member.

Managing this dialogue can be tricky, so here are some tips to keep things positive.

**Tell**

Share something you don’t like, and say why you don’t like it. Start with objects and move to actions, eg

‘I don’t like wearing high heels because they make my feet hurt,’

then

‘I don’t like it when people say I’m fat because it hurts my feelings’.

**Ask**

Zara says she ‘doesn’t like’ Bodie Finch.

*What are some things you don’t like?*

*What happens to your face when you don’t like something?*

Look at Zara’s face. Is she happy? No? What do you think she’s feeling?
Is she sad? Angry? Frustrated, maybe?

Explain

Do you know what ‘frustrated’ means?

If they don’t know, keep it simple:

It’s what you feel when you can’t get what you want, or

It’s what you feel when you can’t do what you want.

Imagine

Why do you think Zara doesn’t like Bodie Finch?

Just listen! Don’t judge the answers! This will tell you a lot about your children’s thinking and their world.

Try to draw out more than the circular argument of ‘because Bodie knocks her blocks down’, and ask things like:

Why doesn’t Zara like it when her blocks are knocked over? What do you think she was making? Was she finished yet?

Talking with parents

TALKING WITH PARENTS OF BODIE’S PEERS

The language other parents use to express concern about the ‘Bodie Finch’ children in our world will of course be more complex, and sometimes might be quite negative. Be sure to remain open to other parents approaching you or talking amongst themselves about what they notice initially too. Their concerns are real; they worry about things like the physical safety of their own children. That’s their job.

Be ready to advocate for the Bodie Finches of this world; e.g. other parents might say That new boy Bodie is a bully. The best response by a caring adult is only to talk about the child’s body actions and your own intentions in response. This avoids judgment and the taking of sides.

E.g. if you’re Bodie’s teacher, you might say Yes, I’ve seen Bodie running after the children too. I plan to show him some ways to enter the play using words, and I also plan to empower your child to understand that he is asking to play by running towards them.
And remember - the fact that a child has autism does not mean that he or she is deaf! Making negative, or in fact ANY comments about any person in their hearing without reference to them, forgetting that they are capable of human feeling and might not like being talked about, is rude and terribly cruel.

We need to be the allies of people with autism. Please consider the privacy and dignity of the child with autism and of their parents.

**How to be an ally of the autistic person**

**TALKING WITH BODIE’S PARENTS**

Try not to distance and ‘other’ the parents of the child with autism. Mostly this happens because of fear and not knowing what to say, but parents have a wealth of information about their child to help us address any problems, if we can only gain their trust. BUT FIRST - please, try to include them and speak to them as you would to any other parent.

When doing this, it’s very important *not* to assume that all parents want to talk openly with others about their child’s disability or delay. Building trust is first and foremost. Gain insight into the family’s world rather than ‘outing’ them or assuming.

Accepting one’s own child’s diagnosis or difficulty is a testing time and an emotional process for parents, similar to the grief process associated with loss (*see chart below*), and we need to be sensitive rather than bowling in with solutions or assumptions. Having a professional tell you officially that your precious, beloved child has a ‘label’ that indicates a deficit - knowing that you will need to hold out that label to get help from official agencies - well, it’s a knife to the heart. Be kind.

Reading this article may help you to get inside the head of a parent whose child has been given an autism diagnosis:

**Acceptance and unconditional love**

And if you’re wondering what NOT to say, here are some tips from a parent:

**What not to say to the parent of an autistic child**

Once a parent has come to terms with a diagnosis, other parents of children with autism can provide support and encouragement.

Look for autism forums online or parent groups in your local area.
Facebook also contains many support groups; look for groups where the administrators have a firm grip on group rules and where no abuse is tolerated.

**Support and resources**

Every Early Childhood service and school should have a list of local providers of support for children with a disability or developmental delay. Different countries will have different government agencies and charities which provide help. In Australia, for example, the following sites may be useful:

- MyChild support
- Autism Advice and Support
- Early Childhood Intervention Australia
- Mission Australia Family Support
- Parent Line
- Australian Government Department of Social Services

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**A parent’s story**

A party invitation? That’s awesome. Thank you so much for inviting my son!

‘Party mummy, party and boons … no sing, no sing please.’ He is so excited, BUT …

Dear party host and guests: what this mum needs you to know …

Will loves to eat cake, but he isn’t such a fan of the loud singing and clapping that goes with the cake. Could you please tell him when it’s going to happen, and maybe offer him a quieter place to be before you light those candles? He would be much happier, but will come back to eat for sure.

Pass the parcel is one of his favourite games. Will doesn’t like to sit in big circles or be too close to other kids sometimes. He would love to tear some paper to find a prize though. You could take the parcel to where he is sitting so he could have a turn, and then bring it back to the circle. He doesn’t like a lot of fuss, and he might not say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ when he gets the parcel, but he is happy to be playing the game.

Will is really excited - but he can get a bit upset at parties too. He might need somewhere quiet to just play cars or read a book while the party goes on - maybe share a swing with him? He likes that, he likes to be pushed, and he’s a great pusher too.

Most of all, thank you again for inviting him - for including Will. He loves parties. He just needs some help to navigate his way through all the excitement, sound and colour. We hope you can come to his birthday, too.
Behaviour is a form of communication. The most constructive and successful way to address behaviour which is causing problems for others is to unpack the ‘why’ of the difficult behaviour, and understand what the behaviour is communicating.

The least effective behaviour ‘management’ tool is blame! It only creates guilt and resentment - it doesn’t lead to a solution. Blame is a form of non-constructive emotional expression. It builds barriers instead of breaking them down; it fans the fire of undesirable behaviour and isolation instead of extinguishing it.

Also, try not to fall into the trap of thinking that a child who has difficulty with social contact doesn’t desire social contact. Bodie wants to play. He wants to make contact. But he is poorly equipped to succeed in this right now.

No friends: a father’s perspective

Talking with children

It’s likely that children will approach you with some of these behaviour-based problems as they occur. Perhaps they will expect you to ‘fix it’ on the spot.

But wait! With behaviours that don’t involve actual physical danger to others, it is wise not to leap in immediately. Make a habit of pausing, listening, getting information and considering - what is this difficult behaviour communicating? What is the best strategy here?

Children are capable and may be able to sort out some of these problems themselves, if you equip them with good information and appropriate behavioural tools. However, they often reach a point of frustration where they lash out with words or hands, simply because they don’t understand what’s happening and don’t know a better way to express their feelings.

That’s when they need some help from adults:

- **Acknowledge** the feelings of the upset child: *It’s very disappointing when you spend a lot of time building something and then someone knocks it down.*
Equip the child with tools for expression and calming of feelings: *I can see you look angry and frustrated. Is that right? Will it help if you kick this ball around the yard for a while, or do you need a big hug from me or to cuddle the big teddy for a while?*

Once immediate feelings have been addressed, **teach** knowledge and perspective of what the difficult behaviour is saying: *Bodie is trying to play with you when he snatches your doll.*

Equip children with appropriate tools for preventing future problems: *Next time you see Bodie coming over, can you put your hand up like this and say ‘Bodie, STOP!’? Or can you ask him ‘Bodie, do you want to play?’*

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**Ask**

It’s good to have discussions with children that are not ‘in the heat of the moment’ about these incidents. Some discussion-starters might be:

**How do you feel when someone breaks something you made?**

Remember that children may not have the words to express these feelings. You can ask them to show the feeling on their face, or give them a choice of pictures of faces with different expressions - **can you point to how you feel?**

A feelings ‘clock’ with hands that can be turned to the picture that matches the child’s mood is a very useful piece of equipment! If you have two hands on the clock, you can even show the feelings of both children involved in an incident - for example, Bodie feeling sad because he wants to enter play, while Zara feels frustrated because her plans with the blocks have been interrupted.

**What if it was an accident? Do you still feel sad or angry or frustrated?**

**How do you feel when someone snatches something from you?**

**How do you feel when somebody comes into your game without asking ‘can I play’?**

**What are some things people do with their bodies to say ‘I’m sad’? What about ‘I’m angry’?**

**Are there any things we have to be careful NOT to do when we’re angry or frustrated?**

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**Explain**

Ensure that these difficult-to-negotiate experiences are supported by sharing knowledge with the whole group of children.

**Sometimes when another boy or girl does annoying things, it means they’re trying to play with you.**

*Maybe they want to be friends.*

*Maybe they have nobody to play with at home.*

*Maybe they don’t know how to ask if they can join in.*
Use the pictures of Zara’s dilemmas (blocks knocked down, baby snatched, cubby invaded) as problems to be solved, with input from the children. You could ask,

*What can Zara do when Bodie is upsetting her?*

or you could use puppets to act out challenging scenes, and give the good advice to the puppets.

Good strategies to deal with Bodie’s difficult behaviours might include:

- asking directly, in a few words, if he wants to play - *She could say ‘Bodie, play?’*
- giving him a share of the blocks or otherwise including him in play - *She could share the blocks and say ‘blocks for Bodie, blocks for me’.*
- asking an adult for support - *She could say ‘Mrs Baker, can you help me please?’*

This book - and in fact any book - can be used as a creative stimulus. Ask leading questions that invite the children to speculate and extend, and see what they come up with. You can even act out these scenarios!

*What might happen next if Zara hits Bodie when she’s angry with him?*
*What might happen next if Zara shouts at him?*
*What might happen next if Zara snatches her baby back?*

Talking about ideas is quite hard for small children. Again, you can make it easier by acting out these sorts of exchanges with puppets - it’s always easier for children to understand when a concrete, visual stimulus is added.

Try some mime, showing big emotions. Show what you’re feeling on your face and with your body (but with no words), and see if the children can guess what feeling you’re showing.

Draw some smiley faces, then change the shape of the mouth and add eyebrows to make the face sad or angry instead. Ask what the feeling is.

Resource your room with many informal opportunities for the exploration of emotions; mirrors, dress ups, music that may evoke emotion, open-ended craft materials and activities like creating simple masks.
Bodie’s actions are all very typical ways for a child with special needs to try to enter play. They are an attempt to communicate, rather than being done with the intention of disrupting. It is sometimes hard to see the intention and easy to misinterpret it, as Zara has done, if you haven’t had any experience with children with special needs.

Zara will admit later that she thought Bodie was just ‘mean, like Eric’; adults will sometimes interpret antisocial behaviour like snatching toys as the child’s parents not setting good boundaries. Remember: think of behaviour as communication. Bodie needs our help, not our condemnation. Translate ‘antisocial’ behaviours for parents as well as peers.

When other parents challenge inclusion of children with these behaviours, focus on the body action of the child and what you intend to do about it. For example, if Zara’s mother were to complain about Bodie spoiling Zara’s games in the cubby house, you might say:

‘I see that Bodie enjoys cubby houses, which is why he keeps trying to share Zara’s cubby, so I’ll start showing him how to make one for himself.’

Here are some positive behaviour support tips for teachers:

**OBSERVE AND DOCUMENT**
- Carefully observe the behaviour over a week and record what you see
- What happens before the behaviour occurs (antecedent)?
- What does the child do (behaviour)? Describe this using body and verbal actions only, e.g. running, hitting, talking quickly without a pause, turning away
- Avoid using subjective language or describing personality traits instead of behaviour (e.g. shy, busy, arrogant, hypo, ignorant, annoying)
- When and where does it occur?
- Who is present?
- What happens after the behaviour occurs (consequence)?

**HYPOTHESISE**
- Is it caused by a medical or internal issue?
- Is it to escape (an internal state/sensory sensation or a task)?
- Is it to gain attention?
- Is it to gain access (to a sensory sensation or desired object)?

**WHAT IS THE CHILD TRY TO TELL US? Examples:**
- “I am in pain”
- “It’s too noisy - let me out of here”
- “I need to touch the dirt”
- “Please look at me - please hold me firm and notice me”
- “I would rather be outside on the swing”
SELECT A TRIGGER (from observation) & PLAN ACTION TO RESPOND
- Changes in the physical environment e.g. acoustics, configuration
- Changes in your verbal and body actions as a response
- Changes in routine e.g. more flexibility or more scheduling within routines, depending on child

IDENTIFY REPLACEMENT BEHAVIOUR
- Work out what you would rather see - e.g. child will make sign for ‘stop’ rather than hitting
- Plan the consequence of the behaviour - e.g. only one adult will bend and use calm simple words like *we say stop, hitting hurts*

MONITOR
- Monitor the frequency and intensity of the behaviour to make sure it’s decreasing
- If not, start at observation - there will always be a trigger
Remember that parents will very often equip children with strategies for dealing with conflict, and they may differ from what teachers suggest, so proceed with caution.

What does your mum or dad tell you to do when you’re angry or upset with one of your playmates?
What else do you think Zara can do to stop feeling so angry and frustrated?

Here are some good anger management techniques to teach children:

**Punch a pillow.**

**Take three big, deep, slow breaths - breathe LOW, so your waist expands instead of your shoulders rising.**

**Flower and candle breathing: raise both index fingers.**
One is the flower - inhale through the nose as you ‘smell’ the flower.
The other is the candle - exhale through the mouth as you blow the candle out.

**Calming breaths:**
Suck the breath in as fast as you can through the nose -
let it out as slowly as you can through the mouth.
You can add clenching fists as you breathe in -
relaxing hands as you breathe out.

**Go outside and shout, or run around, or stamp your feet, or kick a ball hard.**
Take three big deep breaths, then calmly tell the person who upset you why you’re upset with them (you can take an adult with you to help). Tell them what you’d like them to do to fix it.

Ask Mum, Dad or your teacher for more ideas – share the problem.

TALKING WITH BODIE’S PARENTS

Share your values and the strategies you’d like to use with the family, but first ask them what their own limits and strategies are (see the example below).

Together, come to an agreement about what your response will be when conflicts and behavioural challenges arise. Strategies need to be consistent in all settings for the child to respond.

Try to develop, together, a ‘recipe’ or plan for moving forward, such as this:

FROM THE SCHOOL OR CARE SETTING:

· **We believe** (that every child has the right to feel safe and secure in our service.)
· **We have seen** (Bodie running after Zara. This tells us he wants to play with her.)
· **We will support** (both Bodie and Zara to understand each other’s needs by translating Bodie’s body actions into words for Zara.)
· **Over time, we trust** (that Bodie will begin to use words to express his feelings and that Zara will also look out for his bodily actions and remember what they mean.)

FROM THE PARENTS:

Use the same recipe to develop a plan –

· **what they believe**
· **what they have seen**
· **what they will do at home**
· **what they hope to see over time**

This ‘recipe’ has been developed and successfully trialed by Rebecca Thompson. It works!
‘Othering’ children with special needs is not helpful to anyone, so we need to find a way to achieve fair solutions to problems instead of judging or blaming.

One way to advocate for children with special needs is to encourage peer support – in other words, help the children to help Bodie themselves, and to help each other with any problems that arise. Giving children agency (personal power through having input) is a wonderful way to change the mood from negative to positive.

For example, teachers can model hand signals, such as the ‘stop’ hand sign given by Mrs Baker in this picture, and verbal cues that your ‘Bodie’ child may recognise. You will need to decide whether the children can use these effectively without adult help.

Your child with autism may have learned some signs already, so it’s important that teachers and parents confer and use the same signs. Then you need to use them consistently when saying those words.

This modelling may be enough to teach the signs to the rest of the children, or you might like to use them as part of your intentional teaching (they can be helpful for many children, not just the Bodie Finches of this world).

Here’s a link to a video which shows some commonly-used signs, but remember that signs used may differ depending on (for example) what country you live in or the common practices of your special needs resource teachers:

Video of common signs

Some commonly used signs - posters developed by Aileen Ryan from Hands Can Talk:
Sign for ‘drink’  
Sign for ‘eat’  
Sign for ‘finish’  
Sign for ‘toilet’  
Sign for ‘change’  
Sign for ‘sorry’
Eventually it helps children in Zara’s situation to be equipped with the skills to manage conflict themselves. Anger management skills, as described earlier, are very useful. Children can also be taught through role play and modelling to share negative feelings and speak up, in simple terms, for what they want.

You could try modelling ‘what Zara did next’ like this, with a child acting as Bodie:

Bodie, my doll. (pointing to self and then doll)
Bodie, doll please? (pointing to doll, sign for ‘please’, then holding out hands for doll)

**WHAT TO DO WHEN AN INCIDENT IS OCCURRING**

- Ask the child who runs to you *What is happening?*

- Encourage the child to verbalise what it is they don’t like and reflect on whether you need to talk for them, or whether they can simply move away or speak up themselves.

- If you do need to physically assist Bodie, bend on one knee and place your hands gently on shoulders (but with some pressure), saying *Bodie, I see you want to play; Zara says ‘no thanks’. Time to give her space.*

- Continue to model preferred strategies by saying *Next time, Bodie, say ‘Play Zara’, then wait.*
● You may also need to translate Bodie’s version of the words to Zara: ‘When Bodie says ‘Ay, ar’ it means he wants to play.’

Equip

There will be times when the children need your help to solve problems, so prepare them.

*When a problem is too big for us to fix, we need to find a safe person to help us.*
*A safe person is someone you can trust.*

*Zara trusts Mrs Baker, so she runs to her when she’s trying to get away from Bodie Finch.*

Ask

*What does ‘trust’ mean?*

Explain

*When we trust someone it means we know -*

● they will never hurt us on purpose
● they will always look after us
● they will always listen to us.

Ask

*Who are your safe people at home?*
*Who are your safe people at school?*
*Can you think of any other safe people? Who can we ask for help when we’re in trouble?*

(think about aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, police, doctors)

Children might enjoy making a list of their own ‘safe people’, with you writing down their words; then ask the parents to provide photos to illustrate the child’s ‘safe list’.

Being Friends with Bodie Finch - Teachers’ and parents’ handbook
Reflect

Children are capable and may spontaneously find a way to communicate and connect with non-verbal children without adult help - or they may need support. Watch and listen!

Remember, not all children with autism are non-verbal - there are lots of grey areas. And children who are non-verbal early in life may still develop spoken language later on. Our aim is to establish effective communication now in any way we can, and without judgment.

For teachers

Intentionally watch communication between the children for a session. Try to avoid constantly intervening and over-‘shadowing’ the child.

Ask yourself:

- Do we need to interrupt this?
- When is a good time to enter the interaction with a prompt?
- What is my prompt? Does it need to be verbal language or simply a hand gesture?
- Have we gained enough information about what the words, sounds or non-verbal communications ‘Bodie’ uses mean, from Bodie’s parents?

Talking with children

Children can sometimes appear to adults to be quite cruel, teasing other children in circumstances like these. In fact, this repeated name-calling and ‘joking’ is generally a way for the other children to express their own discomfort with something they don’t understand.

So it’s important to ensure that you clarify that the vocalisations of a child with autism aren’t the same as baby-talk - rather, it’s the result of the mouth being unable to make all the right shapes to speak the thoughts that are inside the brain.
Who’s got a baby brother or sister?
Do they have feelings? Do they get sad? What other feelings do they have?
Do you understand what they say yet?
How can you tell what they want if they can’t talk?

Bodie Finch isn’t a baby. He’s about the same age as you.
He can think what he wants to say but he can’t make his mouth say it - so nobody can understand him.

Tell the children that you’re thinking of a colour. (Think of something that won’t jump into the children’s minds at once, like white.)

Hand up if you want to guess what colour I’m thinking of! (Most will put hands up.)
Does anyone KNOW what colour I’m thinking of? Can anyone see inside my head? Is my head made of glass so you can see what I’m thinking?
Or would you just be doing your best to guess the right colour?

This is a really hard concept! What you’re doing is encouraging theory of mind - the realisation that other people have different thoughts from us.

Ask the children to cover their mouths with their hands so no words can get out. Then ask them to think, SILENTLY, of their favourite animal but don’t tell anyone yet!

Ask them to guess which animal others were thinking of.

Sophie, what animal did Lucy think of? Can you tell for sure? Can you guess?
People can’t tell what we’re thinking, can they? We need to tell them with words or actions, like a baby crying because it wants milk.

How can we show people what we want to say without talking?
Go back to the colour question you asked and this time, point to something in the room that is that colour.
So pointing can be a way to show what we’re thinking.
Who knows what mime means?
Go back to the question about what animal the children were thinking of.
Mime some clues to an animal yourself - say, an elephant, by making your arm into the swinging trunk, and ask the children what animal you're thinking of.

Take turns to pretend to be an animal and see if the other children can guess the animal.

You can make your body pretend to be something, instead of saying it.
This is a good introduction to teaching the signs for ‘eat’ and ‘drink’.

What are some things Bodie might need to say?
What could we do with our hands or bodies to show we’re thirsty?
What if we’re hungry?

Who knows what sign language is?
Does anyone know any signs?

How do you feel when someone says something you don’t understand?
What could you say to them if you don’t understand?

Try to encourage the children not to ‘other’ children with communication issues by giving up and walking away. Encourage them to seek more information from the child, or to ask you for help ‘translating’.

Imagine

What if we need to go to the toilet and we can’t make our words understood?
Point out that some things are harder to say politely with your body than others! Nobody likes being laughed at. This is another opportunity to encourage ‘theory of mind’, which is the start of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes - ie empathy.

Teach the sign for ‘toilet’ - it might be very useful for shy children!

Tell

Learn and teach the children any signs and sounds commonly used by your own ‘Bodie’.

Play

Extend mime with both ‘what am I’ and ‘what am I doing’ games. You might like to try:

- walking like a robot,
- jumping like a rabbit or frog,
● cleaning teeth,
● brushing hair,
● getting in the car...

Sing some songs that include realistic actions such as Peter Combe’s Mr Clicketty Cane. Encourage the children to make up their own verses for Mr Clicketty Cane with actions. Sing some favourite songs and ask the children to make up the actions to match the words.

Teachers can show the children some more signs that are used and/or understood by the child with autism, or even signs you want your child with autism to learn next. If everyone is using the signs, it helps! If the teacher is not confident enough to teach the signs, invite the special needs assistant/s to do so.

Inclusion extends to your assistant! Bringing the assistant forward, formally introducing them to the other children and inviting them to participate will help everyone to feel comfortable and supported.

Who else might need to use sign language?
Who knows the word we use when people can’t hear? --> deaf
Does anyone speak another language at home?

This can be extended further into learning certain words in a variety of languages.

Video of simple signs to use (these signs are used by many Early Childhood workers)
Baby sign language chart
Auslan sign dictionary
Sue Larkey's website
Auslan website
Mrs Baker’s feelings show on her face, and probably so do ours. Be honest about your feelings with children! It’s okay to show them that you’re not coping every now and then, but also show them that you can move on from that.

Reflect on how you manage your stress, and model using stress management techniques (such as calming breaths - keep the red wine at home!) in front of them.

Look for services you can access to support everyone’s wellbeing when life gets tough and the children are affected.

Yes, there will be tough moments and tough days during any inclusion experience - and indeed during any parenting or teaching experience. We need to give the children space for expressing their difficult feelings, and the way we express our own frustration or exhaustion is wonderful modelling.

Encourage children to talk about feelings and be open to sharing your own. Are adults allowed to be sad or frustrated or worried or angry sometimes?

If you’re feeling brave you can even ask: What does my face look like when I’m angry? How can children help when a special adult is feeling upset?
Suggest strategies such as kind words, hugs, doing chores without being asked, helping at meal time by setting the table, listening carefully to what the adult would like you to do, etc.

Reassure that we don’t have to ‘fix’ adults’ sadness or troubles, but we can be kind - and that DOES help.

Model breathing strategies (see previous descriptions) in front of the children when you’re upset.

Name your emotion to the children when you’re upset - ‘I’m frustrated because...’ ‘I’m feeling annoyed because...’ and tell them what you’re going to try to do to feel better and to fix the problem - ‘I’m just going to take three deep breaths and breathe out slowly. Do you want to count them for me?’

Take notice of when your colleagues are not coping. What do they do? Do they wash the paint pots, or go to the toilet often?

Consider whether you need a special staff meeting or some professional development to help you all cope better.
Reflect on whether a repeated behaviour that’s causing you distress is really worth bringing attention to. Are we fighting a losing battle? Do we need to react to everything? Are we only exhausting ourselves?

Choose **one or two things** to work on initially.

**And finally - a very important point for reflection:**

If children (including but not confined to the child with autism) are behaving chaotically, they’re telling you something. Behaviour is communication. Perhaps - and this is VERY common these days - perhaps they are being put under age-inappropriate restrictions in the interest of ‘learning’ or ‘readiness’ or ‘getting ahead’.

Perhaps they aren’t being allowed to move enough, or to have enough time outdoors. Up until age 7, children NEED to be playing; it’s how they learn social skills and create core strength in their bodies. They will instinctively respond to the bodily and intellectual need to be active and play.

The following article is enlightening for those who believe that even preschoolers should be sitting down at desks completing worksheets. Reducing chaos caused by children’s frustration at not being allowed to move will reduce meltdowns for your child with autism, as well as being far better for the academic progress and bodily development of all children.

*The decline in play, the rise in sensory issues*
Strong emotions are as normal for children as they are for adults. Often adults make the mistake of expecting children to be more ‘perfect’ than they are themselves!

The ideal is to allow the emotion, but control the response.

But what if Bodie’s chair throwing is not about emotion at all?

So, why did Bodie Finch throw that chair?

People with autism and other conditions such as SPD (Sensory Processing Disorder) reach a point where they are ‘maxed out’ on stimulation and they are no longer in control of their impulses. Then they will usually have what’s called a ‘meltdown’ - a physical or vocal explosion which, if you don’t understand what’s happening, can easily be labelled by the less well-informed as a ‘bratty, badly behaved, badly brought up child making a scene’.

To have meltdowns interpreted like this is extremely painful for the parents of the child with autism. Try not to jump to conclusions when you see a child ‘exploding’ in public.

You may have experienced a type of ‘meltdown’ yourself when you got very angry and did something you later regretted. You may have seen it in your own children when, for example, they’ve been forced by you to stop playing a video game they’re ‘hooked’ on.

However, what Zara interprets as Bodie ‘getting cross’ is probably not anger so much as Bodie crossing the line of how much painful sensory stimulation he can stand.

Here’s a video that explains in more detail:

What’s a meltdown? explained by Amythest Schaber

For teachers

Being Friends with Bodie Finch - Teachers’ and parents’ handbook
Understanding the child with autism is important, but we must also be able to protect other children from harm.

With behaviours that are unsafe for others, you need to prepare by doing certain things in advance:

- Consult the parents of the child in question, then agree on a firm plan about moving other children out of the way.
- Ensure that all staff are informed about the plan.
- Ensure all children have ample free access to the outdoors, where they can release the angry, overstimulated or frustrated energy much more safely.
- Increase your knowledge of the triggers for this particular child with autism. How can you modify the environment? Have you asked the parents for assistance? Do you need to consult an expert in the field?

In time you’ll start to recognise triggers and actions which signal an imminent meltdown - in the picture at left, the camera was put down quick smart when I saw the arm raised with a block ready to throw at the little girl who’d sat down too close!

Immediate strategies to help a child in meltdown may include:

- Asking all other children to move away from the child in meltdown;
- Providing a quiet, dark, enclosed space for the child in meltdown;
- Taking the child in meltdown outdoors;
- Applying firm touch such as a close embrace if this is acceptable to the child’s parents, or a weighted blanket;
- Lowering or turning off the lights, fan, air conditioner, music, and otherwise reducing excess stimuli;
- Asking for silence;
- Sitting near the child in meltdown - not too close - in a non-threatening body posture, hands facing upwards and by your side; saying I see you, I’m here, then being silent; not trying to make eye contact as it adds to the stimulation burden.

As a teacher you may need to allocate other staff members to comfort and care for any other child who has been hurt by the child in meltdown lashing out. Reassure the hurt or distressed child that the action wasn’t intentional, and acknowledge the child’s hurt feelings and pain:

Bodie is feeling very upset right now and that’s what happens to his body when he gets upset - he needs to throw his arms and legs out. I’m so sorry you got hurt - I saw his arm go flying around and hit you. I can see you’re very sad. Which part of you hurts? Is it your arm? Do you need an ice pack for it?
Talking with children

Always offer opportunities for children to talk about how any negative incidents affect them.

Was anybody scared when Bodie got upset this morning and started yelling and throwing things?
Who can tell me why Bodie got upset? Does anyone know?
What can we do next time to help Bodie not to get upset and to stop anyone getting hurt?

Giving children agency in solving their own problems is a very healthy way to create a supportive community around the child with autism.

Do this in an informal way at an appropriate time. Public shaming is definitely not helpful.

Sometimes puppets can be useful for drawing attention to the behaviour rather than the individual child. Act out difficult behaviours with the puppets, and let the children discuss possible strategies and responses.

Counteract negativity by drawing attention to any clever, kind or interesting things that your ‘Bodie’ does.

Try to talk about difficult behaviours in other stories you read to the children, too. The more you discuss and ‘unpack’ these things, the more creative and compassionate the children will become. Here’s a perfect example of how to find the layers in a children’s book and open them up to the children:

Unpacking ‘My Father’s Dragon’ with preschoolers

Ask

Even when we are not coping with an incident, we can use the seeds sown by our Bodie’s meltdowns to grow his peers’ emotional understanding.

Is throwing things okay, when we want to say we’re angry or we’re frustrated?
What could we do instead of throwing things or hitting people?
Also seek to create empathy in the children by using the events in the story to stimulate imagination.

*Why do you think Bodie threw the chair? What happened to make him feel so bad?*

There’s an opening here to discuss the *triggers* relevant to your child with autism with the other children. To help them to be considerate, you must give them good information. Children can be very kind indeed when they perceive a problem and know how to help.

If you want to read more about discussing behavioural issues with preschoolers, this is a great place to start:

*Because Francis doesn’t like it*

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**WHY? POSSIBLE CAUSES OF BODIE’S MELTDOWN**

In Bodie’s case, it may have been *sensory overload* - perhaps the other children were very noisy that day, and then there was a sudden extra noise.

Maybe it was something new in his environment. Children with autism don’t cope well with change. How many days had Bodie been in his new daycare/school, we might wonder? That is a whole new environment - an enormous change to cope with, full of unfamiliar sensations and unfamiliar situations and people.

Or was it the frustration of not being able to express himself? Imagine not being able to say what you mean, or tell someone what you want.

Perhaps someone had laughed at him or been unkind. We know that Eric says mean things. Perhaps he said something mean to Bodie, or laughed at the way he talks?

If you discuss these possibilities in the context of a story rather than trying to teach emotional intelligence skills in isolation, you will find it much easier to open the conversation!
PREPARE

To help the other children control their own emotions when ‘Bodie’ has a meltdown or they are otherwise upset, teach calming breathing or mindfulness.

Make and explain to the children an ‘angry corner’ in the room, where the children can choose to sit to show they’re cross without speaking.

On the left, you can see an example of a safe space for anger. The bright red helps it ‘jump out’ at the angry child, as it reflects the intensity of their feelings, but all the textures are soft and comforting and there are pillows to punch and soft toys to hug, depending on what the child needs.

Plan, with the other children, strategies to help your Bodie feel more comfortable, such as providing blankets for cubbies or telling you Bodie needs to go outdoors. They will help you watch for signs that he’s about to melt down, if you let them.

A TEACHER’S STORY

‘One year I had a very shy, quiet little girl, G, in the preschool room. There were also two little boys with a variety of developmental issues who were expressing their frustration by throwing and hitting at that time. We were understaffed, waiting for an aide to be approved, and things were hard for everyone.

I was very surprised one day to look across to Angry Corner and see G sitting there! To be able to identify her feelings about her chaotic environment as ‘anger’ was a huge step forward for her. I was able to pick up on her mood immediately and offer comfort and assistance.’

Equip

With the children, make a list of acceptable behaviours when very angry, eg ‘kick a ball’, ‘go out and shout’, ‘punch a pillow’.
With the children, write down (at their dictation) some rules they’d like to have in their space. You can find an excellent guide to making rules with the children here:

I have a rule!

Make a recovery area in your room or outdoors, where any of the children can go to be calm and quiet after a meltdown. Meltdowns are exhausting. Provide a safe space to go and be alone, rest, do a quiet activity or even sleep.

The softer blues in the little corner on the left give a gentler cue to the upset child. There was also a blue gauze curtain which could be pulled around to limit light and public view. Many a child cuddled their way to calmness with those big white teddies.

This corner was located near the ‘library’, so it was a designated quiet area. Children often moved independently to the bookshelves when they felt recovered.
There is an opportunity here to teach children to accept failure as a step towards success. Use it! Mrs. Baker is ‘failing’ and doesn’t know what to do - but she doesn’t give up. She asks for help so she can learn to do better.

Stories are very powerful, and even more so if they’re YOUR stories. Share a little of yourself. ‘How did you fail today?’ can be a tension-breaking question which also teaches that failing is a normal part of life.

You can also frame this as learning being a lifelong experience. Show the children that when an adult doesn’t know how to do something, they try to learn - learning is not just something imposed on us at school. It is a life skill for problem solving.

There is no shame in asking for help. Ask early, because getting support from a teacher with specific expertise can take time. This story makes it sound a lot quicker than it really is!

While you wait for support, seek help about successful inclusion from a professional development provider who employs specialists in this area of knowledge.

Mrs. Baker asked for help, even though she felt bad and probably thought she was no good at this.

Share a little failure! Talk about something you have had to ask for help with recently. Your example needs to be personal, but it might come out something like this:

I tried to move the fridge, but it was too heavy. I was too weak and I hurt myself and felt silly. Then I asked a friend to help me and it was much easier.
I was trying to put together some furniture and I couldn’t get it to work. I was so frustrated! I felt stupid! But then I asked my wife to help and now I understand how it works.

What are some of the things you need help with?

Give some leading questions – spread the types of activities across a wide range, eg:

Who can tie their shoelaces already? Who needs help?
Who can read a book already? Who needs help?
Who can bake a cake already? Who needs help?
Who can brush their teeth without help?
Who can do a cartwheel? (prepare for them to demonstrate!)
Who knows how to plant a tree? Who needs help?

What are some things you are good at?
What are some things you need help with, because you’re still learning?
A word of caution first: try not to overuse the concept of ‘still learning’ aimed directly at your ‘Bodie’ child. It’s very important to share the concept out amongst all parties, from the parent to the teacher to the typically-developing child.

The intention is not to ‘excuse’ difficult behaviour, but to explain it in a child-friendly way as part of a learning arc which we are all on, even as adults. So we are normalising the process, and advocating for the ‘Bodie’ child’s need for patience, assistance and understanding.

Remember, these behaviours are communications; what Bodie is learning is how to SAY that he wants to enter play. Miss Tinker is ‘translating’ Bodie’s communication.

If you are experiencing this sort of dynamic as a teacher, the conversation with the children could go like this:

When ‘Bodie’ takes your toys and runs after you, what do you think he’s trying to tell you? He’s not using his voice to talk or say anything, is he?

You might also remind the children that sometimes we don’t understand what other people are trying to do. The perfect example is ‘play fighting’, as seen at the left - often a teacher or parent will stop children at the first gesture of hitting, when really the children were just experimenting with power and play-acting. You could ask the children,

Has the teacher ever told you to stop fighting and you weren’t really fighting, just playing?
Do you see, the teacher didn’t know what you meant! She saw hitting, but you were really playing Superheroes. She didn’t understand.

It’s the same with Bodie - sometimes we don’t understand what he means when he does things. You see him snatching your baby doll, but really he’s trying to play house with you. Maybe he was taking the baby for a walk to the park?

Reinterpreting Bodie’s attempts to join play so that his peers understand him is just as important as helping Bodie ask to join play more successfully. Without understanding his intent, they can’t support him.

**Equip**

You could use your voice when he comes near you and ask, ‘Bodie, do you want to play?’

One day he might say ‘play’ instead of taking your toys or running at you. Until then, let’s all keep saying ‘Bodie, do you want to play?’ to him for a while and see what happens.

Of course some children will still not be happy with this! Acknowledge the difficult feelings.

I know it is frustrating for you. ‘Bodie’ needs time. I want to give him time. How do you feel about that?

**Tell**

If you are simply enjoying reading the story together, you can draw out more ‘learning about learning’ like this:

Everyone is still learning, even when they’re quite grown up.  
It is okay to not know how to do something yet, even if you’re an adult.  
It is okay to ask for help when you don’t know something or don’t understand what someone says.  
It is okay to ask for help more than once, till you understand!

**Talking with children**

Tell the children something that you’re still learning, eg

I am still learning not to shout when I get angry.

It can be a very positive thing to ask the children to help you with your learning, eg

If I start to shout, can you please all put your hands up in the air like this to remind me to stop?
This is not giving up your power or showing weakness. Rather, it is excellent modelling, and it builds a positive two-way relationship with the children. If you want children to admit to their own shortcomings, you must also admit to yours!

Also, letting the children indicate to you that you’re shouting will often interrupt the behaviour that made you shout in the first place. Win-win!

A TEACHER’S STORY

“We were about to start a cooking experience. The children had washed their hands and were waiting for their turn with the ingredients when one little girl absentmindedly started playing with her shoes.

My assistant spoke to her very harshly and told her to wash her hands again. The poor child burst into floods of tears and couldn’t be comforted, until I started telling the whole class about how I’d absentmindedly lost my car keys that morning and eventually found them - in the fridge! Everyone makes silly mistakes!

Even my little crying one burst out laughing, and we were able to go on with our cooking.”

At first it’s best to do this exercise with the children privately. You will need to prepare carefully in your head!

ASK each child to tell you something they think they already do well and something they are still learning.

Then TELL each child something you see they already do well and something you see they are still learning (careful how you word this part - be kind!).

For example, the child might say:

*I’m good at catching the ball and I’m still learning to get dressed by myself.*

You might answer:

*I see that you’re already very good at being kind to the other children, and you’re still learning to speak up with a big loud voice when the other children are listening at circle time.*
When talking with the children about a speech issue, be aware of the possibility that some children may resort to making fun of the speech patterns of a ‘Bodie’-like child because they are uncomfortable with the experience. Always emphasise kindness.

**Carefully separate** literacy games from discussion of the specific communication issues of your own ‘Bodie’.

**Ask**

*What sound is Bodie still learning to say? What’s missing when he says ‘ar’?*

*Can you break ‘car’ into two bits, the ‘keh’ sound of the C and the ‘AR’ sound Bodie’s saying? Let’s try. C - ar. C - ar.*

*What other words might Bodie have been trying to say when he said ‘ar’? Do you know any other words with an ‘ar’ sound?*

**Extend**

Using letter magnets or similar resources, find a C and put it in front of the ‘AR’ in the book to show what Bodie was trying to say.

Put all the consonants in a bag and pull them out randomly. Put them in front of the AR (on the picture in the book, or using a whiteboard), tell them what sound the consonant makes, say it with the ‘ar’ sound and see if it makes a real word.
Say the ‘keh’ sound and then ‘ar’, faster and faster till you make them into one word (‘car’). Sing a song without the first consonant sound of every word, eg: 

\[ aa \, aa \, ack \, eep, \, ave \, ou \, any \, ool? \]

For higher age groups you can try singing it with consonants only - hilarious! 

\[ B \, b \, blick \, shp, \, hv \, y \, n \, wI? \]

Say everyone’s name with a consonant sound missing – eg ‘alon’ for Talon, ‘A-eesha’ for ‘Aleesha’ etc. (Works best if you do this on a whiteboard and rub out one letter, then try to say it.)

Talk about the difference between thinking something and saying it, while referring to the picture of Bodie thinking of the car. You can play a version of ‘I Spy’ or ‘Twenty Questions’ where the children try to guess what object or animal you’re thinking of (start with something very familiar but which ISN’T in view, such as an elephant!).

This distinction between what we think and what we say is an important one for emotional intelligence, as sometimes our thoughts aren’t all that kind! If you can teach your children to distinguish between an unkind thought such as ‘you’re being stupid’ or ‘you’re too fat’ (which we all have) and saying an unkind thing out loud, you are doing a wonderful job.

**Talking with children**

Zara says ‘I didn’t know Bodie Finch was sad’. This is of course a simplistic rendition of Bodie’s emotions; in fact it’s likely that Bodie’s primary underlying emotion is fear, but it would be hard for small children to comprehend that they themselves, or the environment they’re in, might be scary. ‘Sad’ is somewhere simple to start unpacking Bodie’s feelings for the other children.

**Fear and Autism**

It’s helpful to explore negative emotions with children; it increases their emotional vocabulary and helps to create the right landscape for empathy to emerge.

You might like to join the dots for the children like this:

- **What else do you think Bodie Finch might be feeling?**
- **How did you feel on your first day of school?**
- **Were you a little bit scared?**
- **Do you cry when you’re frightened? Do you hide? Do you run to mummy or daddy?**
- **What if you’re here at school and mummy and daddy aren’t here?**

By exploring their own reactions to fear and sadness, children will be better equipped to look for that emotion in others as they start to gain ‘theory of mind’ (understanding that other people have different perspectives from them).
Environments account for so much of a child’s experience and behaviour. It is possible to change a child’s behaviour by adjusting the environment, rather than trying to adjust the child.

Remember that an environment is not just how we arrange a physical space. It’s also what we say and how we say it, how we listen (or indeed, whether we listen), what we expect of others, what routines we implement and how we organise the children’s time.

PREPARE

What does the physical autism-friendly environment look like? Basically, it avoids overstimulation of the senses, and it avoids forced proximity.

Think in terms of the five senses, and try to imagine how your space would feel if every sense was magnified tremendously in intensity.

SIGHT: If there is too much to look at - too many competing visual stimuli - it may overwhelm a child with autism. This is why people with autism have trouble reading faces; every facial expression is made up of many, many tiny shapes and movements. Watch for:

- Too many coloured pictures and posters and notices on the walls. There is nothing wrong with some blank space - many Early Childhood and school environments are a nightmare of overstimulation, with barely any wall visible and everything shouting for attention at once.
- An excess of bright tones - natural and neutral tones are more calming.
- Too many resources out at once - try to simplify and offer just a few open-ended toys at once.
- A general feeling of ‘crowdedness’ - open plan, with ample free access to the outdoors, is best.

If you get it right, you may find that ALL children respond with calmer behaviour.
A picture is worth a thousand words, so here are some images of autism-friendly spaces for children en masse.

Less is more (above). Take notice of the natural colours, the areas of restful blank wall at eye level for children, the open space, the carefully chosen range of resources (and not too many).

A few more colours in this one (left), and a smaller area. What would you remove if it was still too ‘busy’ for your child with autism? I’d move one of the low bookcases.
I love the lower lighting in this room! (right)

Again, we have a lower light level here (left) and natural colours, with a noticeable lack of the excess of brightly coloured plastic toys which can create a feeling of ‘overwhelm’ for the child with autism.
I love the way this setting *(above)* suggests that children can be ‘around corners’ to have some private space.

There’s a little bit of a contradiction, isn’t there? We want an uncluttered area that doesn’t overwhelm the senses, but if everything is TOO bare and open, there’s nowhere for an overwhelmed child to retreat. Experiment till you find a good balance.

Yes, bright colours might attract a baby’s attention, but calm, soothing colours like this *(left)* are easier on everyone.

Overstimulation isn’t just a ‘thing’ for children with autism. It’s just that they react so strongly that we notice more easily.

*Many thanks to Jennifer Kable of ‘*let the children play*’ for the photos.*
SOUND: Try to maintain a reasonably quiet environment without competing sounds. Watch out for:

- Music while there is talking and play happening as well. ‘Background’ music often just contributes to overload.
- Loud toys such as musical instruments being used indoors. Be mindful that it’s not only children with autism who may find this overwhelming.
- Every part of the room being used for loud play. Try to maintain a ‘library’ or other quiet area for noise-sensitive children to escape to.
- A lack of escape from too much sound. This is another reason why unfettered access to the outdoors is so important.
- Even the sound of an air conditioner can contribute to excess noise! BUT it might instead provide a calming ‘white noise’. One child may have a different response from another. Be observant and make your own assessment of triggers.
- White noise played through headphones can be helpful to block out excessive noise.

If you’re unfortunate enough to be located on a busy road or to have jackhammers next door, maybe you could invest in some noise-cancelling headphones. Remember to consult with the parents about their own strategies.

If you want to experience for a moment what a person with autism hears, watch this video:

*What the world sounds like through autism*

SMELL: What you find pleasant others may find distressing! Watch out for:

- Oil burners and other pervasive scents - maybe that’s triggering your ‘Bodie’ child.
- Cooking smells - try to keep the door closed or the ventilation system working well.
- Very strongly smelling foods at meal time - don’t exclude them on suspicion; just be aware and watch for things that seem to trigger the child with autism.

Again, consult with the parents. They may be able to save you some meltdowns!

TASTE: It’s very important to consult with parents about the child with autism’s food preferences. Maybe Bodie’s mum or dad could have told Mrs Baker Bodie loved fish!

- Don’t be surprised by a very small range of ‘acceptable’ foods. Choose your battles.
- Remember that taste and smell are interrelated. Watch for foods that have powerful smells - they may overwhelm your child with autism to the point of throwing up.

TOUCH: Some children with autism will recoil from touch. Some will seek touch. Some will recoil from gentle touch but seek firm and weighty touch.

Know your child!

- Remember that your child with autism may not like the feel of some things and may like others very much. Try not to assume everyone will want to play with your sensory-type resources - goop, play dough, pipe cleaners and/or finger painting, for
example, may be no-go zones depending on the child’s sensitivities. Perhaps putting on wet weather gear or a sweater when it’s cold, or engaging in water play, may be overwhelming sensory issues. And perhaps they really, really won’t want to get off that fluffy mat or bean bag. If you are giving genuine choices, you allow the child with autism to avoid triggers as much as possible.

- Textures of some foods may be distressing. Avoid forcing a child with autism to eat!
- Your child with autism may not like to be touched by others. As Zara finds out, it may feel too intense and almost painful. Avoid crowding (lining up to go inside is unlikely to be pleasurable, especially if there is pushing!!) and think carefully about allowing ample space around the child when he/she is engaged in an activity.
- Even the touch sensation of the air from a fan or air conditioner may be upsetting. Let the child choose where he or she sits, lies or plays inside. Allow avoidance of these uncomfortable sensations - for a child with autism, the air from the fan may feel like being in a hurricane.

### Support and resources

**About Sensory Processing Disorder**

Creating quiet spaces outdoors: let the children play

### Talking with children

You probably already know whether your children as individuals prefer indoors or outdoors, and where they will gravitate within those spaces.

You’ve probably also observed that chaos is catching. It’s interesting to find out who empathises naturally with Bodie Finch and who else responds well to the wide open spaces.

### Ask

**Who likes it when everything around you is loud?**

Tell us some loud places you like to be, or some loud games you like. (Eg at the football or speedway, playing cops and robbers)

**Who hates it when everything around you is loud?**

Tell us some quiet places you like to be, or some quiet games you like.
(Eg in the bedroom or garden, looking at books, doing jigsaws, painting)

You might discover some noise sensitive children by doing this activity!

Who likes being inside? What are the great things about being inside to play?
Who likes outside? What are the great things about playing outside?

What games are best played inside?
What games are best played outside?

Imagine

What games do you think Bodie Finch would like playing?
(You can get some clues from the pictures, but try to think of others.)

What about the other children in the story? What games would Eric like? What about Lilly?
(Again, look for clues in the pictures.)

Create

Encourage the children to invent stories about the minor characters in the book. If you write
these stories down on butcher’s paper and encourage the children to illustrate them, you
have a marvellous literacy learning experience documented!

You could even send them in to us at MonkeyRead.me so we can publish them on the
website.

Play

(This is a game for when your ‘Bodie’ child is not present!)

Play some recorded music for dancing, and use the volume control randomly (a bit like in
musical chairs, but using loud and soft). Get the children to dance wildly with big
movements when it’s loud, and dance daintily with small movements when it’s soft.

Create

Ask the children to make up their own movements to show ‘loud’ and ‘soft’.
Both parents and teachers can reflect upon the flexibility of their routine, regarding where the children are physically able/allowed to be and when. Outdoors and playing freely (without adults trying to organise or teach) is very often the best environment for children, particularly if they are overstimulated or quarrelling.

Try to recognise before any child reaches that point and go outside with them, or look at what you can adjust within the room.

Where there is a child with autism present, make the children aware of the overstimulation - have a universal signal for ‘too loud’ which they recognise - and try using safe havens inside, such as a ‘quiet corner’ or Bodie’s cubbies. You may need to guide your Bodie to their haven or help him/her construct one.

Be aware that using cubbies, tents and teepees successfully as an alternative to outdoors depends very much on the individual child. If a child signals that they find comfort in enclosed, darker spaces (such as by constantly climbing under tables or inside cupboards or shelves), then yes, you can offer a cubby or blanket fort.

It isn’t a magic wand; you may find yourself frustrated if you don’t follow the child with autism’s lead in what is useful to them when overstimulated. Remember - if you’ve met one child with autism, you’ve met ONE child with autism.

Refuges work best if you involve your ‘Bodie’ in making the cubby/fort, and if you model to ALL how the refuge is to be used - if you don’t model calm and quiet around it in a consistent way, you can hardly expect the other children to see it as a quiet spot.

Also note that escaping overstimulation is a transitional measure, not an all-time solution. It shouldn’t become a constant way of escaping the learning of functional social skills.
Visual cues and supports are extremely important for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Note that they need to be used alongside, not instead of language; Miss Tinker says ‘use just a few words’ AND the sign.

As children with autism tend to be very literal-minded, photographs of the child’s real environment work much better as visual cues than clip art!

Programs like ‘Boardmaker’ can be introduced if necessary to support things like routine schedules, order of tasks (first/next/then approaches) or social stories to prepare for new situations.

Social stories help prepare children for what’s coming up, and a book of visuals about a functional skill is a big help. It could be about starting big school, shopping, an excursion, a big show event or even a simple thing like going to visit a friend. Real life photos are usually used plus a simple text story:

My school, I walk in, I say hi to the Teacher, I put my bag on this hook, I choose a game, I say goodbye to mum.

Of course it’s not always as simple as using a few hand signs and a few words. A teacher may have to start with ‘self-help task analysis prompting’, which means writing down every step that exists within a task such as toileting, then decide how much assistance is offered in each step (find toilet, pull pants down, turn around, sit on toilet, do wee, pull paper, break paper off, wipe, stand up, pull up undies, pull up pants etc).

Below are some examples of ‘task analysis observation sheets’. They break down the steps of things we take for granted as neurotypical adults, like self-care routines, into the tiniest possible stages.

The most detailed level would probably only be used with children whose autonomy is very severely compromised by their autism. Again, know your child!
As each stage is managed independently, it can be marked off and the physical and/or verbal prompts removed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Verbal prompts</th>
<th>Point(P)</th>
<th>Hand over hand prompts</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Stuff initials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pick up the toothbrush</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Wet the brush</td>
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<td>3. Take the cap off the tube</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Put paste on the brush</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Brush bottom teeth on left side</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Brush bottom teeth on right side</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Brush top teeth on left side</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Brush top teeth on right side</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Brush top teeth in front</td>
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<td>10. Brush tongue</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Spit in sink</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Rinse brush</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Put brush in holder</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Get cup and fill with water</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Rinse mouth</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Spit in sink</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Put cup away</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Put cap back on tube of toothpaste</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Wipe face with towel if wet</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Clean sink area with towel</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

OBSERVING & PLANNING FOR LEVEL OF ASSISTANCE

Map each step in the activity. Highlight the steps that the child is not doing unassisted or that you decide you will work on. You can not work on all steps at once. This will create anxiety and possibly a meltdown. Break down those steps further using a task analysis to map the type of assistance you will offer in each step. Slowly adapt the assistance over time to enable the child to have a verbal prompt or even a simple hand gesture. Eventually independence where appropriate.

**Activity Analysis**

1. Wait for visual cue
2. Move to bathroom
3. Turn on tap
4. Place hand under automatic soap dispenser
5. Lather soap
6. Rub soap on hands for 10 seconds
7. Rinse hands under water
8. Turn tap off
9. Get a paper towel
10. Dry hands
11. Place towel in bin
12. Move out of bathroom

**Task Analysis**

1. Rub both palms together back and forth 5 times FP/G
2. Open fingers and rub soap in between fingers for 5 seconds FP
3. Rub palms together and backs of hands for 5 seconds PP

**KEY**

- Bold = Did not complete step
- FP = Full physical assistance
- PP = Partial Physical assistance
- V = Verbal prompt
- G = Gesture/Model
- I = Independent

Being Friends with Bodie Finch - Teachers’ and parents’ handbook
So - to get a child with autism to manage a task successfully, the parent or teacher must often work out whether to remind the child verbally, or whether a visual is needed to remind them - or if physical help is needed. Over time, physical and verbal help should (ideally) reduce - and remember, sometimes talking too much to a child with autism can impede self help! ‘Just a few words’ is good advice.
It is hard to empathise with the child who says or does hurtful things repeatedly. Eric’s behaviour is a very different issue to Bodie’s situation and it has a whole different story book devoted to it, called ‘Mean Eric’ (publishing anticipated for 2017).

For now, try to establish an emotional connection with children like Eric. ‘I see you - I’m here’ is one way to signal that you’re present and paying attention to them. Watch your tone of voice! You’re not connecting if your tone is angry or judgmental.

You can also narrate events rather than controlling them: ‘I see Eric pushing. He’s getting in front of Lilly in the line. I can see that Lilly is crying now.’ This simple technique will often help children to self-regulate behaviour.

Another approach is to act out hurtful situation with puppets. Shaming Eric in front of his peers will not change Eric’s behaviour; on the other hand, if he sees a familiar situation acted out with puppets, he has the chance to have input and to comment on what’s going on at arm’s length, while the other children have a chance to problem solve.

Try to find something to like about the Erics of this world. Sometimes that means asking the parents or other adults who know him to give you their perspective. If you can get a little closer to them, you may be able to find out why they behave as they do.

Encourage the children to share their experiences of ‘mean’ behaviour without naming names - ‘I don’t like it when’ - and share some of your own.

I don’t like it when people call me cruel names. I can still remember how much it hurt when my friend got angry with me when I was little and told me I was a fat pig.

I wonder what sort of mean things Eric says?
Has anyone ever said something mean to you or one of your friends? What did they say?
Is it okay to call someone mean names?
Does it help if you tell someone they’re stupid, or fat, or a scaredy cat? Will it make them clever, or thin, or brave?
How do you feel when someone says something mean to you?
Do you get a little sick feeling in your tummy? Do you feel like crying?

Equip

Teach self-affirming responses:
That’s not true. That’s not kind.

Practise calming breathing and calm words of response to the ‘mean’ person.

Play

Go back to your ‘feelings’ faces: look at a sad face, a ‘hurt feelings’ face, an angry face.

Role-play or use puppets to act out how to deal with people saying mean things. Make up a scenario, eg dropping the ball in a catching game. One character says ‘You dropped it, stupid!’ and the other responds calmly ‘That’s not kind!’

If you’re role playing, start by taking the role of the ball-dropper yourself.

Don’t forget, you can incorporate calming breathing into your scenario!

Role play seeking comfort by telling a friend or safe person:
Dylan, Jana said I’m stupid because I dropped the ball.

Again, demonstrate this by acting the part yourself in role play; see what the children come up with to comfort your character.

Ask

Why do you think Eric says mean things?
(There is no right answer – see if you can get the children to think beyond ‘he’s just bad’ to some uncomfortable feelings he might have underneath such as anger or frustration.)

Do you think tiny babies are born mean, or does someone teach them to be mean?

Do you ever say mean things to yourself? Are you a good friend to yourself, or do you sometimes say ‘I’m so stupid’ or ‘I’m no good at anything’?
Be aware that many children get ‘stuck’ because they are saying ‘mean things’ to themselves when things go wrong and they fail at a task. This is an opportunity to challenge the script inside their head.

Let’s try to stop being mean to ourselves first.
No more saying inside our head or out loud ‘I’m stupid’ or ‘I’m no good at this’ or anything else mean!
Do you agree? Can we say ‘I’ll ask for help’ instead, or ‘I’ll try again because some things are hard to learn’?
Everyone has different ideas of what’s too close. Sometimes this is referred to as our personal ‘bubble’. Try to think of personal space as more than physical touch or proximity - for example, eye contact can be an infringement of personal space for some Indigenous children, as well as for many children with autism.

Personal space is a good starting point for discussion of appropriate touching. There is a story book coming soon (2017) about children’s body autonomy called ‘I Won’t, said Willow’ in which this is examined separately.

We all like different space around us. It’s like we have different sized bubbles around us, that tell us when someone is too close. Usually we have a small bubble for our special friends and a big bubble for people we don’t know.

Play ‘how big is your bubble?’: one person slowly gets closer and closer to another person, until the person not moving says ‘STOP!’ when they start to feel uncomfortable.

Take part yourself, with the children and with any other educators or parents in the room.

Notice how we say ‘STOP!’ at different times, depending on who our friends are.

Use the word ‘trust’ (see previous definition):
Friends are people we trust to be close to our body and not hurt us. They are our safe people.

Bodie feels very uncomfortable when people are in his bubble. He has a very big bubble.
When people have very big bubbles it’s good to be kind by not getting too close to them and warning them if you need to touch them.

Teach the following ‘peer massage’ poem with actions. Demonstrate on a willing child or one of your own peers/colleagues, stressing that we must always ASK before we TOUCH.

This is a trust and collaboration exercise. Don’t force anyone to play, and allow the answer ‘no’.

(Sit behind peer’s back)

Ask Is it ok if I massage your back?

Tip tap, tip tap, (tap peer’s back from bottom to top with pointer fingers)
Spiders crawling up your back, (wriggle fingers like spiders from bottom to top of back)
Squeeze, squeeze, (gently squeeze peer’s shoulders like real massage, twice)
Cool breeze, (blow on back of peer’s neck)
Big hug please! (deep pressure bear hug around peer’s whole body)
By about 4 years of age, most children are starting to develop an understanding of how the
world looks from inside another person’s shoes. Developing empathy is a very variable
process; some children may show signs of understanding others’ feelings much earlier than
4, while some will take longer to understand.

Tell a short story from your own life where you saw how someone else was feeling and
acted on your feeling. It might be something like this:

My best friend’s cat was very sick and last week it died. I could tell my friend was crying
when I spoke to her on the phone. She was very sad. So I went and picked some flowers from
my garden and went to see her, and we put the flowers in her garden on top of the place
where she’d buried her cat. I think it made her feel a little bit better.

NB - don’t avoid confronting the big life issues with children - it is fine to talk about death in
an age-appropriate way like this!

You can then bring the conversation around to issues in front of you where empathy is
required.

If we see that someone is uncomfortable, we can often imagine how they feel inside.

Encourage children to be careful observers and problem-solvers. Ask open ended questions
and really listen to the children’s answers.

Look at the picture - Bodie is all scrunched up because it’s too noisy and people are near him,
and he doesn’t like it.
What do you think Zara could do to help Bodie Finch?
If you look at the pictures of Bodie, you’ll see that his hands often seem to be at slightly odd angles. That’s because he’s ‘stimming’ by flapping his hands.

Stimming helps Bodie to focus on a feeling that’s less uncomfortable than noticing his overstimulating environment.

Here’s a great video which explains what stimming is all about:

Amythest Schraber explains stimming

A child with autism may express his or her stimming by making repeated sounds, singing or moving in a way which the other children find odd, funny or annoying.

Here are some examples. See if you can ‘translate’ which are expressions of pleasure and which are an attempt to block out other over-stimulating factors in the environment.

Examples of stimming

Have you ever pulled the bedcovers up over your head when you were scared of the dark?
Have you ever cried because you didn’t like something that happened near you?
What do you do when a very bright light shines in your eyes? Show me!
What do you do when there’s a very loud noise that goes on and on and on? Show me!

That’s using your body to talk.

When Bodie flaps his hands, he’s talking to us. He’s telling us that everything sounds way too loud to him. Or maybe there’s too much movement in the room and people are too close to him. Or maybe the lights are too bright. Or maybe the fan is blowing right on his skin and it feels awful to him. Remember, things that feel normal to us feel really, really big to Bodie.
Remember stimming can indicate pleasure too.

*When X rolls his hands round and round and smiles he’s telling us he’s happy! He likes what’s happening.*

**Ask**

*We can talk to tell people we’re happy, but we can use our bodies to talk too. How do you use your body to say you’re excited and happy?*

Do you jump up and down?
Do you clap your hands or punch the air and say ‘YES!!’?
We would all like a magic wand to solve our troubles. Even well-educated adults can fall into the trap of expecting that a solution to an inclusion problem will mean they can pass on all responsibility to someone else.

It doesn’t work like that. Bodie’s transformation when Miss Tinker arrives might seem like magic to Zara, but for inclusion to work on an ongoing basis, all parties need to learn strategies, take responsibility, spend time and develop relationships to support the included child.

When the inclusion support teacher is seen as the ‘saviour’ and everything is left to him or her, ‘Miss Tinker’ can get exhausted. It’s simply too much pressure!

Read more about that here:

That’s not my child...

Ideally, the other teachers will learn useful techniques and will be able to ‘pass the baton’ for at least part of the time (especially in staffing emergencies). Your ‘Miss Tinker’ can carry out the plan, but everyone needs to reflect on how it’s working and contribute. Eventually all parties may need to discuss whether 1:1 support is necessary on an ongoing basis; ideally, Miss Tinker would be able to move on and offer help in another inclusion environment as Bodie’s teachers become more skilled.

This is an opportunity to talk to children about the way how we feel affects the way we behave.

Is Bodie really ‘nicer’ since Miss Tinker came?
Is Bodie different, or is everyone being nicer to Bodie?

You can suggest that Bodie is just happier, because people understand him better and are helping him. Maybe he was always nice, but unhappy.

Have you ever had a tantrum when it was time to stop doing something you loved?

Do you feel cross and shout or kick your feet when it’s time to leave a party, or go home from the park, or stop using the computer?

Does that mean that you’re not really a nice person, or just that you’re having big feelings that are hard to hold inside you?
Making a dark enclosed space available for children who have already indicated they seek that sort of space can be useful, but giving children like Bodie the resources to make their own cubby is often more effective than creating it for them. This gives them ownership over the space and it’s more likely to be used for the purpose it’s intended.

It’s definitely helpful to have the right resources to support ‘Bodie’, such as blankets or sheets and something to hang them over, and to empower his peers to help him when he needs to retreat.

If you’re experiencing some doubt over providing special resources for an individual child, as opposed to ‘toughening them up’ and teaching them to ‘fit in’, rest assured that modifying the environment is considered best practice. For a child in a wheelchair, you’d put in a ramp. For a child with autism, you’d provide relief from sensory barriers to their physical and emotional functioning.

Change the child or change the environment?

With the children, practise some specific hand signs and words that they might need to communicate effectively with your own ‘Bodie Finch’, such as ‘change’, ‘please’, ‘come’, ‘go’ etc.

There are many online videos to help you learn some useful signs! Here’s another:

100 basic ASL signs
Sensory issues are not confined to children with autism, but are a very common problem in children with autism.

It makes no difference what the intention of a gentle touch is. It can be overstimulating to the point of pain for the child with a sensory processing disorder. This is a physical problem, not a psychological one.

Yet many children with autism are ‘sensory seekers’. They seek and enjoy a heavier, firmer pressure. For this reason, weighted blankets and backpacks can be reassuring for those children. Two hands pressing down on shoulders with some weight may help calm a child and help them listen to instructions.

An occupational therapist can help parents and teachers to work out what kind of touch will help your particular child. Sensory integration issues are complex, and remember - we leave formal diagnoses to the experts.

Permissions associated with touch is also an issue we all need to reflect upon before deciding how and when to touch a child with autism. We ourselves would be disturbed if a stranger embraced and kissed us in the street without asking, yet we often think nothing of doing exactly the same thing to a baby or small child.

Acknowledging a child’s right to say who touches their body is a contentious issue in some circles, yet it is key to ‘abuse-proofing’ our children. A child who doesn’t feel they have a right to say ‘no’ to physical touch is so much more vulnerable to abuse by people known to them - and most abusers are known to the child’s parents. Teaching about ‘stranger danger’ is not enough. We have to give children’s bodies back into their own care and allow them to listen to that small internal voice that says ‘I don’t like that - stop’.
Children are often fascinated by the human body when it affects them directly, such as when they’re hurt. Take this opportunity to capitalise and use some children’s science books to show what happens inside our body when we take skin off, cut ourselves or break a bone.

Here’s a link to a list of some good children’s books about the body:

**Best children’s books about the body**

And here’s what one preschool in America does in their art lessons each year to extend interest in the human body:

**Child Art Retrospective: the human body**

Perhaps you could use that Hallowe’en skeleton for more than just setting a theme.

Perhaps you could talk about how people donate blood to help others who’ve been hurt.

Perhaps the children might be interested in why a bruise changes colour, and what a bruise really is.

They might also be interested in the medicine we put on a cut. What does antiseptic do? There is a whole thread about germs that could be drawn out here.

There is so much science children could enjoy, starting from this page!

**Support and resources**

- About sensory processing disorder
- More about sensory processing disorder
Here’s another opportunity to talk about personal space and body autonomy. You might decide to talk about experiences where you or the children have not liked being touched (eg being kissed or hugged by a relative you’ve never met before), which parts of our body are private, and about who is allowed to look at or touch the private parts of our bodies (eg mummy or daddy to wash us, a doctor if we’re sick).

The concept of being kind is also an important one which can be discussed here.

**Ask**

*How can Zara be kind to Bodie?*
*What sorts of things does she need to do?*
*Let’s find some pictures of Zara being kind to Bodie.*

(There is a picture of Zara advocating for Bodie by hushing Eric’s drum playing when Bodie is clearly uncomfortable with the noise, another of her making a cubby for Bodie, another of her sitting with Bodie in the cubby and just playing quietly, not talking.)

**Extend**

You could spend some time investigating what each child in your environment does and doesn’t like, and how others could be kind to them. Perhaps some don’t like shooting games, for example. Others might not like loud noises or snatching.

Move on from there to other people. How could we be kind to mummy and daddy? How could we be kind to our teachers?

Remember that you can extend the children’s vocabulary when you talk with them. The word ‘considerate’ might be something to introduce here.
Children have many ways of interacting. They are also entitled to play on their own when that meets their needs, and to be silent. Be careful of trying to put all children on the same conveyor belt! Respect introversion as an acceptable way of being a child; child introverts may turn out to be our great inventors, artists and philosophers of the future.

Many children will self-manage their overwhelmed feelings by seeking some solitude or a quiet place, and children with autism are no exception.

Ensure that such refuges are always available, and avoid insisting that all children take part in every activity.

**Reflect**

Why do you think Zara doesn’t talk to Bodie in the cubby?

It will be interesting for you to see who can answer this question - who has noticed that Zara has really absorbed Bodie’s need for less stimulation and is acting on it.

Of course your children won’t use those words. They might say *Bodie doesn’t like noise.*
Remember: not all children with autism or Asperger’s Syndrome have savant abilities. However if you notice a special ability, celebrate it!

Often a child with autism will have a ‘special interest’ that is pursued to the point that it seems like an obsession. In fact it’s a ‘safe place’ which helps them both relax and to focus on something that takes them away from the world of overstimulation. Judging by the look on Bodie’s face afterwards, perhaps ‘fixing things’ - mechanics - is his special interest.

Learn more about special interests here:

Special interests - Amethyst Schaber

And here’s a video about a little boy called Nicky, the things he likes and his unusual special interest:

Nicky's story

So a special interest is like a little green flag that tells us a way to interest a person with autism. What does this mean in practice?

It means you know what motivates this child and what will soothe this child. This is very valuable knowledge! A child who’s just had a meltdown may recover more quickly if you give them some privacy and the opportunity to focus on their special interest.

If, for example, you had Nicky from the video above in your space, you would be wise to let him bring a book of his photos of telegraph poles from home, so he could sit looking at it while his body recovers from the sensory trauma of meltdown.

Highlight the times where your ‘Bodie’ shows fluency in a skill or knowledge; maybe he/she always lines the toys up neatly on the shelf at clean-up time. Maybe she knows a LOT about Manga comics.
Remember to draw attention to positives in his/her disposition also - perhaps as the child becomes used to this environment, they are careful to always return a personal toy to its owner, for example, or show kindness and thoughtfulness in other ways. This will be the thing the child’s community notices the most, as it has the biggest effect on them personally.

Another facet to reflect on here is that Bodie is clearly using a real tool, a screwdriver, competently.

Try not to ‘dumb down’ your resources, regardless of whether you have a mechanical savant in your midst. There is plenty of research out there to show that children can use tools carefully and correctly when we give them the appropriate support, and if the thought of giving a two- or three-year-old a hot glue gun gives you the shivers, perhaps have a look at how this excellent teacher organises the experience:

Teacher Tom: children using real tools

Another excellent link about helping children develop their own risk assessment skills, before you hand out the screwdrivers, can be found here:

Teacher Tom: risk assessment
Be aware that those children who have a certain mechanical expertise alongside their Asperger’s Syndrome may be very good at opening supposedly ‘childproof’ drawers - be alert, not alarmed, but do think carefully about how you store items you really don’t want touched by the children (for whatever reason).

A TEACHER’S STORY

“My little Bodie-child had barely been in the room for half an hour when I turned around and discovered he was firing my stapler at other children like a gun! Fortunately it had been put away empty. It had been safely stashed away in the drawers by the sink, which had ‘childproof’ fasteners - so much for that theory! This was the first indication of my Bodie’s fascination with and aptitude for machinery.

‘In the short term the stapler had to be stored elsewhere. Then we started using visual cues to show Bodie what he was and wasn’t allowed to touch. We just used a bright red ‘STOP’ sign like you’d see at the roadside, laminated and taped to the things he shouldn’t touch. It took a lot of patience and repetition, but eventually I was able to store my stapler in the room again without Bodie touching the drawer. He really did want to please and he was able to develop some self-regulation around this, which was a huge step forwards.

‘Of course the added benefit was that all the other children in the room soon recognised the word ‘STOP’ by sight!’

(Image from http://cliparts.co/stop-sign)

Talking with children

Draw attention to the positives, such as Bodie likes to fix cars, and I noticed that he gave the car back to Zac after he fixed it.

Encourage the children to share any achievements or other positives they’ve noticed.

Do you notice a common theme here? We are always describing behaviours, not labelling them as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. If you can adopt this habit, it will make a big difference in the way you communicate with children.

We don’t need to preach the gospel of good behaviour. We can let children work this out for themselves. Trust them. Just let them watch, listen, and draw their own conclusions.
When the children feel that they are part of your child with autism’s community, they are able to celebrate with them and delight in their achievements. They may also have ‘lightbulb moments’, as Zara has here. This is what we aim for. This is true inclusion at its best.

Read about the meaning of inclusion here:

Rebecca Thompson’s ‘Inclusion: a perspective’

Notice how Mrs Baker is learning to provide appropriate resources for Bodie to use, based on his abilities and interests, and how she enables him to play with the construction materials outdoors, where his sensory issues will be reduced.

She also chooses resources which will enable Bodie to demonstrate mastery - he can use his strength to pick up the big blocks, and the other children can notice this and admire it.

Note also how Bodie’s food preference is observed once his carers understand; perhaps it’s nutritionally unsound to let a child eat fish fingers for lunch every day, but it is important for us to both choose our battles and reduce the sensory challenges for our child on the spectrum while he assimilates within the new environment.

Battles with children over food choices are generally counterproductive in any case; try to make mealtimes as free of emotional content as possible, including any suggestion of using food preferences as a reward or punishment.

More about food and small children can be found here:

Aunt Annie's Childcare: Food failings and fussy eaters
As your time with your own ‘Bodie’ child goes on, it will be interesting to look back and share with the other children how far you’ve come. In the story, you might like to flip back from this page to page 4 and play ‘spot the difference’.

The difference is not in the behaviour, but in the expression on the children’s faces. Zara’s attitude to Bodie has changed.

It is so important for the other children to understand as fully as possible what is going on, what behaviour means, how they can help, if you aspire to adjusting their attitudes when a child with special needs is included!

Who else likes playing chasings?

Draw to the children’s attention that some of us are just like Bodie Finch in what we like to play. Too often, much is made of differences and very little is made of similarities.
Again, remember - not all children with autism will reveal sudden or surprising abilities. But when they do, celebrate; not in an over-the-top way, but as you would with any other child’s breakthrough.

There are many literacy games you can play with the children’s names - from finding ‘their’ own initial letter in a bag of letter magnets, then writing their names with the first letter missing and asking them to match the right initial with the rest of the name, to making upper and lower case letters out of blocks as happens in the story (you will need a variety of curved blocks of course).

A TEACHER’S STORY

‘This part of the story really happened. I was inviting the children to make the first letter of their names with the blocks, and a child got stuck on J.

My Bodie came over and grabbed the blocks and made the J with absolutely no trouble. I had no idea at all that he was that literate! And no, his real name didn’t start with J!’

Up to the age of 7 years, literacy needs to be a game, not a discipline. Read more here:

Evidence about school starting age
Evidence about early literacy learning
So please, PLAY with letters and words with the children. A recommended book about early literacy is *Mem Fox's Reading Magic*, which shows the many ways that literacy can be taught in a playful way and stresses how important it is to read aloud to children daily.
This is a great example of Bodie making a breakthrough - he’s dealing with frustration by persevering and using words instead of physical responses like throwing, and is motivated to break his one-syllable barrier instead of escaping the stimulus. Well done, Miss Tinker and all! It’s likely that Bodie has been saying Zara’s name inside his head for some time, but has been unable to get his mouth parts to comply.

Eric’s interjection is also a perfect opportunity to discuss how we can hurt each other with words. Start talking about this early, so children can combat bullying later on.

Children can get very discouraged when they see that some children are ‘better at’ some skills than they are. We can push back against that!

We can ‘join the dots’ for children and remind them of how far they’ve come in their learning by telling them stories of when they were younger, and showing them how much better they are at certain skills now. It’s very effective to do this with photos of them when they were younger, if possible.

But we can do this first with Bodie’s story.

**What do you think Bodie Finch is feeling? (Is he sad? Angry? Frustrated?)**

**What does he do about it?**

**What did he do at the beginning when he was frustrated or upset? Let’s go back and see.** (You should be able to find Bodie kicking over blocks, snatching a doll, throwing a chair, climbing the furniture...)
What do you think Zara feels when Bodie tries to say her name? How do we know that? (Look at her face.)

Is it easy for Bodie to say Zara’s name or is it hard for him?

Ask

We’re always telling children to tell the truth, but if we examine what Eric says in this scene - it is 100% true. Yet what he says upsets both Bodie and Zara.

Eric says ‘car starts with C, not Z.’ Is that true?

But Bodie gets frustrated when Eric says that, and Zara says Eric’s being mean. Can we say true things that are mean?

Try to move the discussion towards a goal of asking ourselves two questions before we speak about others:

Is it true?
Is it kind?

This is excellent ‘bully-proofing’ for children. When mean words are said to them, they can respond calmly with either

‘That’s not true’
or
‘that’s not kind’.

But first, they need to understand that a statement can be both true and unkind!

Explain

Zara says ‘Bodie never looks at anyone’. People with autism often dislike making eye contact, and Bodie is no different. Because a person with autism picks up so many messages with their eyes already, making eye contact can be overwhelming. Facial expressions are full of many very tiny signals, and an autistic person picks them all up as separate signals to be translated.

Culture, sensory overload and eye contact
When talking with children with autism, please don’t insist on eye contact! And make the other children aware that it doesn’t mean he’s not friendly.

You can use Amythest’s imagery from the video above to help you explain lack of eye contact to other children.

For Bodie, looking at your eyes feels like staring into a very bright light. It nearly hurts! It’s very uncomfortable!
Let’s not ask him to look at us. It doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to be friends.

For our own ‘Bodie’, it can be very revealing and helpful to let them play with a cheap digital camera. A child who’s been watching us take pictures all year may well already know exactly how the camera operates!

Using the camera as a go-between, the child can ‘capture’ other children’s faces and also things they find interesting in the environment. They can also turn the camera around and capture their own face, which can be fascinating for them. In this way you can both break down the barriers and learn about the child with autism’s interests, which can sometimes be very focussed (to the point of being classed by some as an ‘obsession’).

The concept of ‘not looking at’ can also be interesting to explore. There are certain things we shouldn’t look at, such as the sun. If there’s a solar eclipse coming up, you may need to mention this to the children and explain how even though it’s so far away, the sun can burn your eyes and make you blind.

You can also talk about other cultures where eye contact is considered rude - especially if there are children from that culture in your circle! For example, some Australian Aboriginal mobs find eye contact confronting or disrespectful. You can research the social norms in your own area by making contact with a local elder.

Whose mum or dad says ‘Look at me when I’m talking to you!’?
Whose mum or dad NEVER says that?

Showing children that you can use senses other than sight in friendships can be as easy as playing this game.

‘WHAT IS MY NAME?’ Everyone moves around the room to a random place, then closes their eyes or puts their head down on their arms so they can’t see. Walk around and touch a child
on the head. That child waits a moment till you’ve moved away, then says (still with their head down or eyes shut) ‘What is my name?’ See if the other children know who is speaking just by listening, not looking. The child’s friends will probably answer first!

**Extend**

Invite the children to extend the story of Bodie and Zara. Children can be remarkably creative when given an opportunity!

*What do you think happened after that?*
*What did Zara do next?*
*What did Bodie do next?*

Remind the children of all the other characters in the story and encourage them to use their imaginations.

*Whose name will Bodie try to say next? Or will he try to say some other word?*

*Do you think Bodie will make any more friends? Who else likes doing the same things as Bodie?* (Hint: Bodie often has Zac’s car with him in the pictures.)

*Which other children are friends with each other, do you think?*

You can take these imaginings wherever the children like. Perhaps they’d like to act out the next ‘episode’. Perhaps they’d like you to write down their own next chapter so they can illustrate it.

At the left you can see a four-year-old illustrating a story she and her classmates wrote together. Even very young children can do this with the right help at the start!

Who knows? Maybe your children can make up ‘What Bodie Did Next’, illustrate it and send it to MonkeyRead.me to publish on our website!
An example of how to help children create their own original stories can be found here:

**Aunt Annie’s Childcare: early literacy experiences**

If you scaffold the experience by asking the children in turn:

*Who is the story about?*
*What is the problem to be solved?*
*How do the characters solve the problem?*

and do the transcribing for them, you can help them to unlock their own creativity and literacy.

You can see an earlier stage of the previous picture *above*. Some children used black markers to draw their own pictures and then used watercolours to ‘colour in’ - some painted directly onto the page. They negotiated this, and who they’d work with, themselves. Oh, and that’s a giraffe on the right.
So, once a child with autism shows a capability in literacy, as Bodie has done, where do we go next?

Bodie can clearly:
- Recognise certain letters of the alphabet
- Link the letters to sounds in familiar words
- Relate a letter to the person whose name starts with that letter

On the spot, we would acknowledge Bodie for both his achievement and the effort required to make that important step to two syllables.

*Wow, Bodie. You did it! You said both parts of Zara’s name. And you know how to make a Z with the blocks.*

Notice the absence of value judgments in the above. It’s simply acknowledging what has been achieved today; it isn’t giving it an approval ranking, or comparing it to anyone else’s achievements, or applying your personal opinion to the achievement. Your smile will add all the approval that’s needed.

What else should we do next? We might make sure to have the blocks readily available to play with, as Bodie has shown an interest in them. Who knows? Perhaps the other children will ask Bodie to make ‘their’ letter, and the social side of the experience will be extended.

We would note that Bodie seems to have recognised Zara as an important figure in his life - more so than Zac, whose name also starts with Z. This could be an important social leap if he generally can’t or doesn’t use people’s names.

But be patient! Rome will not be built in a day, and the last thing we want is to place pressure and demands on a child who’s just made a huge leap. Let the experience unfold. Try not to shape it too forcefully.
AUTISM, TECHNOLOGY AND LITERACY

Children with autism who show an interest in literacy can often be ‘freed’ from the limitations of their overwhelming sensitivities by giving them access to computers or iPads loaded with an early literacy program.

However, we need to be cautious and not create an ‘addiction’ or a replacement for human interaction. The technology must remain a tool which can be used to help the child with autism both to have some time out from multiple stimulations and to gain literacy skills (a well-chosen screen is less overwhelming in the ‘teacher’ role than a human face, particularly if it comes with headphones to cancel out distracting and upsetting noises).

This means setting clear time limits on screen time by implementing aids such as timers and multiple regular warnings:

_Bodie, in ten minutes we will turn off the computer and have lunch;_

then

_Bodie, in five minutes we will turn off the computer and have lunch;_

then

_Bodie, in two minutes we will turn off the computer and have lunch - would you like to turn over the timer or will I?_

then

_Look Bodie, the timer is finished so it’s time to turn off the computer and go to the table. Would you like to do it or will I?_

You could also use a ‘finish bag’.

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A TEACHER’S STORY

The computer is always a popular resource in any classroom and I found it particularly useful for one little boy who responded well to scheduling in sections of his play.

First we would play trains, next we would have morning tea and (much to his delight) THEN it would be computer time. However finishing up this time was always difficult for ‘James’.

I remember thinking I would give him a certain amount of time using the egg timer, however in hindsight I wonder if that was just contributing to his anxiety? What was effective however was the ‘finish bag’. A checkered material bag that I would throw over the computer to visually show that it was time for that experience to end.

Of course we would prepare him with a warning and yes there was always a tantrum, but I believe the visual helped to make an abstract concept more concrete for James.
Experience and consultation with the parents will teach you how many warnings are required.

In the readings below you will find some suggestions that walking away from the neurological effects of screens can be as emotionally unsettling as withdrawing from some drugs, so if the boundaries are not clearly and carefully enforced, meltdowns may follow a direction to turn the screen off!

GUIDELINES AROUND SCREEN TIME

How watching screens affects children's learning/development

In the above Ted Talk, you’ll see many important threads unravelled. The take-aways for ‘Bodie’ are:

1. Too much stimulation is bad for both brain development and behaviour.

Remember - children with autism feel negligible stimuli as huge stimuli all the time. Don’t add to that load.

2. Content matters a lot.

So when choosing a literacy program for a child with autism, find something which moves slowly - preferably with each successive step activated by the child - rather than something which involves frenetic movement and sound with fast changes of scene and ‘races against the clock’.

Teacher Tom: why TV is 'relaxing' (caution required)
Some screen time may be beneficial in autism - the science

Support and resources

Here are some recommended apps that are good for children with autism and communication difficulties. Thanks to Kathy Rowan, speech pathologist, for the list.

- My Play Home / My Play School (fabulous for language, and all the little parts in the house / school move and make sounds)
- Toca Boca Hair Salon (good for rewards)
- Super Duper
- First --> Then (take photos of anything with the iPad, then put the photos straight into the templates on the app)
- Proloquo2Go (for children who aren't very verbal but have good comprehension)
- I Speak buttons (good for single messages)
- Sounding Board (like a communication board)
- Fireworks / Bubble Wrap (good for children who are just learning to use the iPad, and / or who are at the stage of learning cause and effect concepts)
And here are two fantastic lists of apps for you to download and keep, also from Kathy:

iPad Apps for special needs
iPad Apps for speech therapy

Support and resources

Find tools to use with a child with autism:

Sue Larkey website
Autism Spectrum website
Raising Children website
List of useful websites by an autism mum
Autism Discovery Tool on Facebook
Asperger Child (with Sustainable Social Skills program)

Support in Australia:

MyChild support
Autism Advice and Support

Understand what the autism spectrum is:

Rebecca Burgess: diagrams and comics to explain autism
Amythest Schraber explains what autism is

Find others to talk to about autism:

Wrong Planet: a website for people with autism
Website for Families of Adults Affected by Asperger's Syndrome

Read more great writing about children with autism:

Floor Pie - blog by mother of a child with autism
The Mighty website - autism

A book about autism for older children, with teachers’ handbook:

Look Me in the Eye by John Elder Robison
Look Me in the Eye teachers’ handbook

An award-winning novel written from the perspective of a 15-yr-old boy with autism (it’s fantastic!):

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime
Visit www.monkeyread.me for this and other supportive and educational books.