

RIVERSIDE SCHOOL
FLEXIBILITY OF THOUGHT GUIDANCE

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This Guidance was reviewed at a meeting of the Governing Board on:

27 March, 2025

Guidance to be reviewed biennially.

Next review date:

Spring term, 2027

Introduction

This document outlines the school's approach to developing flexibility of thought for Riverside students who fall under the Autistic Spectrum Condition category, outlining our aims, objectives and the strategies used.

Rationale

Flexibility of thought 'allows us to imagine situations outside our immediate daily routine' (*National Autistic Society*). We recognise that autistic students can struggle with flexibility of thought at times. This may include associated difficulties in the development of play skills, social imagination and limitations of emotional intelligence. This can manifest as not easily grasping that other people have thoughts and emotions of their own.

Differences with flexibility of thought can manifest themselves in obsessive, repetitive routines and behaviours. Autistic people often have a strong preference for routines and sameness and may find security in rigidity or ritualistic behaviours. These behaviours are not seen as behaviours that always need eliminating; we would only consider this if they were impeding the student's daily life, safety or education. We would seek to modify the behaviours necessary to the individual.

'With its unwritten rules, the world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people' (*National Autistic Society*). Taking this into consideration it can allow for us to see why Autistic people often prefer to have routines so that they are aware of what is going to happen.

How autistic students may experience things differently

Autistic students may have a compromised ability to think flexibly, to problem-solve and predict outcomes on a day-to-day basis. If anxiety levels are heightened for whatever reason, the ability to make or accept choices, problem solve, make decisions and negotiate is impaired.

Differences with flexibility of thought may mean autistic students might find it hard to:

- *Understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and actions*
- *Predict what will happen next, or what could happen next*
- *Understand the concept of danger*
- *Engage in imaginative play and activities: autistic students may enjoy some imaginative play but prefer to act out the same scenes each time*
- *Prepare for change and plan for the future*
- *Cope in new or unfamiliar situations*
- *Generalise skills across different settings*
- *Multi-tasking*
- *Decision- and choice-making*

These differences in flexible thinking may present a barrier to learning for autistic students , and may present as:

- *Distressed behaviour*
- *Repetitive behaviours (such as; lining up objects, pacing up and down, repetitive questioning or activities etc*
- *A difficulty in empathising with others*
- *Limited ability to problem-solve*
- *Limited ability to accept others' viewpoints*
- *Restricted play skills*
- *Withdrawal from unfamiliar people, activities or places*
- *Obsessive interests*
- *Reliance on routines*
- *Resistance to change (desire to preserve sameness)*
- *Difficulties with self-organisational skill*
- *Difficulties managing unstructured times and transitions*
- *Limited imitation skills*
- *Lack of social imagination*

Managing change

Change is a contributing factor to causing anxiety. A person with ASC can find any kind of change difficult, however significant or insignificant it appears to others.

There are many changes that require attention and support such as:

- *Changing position of (classroom) furniture*
- *Changing the timetable*
- *Changing teaching staff*
- *Eating different foods*
- *Eating and drinking from different containers*
- *Wearing different clothing*
- *Seasonal changes*
- *Changing travel routes*
- *Micro and macro transitions*
- *Crisis management*
- *Environmental changes*
- *Change to structure and routine*
- *Community outings*

Implementation

At Riverside School we address differences with flexibility of thought through various teaching strategies: these strategies are identified and recorded in a variety of formats. Some of the daily teaching techniques are listed below. This however, is not an exhaustive list and we will always seek new and other ways to meet individual needs:

- *Visual timetables and schedules*
- *Alternative and augmentative communication systems*
- *Choice-making boards / systems to support students to make choices*
- *Offering limited choices and sabotaging events (to encourage problem-solving and seeking alternatives)*
- *Teaching across different settings to encourage generalisation skills*
- *Teaching to ask for help*
- *Teaching to request breaks, identifying time out, promoting self-regulating behaviour*
- *Using a surprise symbol on the timetable (pre-planned changes)/ 'oops' symbol on PODD pages and ALDs*
- *Behaviour techniques and management strategies (see behaviour policy)*
- *Opportunities to negotiate throughout the day (now/next schedules / token boards e.g. I am working towards...)*
- *Building sensory activities into the daily routine to reduce anxiety (e.g. sensory toys, cycling, softplay)*
- *Effective transitions between activities is embedded into daily routines so that unexpected change can be managed (teaching the concept of 'finished')*
- *Social stories (where relevant)*
- *Social skills teaching*
- *Setting clear and consistent boundaries for the behaviour (limiting frequency of object / time or place)*
- *Exploring alternative, more appropriate activities that have the same function as the repetitive behaviour*
- *Using obsessions to motivate and reward so to develop skills, increase social opportunities and improve self esteem*
- *Relaxation techniques*
- *SMILE therapy to encourage students to be aware of how their actions and what they say in specific situations will impact on others.*

Special interests

Special interests can provide great motivations for students on the autistic spectrum. Riverside School often use special interests to motivate our students. We do not view a student's special interest as something we need to eradicate (unless there are H&S reasons).

Use of special interests' books, for students to record information/pictures they find about their special interest, are encouraged. Students are also encouraged to make presentations about their special interests in assemblies.

By incorporating special interests into learning, students are often able to develop communication, social, and problem-solving skills, as well as build confidence.

Planning and recording

Information relating to a student's difficulties in relation to rigidity and flexibility of thought may form part of the following records:

- *Annual review and EHCP Outcomes*
- *Individual Key Skills*
- *A student with ASC may have individual Key Skills targets addressing issues related to the condition not addressed in every day classroom activities. These are recorded and evaluated in Solar*
- *Individual Positive Behaviour Profiles*
- *Individual meal time plans (some students eat separately)*
- *Communication, behavior and Sensory Profiles*

Staff training

All staff receive ongoing training on all aspects of autism including use of visual structure, preparing for transitions, special interests and diagnoses of autism.

In addition, primarily for students in Team 3, many staff are trained in Attention Autism.

Monitoring

Regular monitoring not only ensure progress but also help identify areas where strategies may need to be adjusted or further developed to support the student's needs. At Riverside School we ensure that opportunities for developing flexibility of thinking, choice-making and problem solving are pursued and evaluated. This is done through:

- *Annual reviews / Transition Plans*
- *IEP recording sheets*
- *Lesson evaluations*
- *End of term assessments*
- *Monitoring communication systems*
- *Certificates recognising progress in this area are stored in folders in class*
- *Monitoring class planning files*

Links to other areas of learning

Flexibility of thought links into all areas of learning, all areas of the curriculum and supports policies and programmes such as:

- Behaviour Management policy
- Positive Behaviour Profiles
- Communication Policy
- Communication Profiles
- PSHEE Curriculum