



DURANTS SCHOOL – POLICY DOCUMENT

Flexibility of Thought

October 2025

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Introduction

The purpose of this policy is to highlight one of the major difficulties encountered by autistic students and how it affects their ability to learn and to detail the supportive strategies we use with these students in order to promote their learning and development.

Rationale

"Flexibility of thought allows us to understand and predict other peoples' behaviour; make sense of abstract ideas and to imagine situations outside of our immediate daily routine". (National Autistic Society, 2008). The typically developing child initially learns through imaginative play and imitating actions they experience and understand in their immediate environment later on this transforms in to a more abstract form of thinking and learning. This natural ability is impaired in the student with autism.

At Durants we recognise that students with autism have difficulty with flexibility of Thought, a diagnosis of autism means that the student has problems in three areas of development communication, social interactions and imagination (flexibility of thought), also known as the 'triad of impairments' (Lorna wing, 1996). Students with autism have difficulties in using imagination to solve problems and in predicting outcomes in day to day life. Their ability to generalise from one experience to another is limited as is their ability to anticipate new experiences not already encountered. Learning activities that require imagination or abstract thinking can be difficult for them to engage in, these difficulties with flexible thinking represent a significant barrier to learning for students with autism. Impaired flexibility of thought can be seen in the following behaviours:

- difficulty in sequencing or processing events
- difficulty in linking separate parts to create a coherent whole
- all absorbing interests and obsessions
- Restricted play skills
- Dependency on routines and rituals in order to secure familiar outcomes
- Difficulty with transitions between environments or activities
- Difficulty with changes in the familiar environment, people or routines
- Poor levels of imitation and incidental learning skills
- Fear of change

Aims

At Durants we aim to create and maintain a learning environment that is safe and secure, that helps reduce levels of anxiety, while at the same time is flexible enough to enable students to develop more flexibility themselves and better coping strategies to improve their independence and enjoyment of life. Supportive Strategies Used at Durants

- Use of National Autism Society's approved strategies including structure, positivity, empathy, low arousal, to guide all planning and interventions used with Autistic student (see Autism Policy).
- Visual aids used frequently and flexibly, e.g. communication in print, photo's, pictures, packaging, objects of reference etc.
- Visual support in the forms of timetable and 'now, next' card, positive reinforcement symbols and PECS books/folders to encourage choosing at snack and leisure times, available to every autistic student.

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- Language kept minimal and to the point,
- TEACCH principles adopted in classroom environment with workstations, visual timetable, PECS and structure evident,
- Pupil positive behaviour Support Plans provide tailored, specific information that is updated regularly and shared with parents and all professionals working with that individual. This means that
- Every student can expect a consistent, positive approach from the adults that support them.
- IEP's are written and evaluated three times a year, shared with parents and the class team and other professionals that come into direct contact with the student
- Use of social stories and comic strips.
- Regular autism specific training provided to staff e.g. TEACCH, Intensive Interaction, PECS, Total communication.
- Different staff working with the student encouraged,
- Preparing students for transitions using photos, maps (see Transitions Policy).
- Regular educational visits outside of school
- Intensive Interaction (II) is offered to some autistic students to encourage early communication, social interaction and flexibility of thought.

At Durants as well as using these planned strategies outlined above we also see the long term benefit of the inevitable, unplanned day today breaks with routine, seeing them as an opportunity for the student to demonstrate and learn coping strategies when faced with the unexpected – an important life skill for our pupils.