

Using Check-In Cards to Support Communication

Many autistic children and young people find it difficult to express how they are feeling or what they need, particularly in busy or overwhelming environments. Verbal communication can sometimes feel like too much, and non-verbal alternatives provide a supportive way for students to express themselves without speaking.

Check-in cards offer a simple, visual system that allows students to communicate their emotions, needs, and preferences in a way that feels safe and accessible. These cards can help reduce stress, increase autonomy, and improve understanding between students and those supporting them.

This resource explains how to introduce and use check-in cards effectively. The cards are designed to be flexible, meaning they can be adapted to suit the child's individual needs. Some students may use all the cards, while others may only select a few that are relevant to them.

How to Use Check-In Cards

- **Introduce the cards gradually:** Start with just a few and add more as the child becomes comfortable using them.
- **Encourage personalisation:** Some children may want to create their own versions of the cards that better reflect their experiences.
- **Use them flexibly:** They can be used in the classroom, at home, or in social settings.
- **Make them portable:** Print and laminate the cards so the child can keep them in a pocket, keyring, or lanyard for easy access.
- **Respect individual interpretations:** Each child may use the cards differently, and that's okay. Work together to build a shared understanding.
- **Check in over time:** Regularly review whether the system is still working for the child and make adjustments if needed.

Understanding the Check-In Cards

The check-in cards are **all circles**, designed to be easily recognised and understood. The first three cards use a **traffic light system** to indicate general wellbeing, while the remaining cards use **symbols** to communicate specific needs.

Traffic Light Check-In Cards

Green – I'm okay

The student is feeling good and ready to engage. No immediate support is needed.

Amber – I'm struggling

The student is finding something difficult and may need help or a check-in soon.

Red – I need a break

The student is feeling overwhelmed and needs space or time to reset before continuing.

Additional Check-In Cards

● Quiet Time Needed

The student needs a low-stimulation environment with minimal noise and interaction.

● I Need Help

The student requires support but may not feel comfortable asking verbally.

● I Need Space

The student wants to be left alone for a while and does not want to engage in conversation.

● I Have a Question

The student needs clarification but prefers to ask in writing or at a later time.

● I Need a Movement Break

The student feels restless or unfocused and would benefit from a short walk, stretch, or physical activity.

● I Need Sensory Support

The student requires access to sensory tools such as headphones, fidget items, or a weighted blanket.

● I Need to Work Somewhere Quieter

The student is struggling with noise or distractions and would benefit from a quieter space.

● I'm Overwhelmed – Please Check In Later

The student is too overwhelmed to communicate in the moment but will engage when ready.

Final Thoughts

Check-in cards provide an accessible, non-verbal way for autistic children to express themselves in a world that often demands verbal communication. When used effectively, they can help students advocate for their needs, feel more in control, and build confidence in their ability to communicate in ways that work for them.

Each child will use these cards differently, so take the time to explore and adapt the system to meet their needs. Over time, these simple tools can foster stronger relationships and a more inclusive, understanding environment.

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