

Supporting Autistic Girls: A Guide to Self-Advocacy Scripts

Many autistic girls struggle to express their needs due to past experiences of being misunderstood, fear of being dismissed, or difficulty finding the right words. Supporting them in developing self-advocacy skills helps build confidence, independence, and self-belief. This guide provides structured scripts and adaptable templates to help autistic girls communicate their needs effectively. Here are a few pointers to help you put it into practice:

- **Model and practise:** Role-play different scenarios to help students feel comfortable using the scripts.
- **Offer choices:** Provide multiple script variations so students can choose what feels best for them.
- **Encourage personalisation:** Support students to write their own versions.
- **Validate efforts:** Praise students for self-advocacy, even if imperfect.

To support autistic girls in developing self-advocacy skills, it's helpful to focus on key moments where speaking up can make a difference. The sections below provide structured examples to guide these conversations.

Asking for Help

Self-advocacy starts with recognising when help is needed and feeling confident enough to ask for it. Many autistic girls may hesitate to ask for support due to past experiences of being dismissed or wanting to appear independent. Providing clear, structured ways for them to request help can empower them to access the support they need without feeling like they are failing.

Below are some ways students might ask for help, ranging from gentle to more direct.

Gentle approach:

- "I'm finding this tricky. Could you explain it another way?"
- "I'm not sure I understand. Can you give me an example?"
- "I want to try this on my own, but could you check in with me later?"

More direct:

- "I need help with this part. Can you help me now?"
- "I'm struggling with this section. Can you walk me through it?"
- "I don't get this. Can we go over it together?"

Assertive:

- "I've tried to figure this out, but I'm stuck. I need you to go over it with me."
- "I need more time to understand this properly. Can we review it again?"
- "I need step-by-step guidance to get this right. Can you help me?"

Non-verbal:

- Holding up a help card.
- Writing down the question instead of saying it aloud.
- Pointing to the section of work that's confusing.

Tip: Encourage students to practise asking for help in low-pressure situations first.

Setting Boundaries

Autistic girls often struggle with setting and maintaining boundaries, especially in social situations. They may feel pressured to comply with others' expectations or struggle to communicate their needs directly. Encouraging them to set boundaries in ways that feel comfortable can help them build self-respect and confidence while fostering healthy interactions.

Here are some ways students can assert their personal boundaries in a way that feels comfortable for them.

Gentle approach:

- "I'd like to work alone right now, but I'll join in later."
- "I need some space, but I'd like to talk later."
- "I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed. Can I sit somewhere quieter?"

More direct:

- "Please don't touch my things without asking."
- "I don't like being hugged. Can we do a high five instead?"
- "I need you to give me some personal space right now."

Assertive:

- "I need you to respect my space. Please stop touching my things."
- "I am not comfortable with physical contact. Please don't do that again."
- "I need my boundaries to be respected. I will move away if this continues."

Non-verbal:

- Using a boundary card to indicate personal space needs.
- Stepping away from the person encroaching on space.
- Holding up a hand in a "stop" gesture.

Tip: Reinforce that setting boundaries is not rude—it's self-care.

Managing Sensory Overload

Sensory overload is a common challenge for autistic students, but many feel unable to communicate their discomfort. By providing multiple ways for students to express their sensory needs—both verbally and non-verbally—you can help them navigate overwhelming situations while maintaining a sense of control.

These scripts provide ways for students to communicate when they are feeling overwhelmed by sensory input.

Gentle approach:

- "The noise is a bit much—can I sit somewhere quieter?"
- "I'm feeling overwhelmed—can I take a break?"
- "The lights are too bright. Can I move seats?"

More direct:

- "I need my headphones because it's too loud."
- "I need a break now because the noise is too much."

- "I can't focus with this background noise—can I work somewhere else?"

Assertive:

- "This environment is too overwhelming for me. I need a quiet space now."
- "I need you to lower your voice—it's too loud for me."
- "If this noise continues, I'll have to leave the room."

Non-verbal:

- Pointing to a quiet space.
- Using a sensory break card.
- Wearing noise-cancelling headphones.

Tip: Help students identify and communicate their sensory needs before overwhelm happens.

Expressing Preferences in Group Work

Group work can be particularly challenging for autistic girls, who may find unstructured collaboration overwhelming or struggle with social expectations. Supporting them in expressing their preferences allows them to participate in ways that feel comfortable and meaningful, ensuring their contributions are valued without undue stress.

Below are different ways students can express their needs when working in groups.

Gentle approach:

- "Can I do this part on my own and share my ideas later?"
- "I'd rather listen first before I speak."
- "I like to take notes instead of speaking up—can I do that?"

More direct:

- "I'd prefer to write my thoughts instead of speaking in front of the group."
- "Can we agree on roles so I can do a part I feel comfortable with?"
- "I prefer smaller discussions—can we split into pairs?"

Assertive:

- "I don't feel comfortable speaking in a large group. I will contribute in writing instead."
- "I need a clear role so I know what's expected of me."
- "I will participate in a way that works for me, but I won't be forced to speak aloud."

Non-verbal:

- Writing responses instead of verbalising them.
- Holding up a card indicating preferred group work roles.
- Pointing to a preferred way to contribute.

Tip: Offer flexible ways for students to contribute, such as written responses instead of verbal ones.

Asking for a Break

Knowing when to take a break is an important self-regulation skill, yet many autistic girls feel guilty or anxious about stepping away when they need to. Creating a culture where breaks are normalised and providing structured ways to request them can make it easier for students to self-advocate while maintaining their wellbeing.

Here are some ways students might ask for a break when they need one.

Gentle approach:

- "I'm feeling a bit tired—can I take a short break?"
- "I need a moment to breathe. Can I step outside for a minute?"
- "I'd like to take a quiet break—where's a good place to go?"

More direct:

- "I need a break now because I'm feeling overwhelmed."
- "I can't concentrate right now—can I take five minutes to reset?"
- "This is too much for me. I need to step away for a bit."

Assertive:

- "I need a break immediately. I will come back when I'm ready to continue."
- "I cannot focus or work effectively right now—I need to leave the room for a moment."
- "I have the right to take a break when I feel overwhelmed. I will return when I'm able to."

Non-verbal:

- Holding up a break card or showing a designated signal.
- Leaving the classroom calmly after pre-arranging a break plan with staff.
- Writing a note asking for a break instead of speaking aloud.

Tip: Ensure students know **where** they can take breaks and **how** to communicate their need for one in a way that feels safe and comfortable for them.

Common Challenges & Solutions

Even with the right tools, some students may find self-advocacy challenging. Below are common difficulties that autistic girls might experience when using these scripts, along with practical solutions to help support them.

Challenge 1: A student struggles to use the scripts even when prompted.

Solution: Start with **low-stakes practice** in safe, familiar situations (e.g., choosing a classroom job or requesting a preferred seat). Reinforce that **small steps matter** and celebrate any effort to communicate a need.

Challenge 2: A student shuts down instead of advocating for themselves.

Solution: If verbal advocacy is too overwhelming, offer **non-verbal options** (e.g., help cards, gestures, written notes). Ensure that **breaks and self-regulation tools** are always available as a backup.

Challenge 3: A student worries that advocating for themselves will upset others.

Solution: Reassure them that **self-advocacy is not being rude**—it's about **ensuring their needs are met**. Model how to use **calm, respectful communication** and discuss real-life examples of when advocating is important.

Challenge 4: A student only uses the scripts in certain settings (e.g., with trusted staff) but struggles elsewhere.

Solution: Encourage **gradual generalisation**—start with **safe, familiar environments**, then expand to **different settings and people**. Role-play scenarios so students feel more prepared for new situations.

Challenge 5: A student forgets or avoids using the scripts when they need them most.

Solution: Embed self-advocacy into **daily routines** (e.g., morning check-ins, structured reflections). Visual reminders like **script cue cards** or **prompt posters** can also help reinforce their use in real time.

Self-advocacy is a skill that takes time to develop. Encourage students to start small, build confidence, and celebrate their progress. The more they practise, the more natural it will feel to express their needs.

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