

Dudley College

Making our college more 'autism friendly'



Why we wanted to make ourselves more 'autism friendly'

During the last three academic years, we have had an increase in students on the autistic spectrum. This has led us to set a goal of becoming an 'autism friendly' further education college. We saw this as an important priority in improving the effectiveness of our teaching and learning.

Many of our learners are enrolling on mainstream courses where, unlike within our specialist provision, our staff members are not experienced in managing and coping with behavioural issues of learners on the autistic spectrum. We soon realised that staff were not coping and this was having an adverse effect upon the experience of our students.

We were lucky to have a member of our Additional Learning Support team who has a post graduate qualification in autism who was willing and indeed keen to raise its profile of within the college. As we developed our thinking, with the support of our expert, we also saw a need to provide both physical and temporal 'space' for our students who are on the autistic spectrum.

What we did

We have done three things to address this:

1. Cross college staff development

We implemented a development programme to raise the autism awareness of staff across college and curriculum areas drawing on our qualified member of staff. We decided to go for a two pronged approach where we offered sessions to teams to raise their awareness of both autism and dyslexia.

Over the past year we have trained 80 staff across the college including business support staff, Educational Support Assistants, Additional Learning Support Instructors, mentors and teachers.

The training covers the following areas:

- What is autism?
- How to recognise it?
- Understanding how autistic difficulties affect the learner(s)
- Strategies for supporting autistic learners in the classroom

2. Creating an 'AS Base' for our students

We have also set up an 'Autistic Spectrum Base' at one of our campuses which will be replicated at our Broadway site from September 2012. The AS Base was set up by learners and completely learner led with some support from our autism specialist.

The Base provides students with a social space they are comfortable in as well as a quiet room for when the stress of college becomes too much and they need to 'take a break'. It is also used as a venue for services such as mentors and Brook Advisory clinic to reach vulnerable learners who may not attend our cross college pastoral events.



3. Our 'Take a Break' card

We are piloting a 'Take a Break' card for learners who are on the autistic spectrum and sometimes need time out of sessions. This means that staff know when learners are becoming stressed and anxious, and it enables the learners to leave the class before stress and anxiety reach a climax.

What the benefits have been

- The profile of autism has been raised right across college.
- Staff are more confident having students on the autistic spectrum in their class and understand some of the behaviours they may display and how best to support them.
- Students on the autistic spectrum have a 'safe place' to go a break time or when the stresses of college life become too much
- Mentors and external agencies are able to access learners on the autistic spectrum who may find it difficult to access wider college events or venues

Hints and tips on creating an 'AS Base'

- Ensure it is learner led so they feel ownership.
- It doesn't need to cost a fortune: learners just need to have a space which they feel is theirs.

Want to know more?

More information about Dudley College is available on the [college website](#). For more information on our approach to being 'autism friendly', contact Diana Martin, Centre Manager ESOL and ALS, at Diana.martin@dudleycol.ac.uk or on 01384 363940.