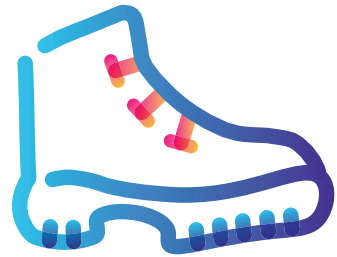
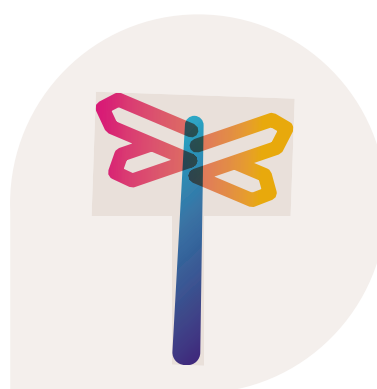
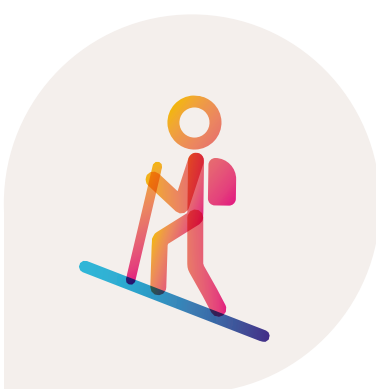


The Duke of Edinburgh's Award: Autism toolkit



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Introduction

Embarking on the journey of achieving a Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE) is a transformative experience, offering young people the chance to develop skills, build resilience and foster a spirit of adventure. For autistic participants, this journey can be both enriching and challenging.

The DofE autism toolkit is designed to provide comprehensive support, ensuring that every participant can successfully navigate the various sections of their Award while accommodating their individual needs.

This toolkit offers tailored advice to Leaders and Supervisors, as well as sharing tips and perspectives from autistic young people in their own words. Every young person's pathway to complete their Award is a deeply personal journey through one's own capabilities and potential.

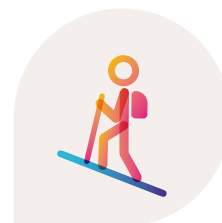
From planning shorter, more manageable walks in the Expedition section to incorporating interests into the Skills and Physical section, personalised adaptations to the DofE programme ensure that every participant can enjoy and benefit from their Award. Moreover, this toolkit addresses the sensory and logistical challenges that can make a significant difference for autistic participants, with a particular focus on adaptations to the Expedition section. We suggest practical steps such as practising walks to build confidence, choosing appropriate clothing to meet sensory needs, allowing the presence of a supportive adult, and bringing comfort items from home.

Leaders are encouraged to explore flexible navigation methods and diverse accommodation options, making the Expedition section not just a challenge to be overcome, but an experience to be enjoyed.

This toolkit is more than a guide; it is a commitment to inclusivity and understanding. It aims to empower Leaders to use strategies such as clear communication, a structured approach and building in downtime. It recognises that while autistic participants face some challenges, they also bring unique strengths and perspectives that can enrich a DofE experience.

The DofE autism toolkit contains a wealth of resources designed to make The Duke of Edinburgh's Award a rewarding, adaptable and accessible adventure for all.

Expedition top tips



In the Expedition section, participants, Leaders and Supervisors should consider and explore the best options for their group, acknowledging the individual needs of each participant. The expedition requirements enable this, but it is important to discuss any concerns before the expedition so each participant can be supported. The following are top tips for participants:

How can you adapt your expedition?

Shorter distance walks

It's perfectly fine to plan shorter distance walks for your DoFE expeditions and focus on what feels manageable and enjoyable. You have to spend at least 50% of your time journeying, but the rest can be spent looking into a team goal of your choice. Your practice and training walks will help to work out your average walking speed with your rucksacks and allow you to plan an achievable expedition length.

Pack weight

Remember that you won't necessarily be carrying a heavy pack. Over the course of your training and practice expeditions, you will work out what weight suits you best and will allow you to complete your expedition. Did you know your Leader can transport heavy equipment to your campsite for you? Ask them about ways to adapt your pack weight to suit you.

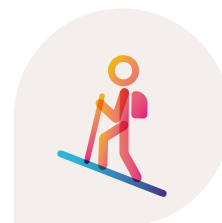
Accompanying adults

Having the support of a parent or carer with you at night or during the expedition is an adjustment your Leader can investigate. Their support can often make the experience more comfortable for you. On some expeditions, you may have an adult closely supervising you so you're never alone as a group.

Practice walks

Regular practice walks will help develop friendships and build confidence ahead of your qualifying expedition. This way, you won't be completing your qualifying expedition with participants who are completely unfamiliar to you.

Expedition top tips



Food preparation

Some young people may have concerns about cross-contamination and food. You can prepare your own favourite foods in your own way. You can also practise all your meals at home before you go.

Accommodation

There are lots of accommodation options available for DofE; it's not just tents. You can also stay inside, or even return home, if that's what you and your Leader decide is appropriate for you.

Accessible campsites

When planning your expedition, you can choose campsites with nicer facilities eg toilets and showers.

Alternative navigation

Instead of route cards, you could plan your route using photographs at different grid references or by annotating a map. Alternative navigation methods can play to your strengths, such as visual or audio learning.

Clothing

Consider your sensory needs when choosing your clothing. You will figure out what clothing works best for you on your practical and training expeditions.

Comfort items

Bring comfort items like a tactile toy, stuffed animal or sensory cushion.

Equipment kit guide

The [DofE Expedition Kit Guide](#) is aimed at helping participants and parents to choose and then find the right kit for their expeditions. Each category includes key information, expert tips and money-saving ideas, as well as useful links to online resources.



General DofE top tips



Include your parents

Involve your parent or carer in planning and helping you choose your activities. This will mean you can ask them for support later on.

Special interests

You can plan your sections around what interests you; there are no prescribed activities so you can tailor your programme to ensure you incorporate your hobbies. This is especially important for the Skills section, so be sure to talk to your Leader about how to incorporate your hobbies into your Award.

Volunteer together

When choosing your Volunteering section, why not choose to do it with others? You could volunteer with people in your existing friendship group or branch out to make new connections.

Young carer

You can be a young carer for your Volunteering section, so if you care for a family member at home, then you can count this towards your DofE.

Support

Your DofE Award is your own challenge which you complete independently, but your Leader is always available to support you. If you feel like you need more help with your sections, then you can contact them.

Personalised programme

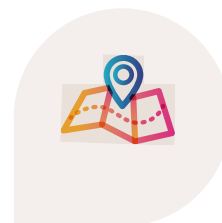
For all your DofE activities, you will be assessed based on your own personal abilities, not as part of a team. This includes the Physical section so you can set a goal that's achievable for you and suited to your abilities.

Getting to know you

A great way to let your Leader and other participants know your individual needs, preferences and background is to create a one page "getting to know me" profile.



Participants' DofE journey



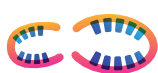
Your journey to your Award is an exciting one. Below, we've mapped out the different stages of your journey with some tips and online resources linked to help along the way.

1. Your first step is to complete the registration information requested by your DofE Leader at your school/centre. This may be in an online or paper form depending on which organisation you are completing your Award with.

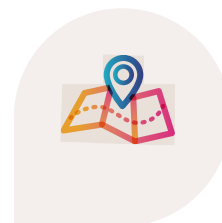
- TIP: Check with your Leader for any upcoming deadlines and ask them to give you helpful reminders.
- [Why do the DofE? - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award](#)
- [How old do I need to be? - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)
- [How much will it cost? - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)

2. Look out for your "Welcome to eDofE" email which you should receive the day your Leader creates your account on eDofE. Your Leader may also give the login details to you. Your email will include your username and password.

- TIP: Check your junk folder.
- TIP: The email address is the one you used to register.
- [After signup - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)



Participants' DofE journey



3. Log into your eDofE account (Web Browser or App).

- TIP: Keep a note of your login details.
- [eDofE | How to use the DofE App - Bing video](#)
- [eDofE | DofE app - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award](#)
- [Do DofE - eDofE - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award](#)
- [Log in \(eDofE\) - DofE](#)
- [Basic info \(eDofE\) - DofE](#)

4. Choose your activities and find an Assessor. An Assessor should be an expert in the activity and can be anyone except a family member.

- [Ideas for activities - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)
- [Timescales - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)
- [Choosing Assessors - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)
- [How do I change my section timescales? - DofE \(edofe.org\)](#)
- [Sections - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)

5. Input your programme planners for each section. Provide enough information that your Leader can check that it meets the criteria and give approval.

- [How do I add a programme planner? - DofE \(edofe.org\)](#)

Participants' DofE journey



- 6.** Await DofE Leader's approval for programme planners.
- TIP: Please check your Leader agrees your activity before you use it for DofE.

- 7.** Start your activity(s). Make sure you keep an activity log so you can track your progress and provide this as evidence at the end of your sections. Have a look at the Expedition Kit Guide ahead of your expedition so you are prepared.
- TIP: Check in with your Assessor to check your goals are on track.
 - TIP: Add supporting evidence (optional).
 - [Activity Logs - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](https://www.dofe.org/activity-logs)
 - [DofE KitGuide April 2024.pdf](#)

- 8.** When the section timescale is finished, ask your Assessor for your Assessor Report. An Assessor Report is the only compulsory piece of evidence.
- [How do I add evidence as a participant? \(eDofE\) - DofE](#)
 - [How do I submit a section? - DofE \(edofe.org\)](#)

- 9.** Your DofE Leader will check all evidence and sections.
- TIP: Check your eDofE account for messages.



Participants' DofE journey



10. When all sections have a tick, the Award will be sent to the Award Verifier at your school/centre.

- TIP: Verifiers may query evidence. Please check for messages on eDofE.
- [How do I view/send messages? \(eDofE\) - DofE](#)
- TIP: Gold Awards have two stages of verification so may take longer.

11. When your Award has been approved, you will receive an email.

- TIP: Check your name, email and home address are still correct.

12. Bronze and Silver Award certificates and badges come from your school/centre. Gold certificates and badges are sent from the DofE Gold Award Celebration Event Team.

- [My achievements - Participants - DofE \(edofe.org\)](#)
- [Achieving your award - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)
- [Sectional certificates and Certificate of achievement - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)
- [Gold Award celebration events - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)
- [Certificates and badges - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award \(dofe.org\)](#)
- [After DofE - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award](#)



Tips for Leaders from autistic young people



Have a read of tips for Leaders from Grace pictured above, Daphne and Ats.

1

Timeouts

It's important that you let us have our own time and space to refresh and recharge. Try not to overload us or keep us continuously busy. We appreciate downtime on our own.

2

Bite-sized chunks

Breaking down activities and instructions into bite-sized chunks can be very helpful. Over-stimulation is a real thing and it can feel incredibly intense. If over-stimulated, we can sometimes shutdown or experience a meltdown.

3

Behaviour

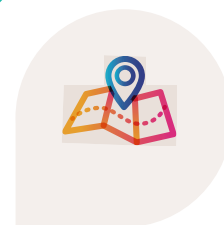
Speaking of meltdowns, it's really important to understand autistic behaviour. A meltdown isn't a tantrum. It's an involuntary, overwhelming physical reaction to sensory overload (bright lights, loud noises) or intense emotional stress. It can look different in different people, but can often be expressed through crying, yelling, physical movements like rocking, or withdrawing. It can be preceded by anxiety or pacing.

4

Socialising

Be aware that autistic people can find aspects of socialising challenging. Social niceties such as hand shaking or maintaining eye contact can be really difficult for us.

Tips for Leaders from autistic young people



5

Language (clear and concise)

Choose your words carefully when speaking to us. Say what you mean and be literal, clear and concise. We appreciate clarity and can find explanations that are overly complex or feature too many idioms a challenge.

6

Movement

Stimming or self-stimulating behaviour is something we do to help us maintain our focus on what we are doing. It includes arm or hand-flapping, finger-flicking, rocking, jumping, spinning or twirling, head-banging and complex body movements. It may also be the repetitive use of an object, such as flicking a rubber band or twirling a piece of string, or repetitive activities involving the senses (such as repeatedly feeling a particular texture).

7

Don't make assumptions

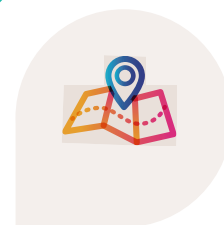
All autistic people have their own unique challenges, needs and preferences. We appreciate not being put in a box and generalised. We are all different.

8

Listen

Taking the time to listen and understand our needs is important. Try not to talk over us and make sure we are given the space to express ourselves fully.

Tips for Leaders from autistic young people



9

Time to reflect

After instructions or explanations, allow us some time to think and process. Sometimes autistic people's responses take longer.

10

Regular communications

Communicate with participants often to make sure they are updated on everything they need to know. Regular reminders of deadlines are really appreciated.

11

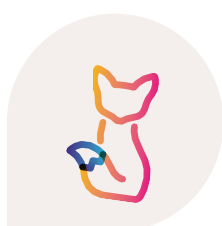
Preparation time

Make sure to help participants prepare for the expedition well before it happens; that way, if they lack skills like map reading, they have time to practise them.

12

Structured approaches

Be clear about specifics such as expedition details (dates, equipment, groups, and everything else) so we know what to buy and can prepare with our group in advance.



Communication tips for talking to autistic people



1

Use their name

This will help you to gain the person's attention and to tell them that you are talking to them specifically.

2

Ask about their preferred method of communication

A person may understand the content of the conversation but may not respond verbally. Give them the option to respond using alternative communication methods, such as texting or writing things down.

3

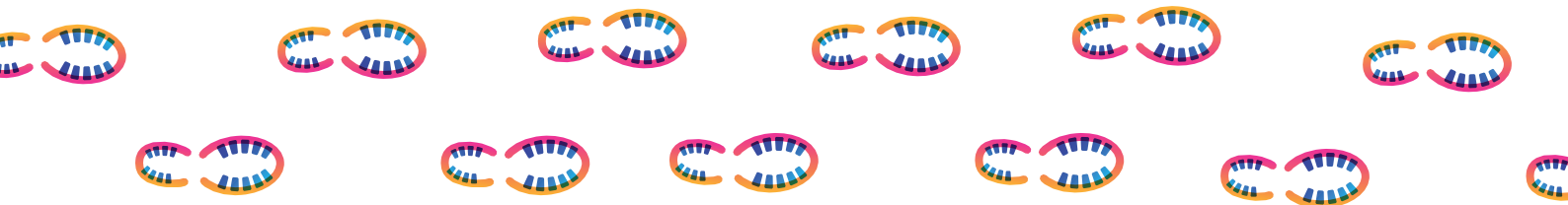
Allow for processing time

Say less and speak slower. It may help to pause between words and phrases to give the person time to process what you have said and to give them a chance to think of a response.

4

Ask questions

If you ask a question, wait for a response. If someone doesn't respond immediately, do not assume they haven't heard or understood you. Try to avoid asking too many questions in a short timeframe. Also try to avoid asking open-ended questions by making your questions more specific. For example, ask "Did you enjoy your walk on the beach last Wednesday?" rather than "How was your week?". It may also help to structure your question by offering options or choices.



Communication tips for talking to autistic people



5

Take time to listen

Taking the time to listen lets a person know that you care about and support them. If you do not understand what the person is saying, ask them to clarify what they are trying to convey.

6

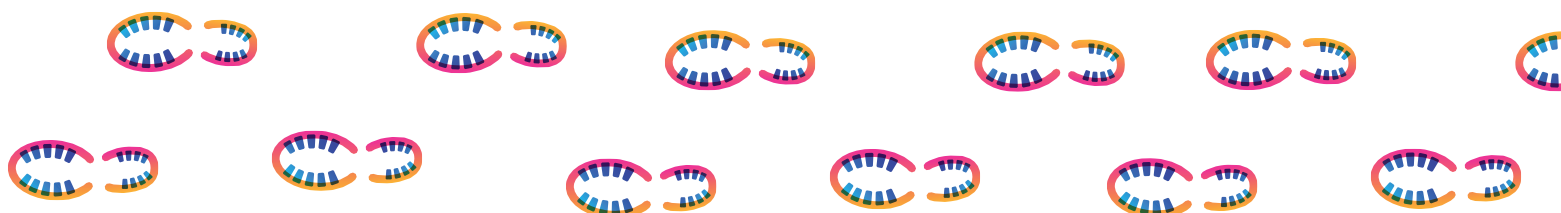
Be clear

Say what you mean and be literal, clear and concise. Avoid using irony, sarcasm, figurative language, rhetorical questions, idioms or exaggeration, as these can be taken literally. If you do use these things, explain what you have said, and be clear about what you really mean.

7

Rely less on non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication includes eye contact, facial expressions, gestures and body language.



Helen's story as a group Leader

"Listening to each participant, often linking in with their interests, was important."

My group of five autistic girls and young women were supported by a parent from the start, attending the first meeting together to plan their Bronze Award. As well as choosing their sections carefully, the group had to get to know each other. This was achieved by having about 12 practice walks. Each walk developed the ability to walk further, be more independent with their map-reading and try new places to walk. When getting to know each other, the group also talked about what they were doing for their sections and how they were getting on. After some practice walks, we planned the expedition or practised cooking, putting tents up or packing a rucksack. This time together built up trust and meant the adults knew the individuals too, important for forward-planning.

Choosing what to do in each section was challenging, but with imagination and flexibility, we got there. Listening to each participant, often linking in with their interests, was important. Skills seemed an easy section to choose as most had a favourite pastime, be it crocheting, knitting or playing guitar. The Physical section was harder as no one was in a club and most lived rurally. Walking, dog running and roller-skating were favourites, being checked by those at home. There is a brutal honesty to being autistic, so timings were very accurate. For volunteering, we organised group beach cleans, which allowed us to invite other branch members who might be interested in The Duke of Edinburgh's Award in the future. It also gave us the opportunity to engage with the public, who were curious about our activities, with the girls serving as excellent role models.

The expedition was recced by two Leaders as the area was not local to the group. It was important to anticipate what may happen so that adjustments could be made. Photographs were taken for a participant who found reading difficult, so she could be part of the navigation. Day sacks were carried and heavy packs left at the campsite.



Helen's story as a group Leader

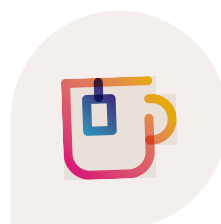
"Each group member made so much progress individually as well as within the group."

On day one, there was a halfway stop with loos and water to top up bottles. By this stage, the adults were walking in a separate group behind, with great teamwork demonstrated by the group.

At night, cooking was done separately by those concerned about meat contamination, and we had access to an air hangar where we could sit, as well as use the loos, showers and the fridge in the kitchen. The focus was on keeping anxiety levels as low as possible while still challenging the group. On day two, there was a place to sit quietly and have lunch, with the finish on a village green beside the vehicles, ready to take us back to the campsite. There was very little uncertainty or waiting around.

Many members of the group had experienced feelings of isolation and disappointment in the past, often starting things but giving up due to a lack of self-belief. It was crucial to anticipate how each individual was feeling, avoiding overwhelming challenges while recognising what each person was capable of at any given time. Managing energy levels was equally important - if someone needed a month off from a section due to illness or exams, it was about understanding the reason and supporting them to pick up where they left off when ready. Communication with the section verifier was invaluable, as explaining challenges and circumstances helped ensure progress.

Each group member made incredible personal strides, as well as growing within the group. Friendships blossomed, and the girls became very comfortable in each other's company. The impact was life-changing for many: one participant researched courses, achieved excellent A levels, and earned a place at university. Another learned to drive, started working as a teaching assistant, joined a choir, and became part of a roller-skating club. One member recovered from a bicycle accident to complete her Bronze Award. Another discovered a passion for archaeology through volunteering on a dig, and one participant, for the first time, made friends and became less reliant on a parent.



Helen's story as a group leader

**"Lots of
practice
walks help
friendships
develop."**

Helen's DofE top tips

Physical activities (such as walking, running or yoga) can be done at home and checked by a family member.

Volunteering worked best when we did it together and got to know each other more.

Lots of practice expeditions help friendships develop and planning was easily shared.

Participants were given the option of not having to carry full kit, only day sack.

Participants had the option to share a tent with an adult.

Participants can cook separately to prevent cross-contamination anxieties.

We chose a camping spot (beside a hangar) with facilities.

We found a photograph at each grid reference instead of following a route card.

Parents were on the expedition but mainly walked behind.

We focused on special interests when choosing sections.

Keeping in mind sensory preferences is very important when choosing expedition wear.

We used a "one page profile" for assessors or new people joining the group.

Ats' story as a participant



About me

I have a special toy sloth called Dave - he is my support sloth.

My favourite animals are sloths.

I am 16 years old and I like swimming (a lot).

My DofE group

My Duke of Edinburgh's Award group started in 2022.

It is run by North Northumberland NAS.

It was a pilot group between DofE and the National Autistic Society.

There are six girls and young women of different ages.

We are supported by our Leaders (mostly our parent-carers).

My Bronze Award

Volunteering (three months) - Beach cleaning.

Skills (six months) - Sewing and crochet.

Physical (three months) - Dance.

Expedition to the Lake District.

I enjoyed making friends.

I learnt how to crochet a little bit.

The expedition made me very tired.

Ats' story as a participant



My Silver Award

Volunteering (six months) - I was part of the community of practice to develop a toolkit to make DofE accessible for young autistic people.

Skills (six months) - Spanish.

Physical (three months) - Yoga.

Expedition July 2024 - Mounthooley in the College Valley.

It's been good to learn a different language.

It's been good doing yoga to improve my balance.

My DofE top tips

Including parents helped me feel safe.

Bringing a stuffed animal and/or sensory toy (Dave!) was right for me.

I had help with my bags - I didn't need to carry camping stuff.

I stayed in a hostel with facilities for my Silver.

As a group, we all volunteered together.

I had lots of practice walks with others.

You can cook your own food by yourself on expedition.

It's helpful when staff listen to us.

Getting to know more about us is helpful.

Make sure you do what you are interested in for your sections.

There are lots of ways to make the walks manageable.

Ellie's story as a participant

**"Being able to
start slowly and
in my own way
was important."**

My name is Ellie and I was diagnosed autistic at the age of 20. I work full-time as a teaching assistant at a local primary school and I drive.

How autism affects me

I struggle socially. I find it very difficult to try new things. Over the years I have learned to mask symptoms in order to try to fit in. I have sensory issues and can easily feel overloaded and then struggle to follow conversation.

I have difficulty following both written and verbal instructions, but I am good at carrying out activities exactly as required as long as I am physically shown how to do something.

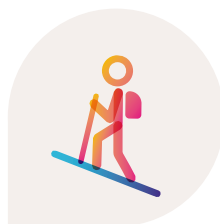
Having to concentrate all the time, deal with a new situation, or meet new people makes me feel fatigued very quickly. I am much more likely to struggle with fatigue from having to hold a conversation or listen carefully to instructions than I am from doing a physically strenuous activity.

I am sensitive to loud noises and busy environments.

I get very anxious about most things, but once I get over the anxiety of doing something I can usually enjoy myself.

I have difficulty interpreting tone of voice and working out if someone is cross with me or just trying to help me with something.

I have a genuine phobia of feeling/being sick which makes me obsessive about food and hand hygiene and makes me reluctant to eat food that may cause illness. I prefer not to eat out or to eat food prepared by other people.



Ellie's story as a participant

"Be aware that I can mask my anxiety and may be quite anxious about what is happening."

Ways in which the DofE Award was adjusted to help me

Factoring in additional time and meetings to get to know the group slowly was helpful.

Being given extra explanation regarding how the Award works and how to plan and prepare for the expedition was very helpful.

I did not have to carry a full pack during my expedition. This meant the walk was still a challenge for me but not completely overwhelming.

Being able to have someone with me for support at meetings and at the campsite during the expedition helped me feel calm.

We had access to a kitchen and bathroom during the expedition which greatly reduced my anxiety around food and hand hygiene.

For my Bronze Award, I did not feel able to join a club for my Physical, Volunteering and Skills sections. Starting at my own pace and in a way that felt right for me was so important. Now, I've joined a skating club and volunteer with a charity supporting children and young people with learning disabilities as part of my Silver Award.

Other ways to help me through the DofE Award

Allow me to ease into a group quietly and avoid singling me out or asking me questions until I am comfortable in that environment.

Be aware that I can mask my anxiety and may be quite anxious about what is happening.

If you are giving me instructions, you may need to repeat them or check that I have understood what you have told me. If I am not taking on board any information, it is likely that I have shut down and will need some time doing something else before coming back to that activity.

Repeating key information to me and giving me longer to get used to new things is important.

Giving me gentle reminders of deadlines and dates of meetings is much appreciated.

Daphne's story as a participant



About my DoE

Volunteering - I did litter picking.

Practice walks - I did many in order to get to know everyone.

Expedition practice - tent putting up and cooking.

Physical - dog running.

Skill - knitting a sensory blanket.

Expedition - lots of fun.

Top tips

Practice walks helped me get to know the group and feel more comfortable.

Litter picking was a great activity that kept us working together as a group.

Doing my Skills at home was comfortable, and having an end product gave me a clear goal to work towards.

I could run at home because I live in a rural area, and running with my dogs kept me motivated.

I was able to sleep in a tent with my mother, which made the experience more manageable.

I only carried a daysack as I usually sleep with weighted blankets.

I focused on taking photographs along the route because I find reading and writing difficult due to my dyslexia.

Even though my parents were there, I still walked with the group and felt included.

While we camped, we had access to a hangar with loos, showers and a kitchen, which made the experience more comfortable.

I can use the same ideas for my Silver sections, but I'll set myself a new challenge to keep things exciting.

About the National Autistic Society

The National Autistic Society is here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people.

We transform lives by providing support, guidance and practical advice for the 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK, as well as their three million family members and carers. Since 1962, autistic people have turned to us at key moments or challenging times in their lives, be it getting a diagnosis, going to school or finding work.

We change attitudes by improving public understanding of autism and the difficulties many autistic people face. We also work closely with businesses, local authorities and government to help them provide more autism-friendly spaces, deliver better services and improve laws.

We have come a long way but it is not good enough. There is still so much to do to increase opportunities, reduce social isolation and build a brighter future for people on the spectrum. With your help, we can make it happen.



The National Autistic Society is a charity registered in England and Wales (269425) and in Scotland (SC039427) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England (No.1205298), registered office Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH.