



AutismFIT:

Promoting the inclusion and well-being of youth with autism through enhancing digital innovation (VR simulations) and high-quality youth work

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AUTISM FIT FRAMEWORK

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Introduction

The AUTISMFIT project targets youth aged 13-18 with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The focus of this project is the promotion of a healthier lifestyle for this target group, including a healthier diet, better nutrition, and a more active mental and physical wellbeing.

The **AutismFIT Competence Framework** has been developed to support the holistic inclusion, well-being, and development of young people with autism. Rooted in evidence-based practices and informed by the lived experiences of autistic individuals, the framework identifies key skills, knowledge, and attitudes across five foundational modules: *Personal Skills, Social Skills, Learning to Learn Skills, Balanced Diet, and Physical Exercise*.

Each module is structured to address two functional levels of autism spectrum disorder (ASD)—Level 1 (Low-Functioning) and Level 2 (High-Functioning)—ensuring tailored, accessible, and meaningful support. The framework is intended to guide youth workers, educators, and caregivers in creating inclusive environments that empower autistic youth to build confidence, autonomy, and quality of life.

The competencies presented here will inform capacity-building activities for youth workers and serve as a basis for the development of innovative tools, including VR-based simulations and gamified offline activities. The AutismFIT project reflects a commitment to promoting diversity, participation, and personal growth through practical and adaptable approaches.

Module 1: Personal skills

Short Description: Personal skills in autistic Youngsters are critical components that significantly influence their ability to develop independence, self-regulation, social adaptability and navigate daily life effectively. This module focuses on self-awareness, self-advocacy, resilience, and stress management - key competencies that enable autistic youngsters to effectively communicate their needs, navigate challenges, and develop coping mechanisms for social and environmental demands and emotional regulation (see social skill module). Learning outcomes are tailored for both **Level 1 (Low-Functioning ASD)** and **Level 2 (High-Functioning ASD)**.

Level of ASD	LEARNING OUTCOMES			
	TOPIC	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	ATTITUDES
Level 1 ASD (Low-Functioning)	Self-Awareness	- Identify one 's basic emotions (happy, sad, angry) and their physical signs in the body and mind (thoughts). - Recognize personal strengths and difficulties.	- Recognize and name basic emotions, identify their physical manifestations and associated thoughts - Identify one's interests and their major difficulties.	- Show interest in identifying and understanding their emotions and its manifestations - Demonstrate interest in recognizing bodily sensations and their function

		• Understand how sensory triggers (e.g., loud noises, bright lights) affect emotions and behaviours. • Acknowledge the basic body parts, their functions, and how to use them for communication (e.g., waving, pointing).	• Identify sensory triggers • Identify basic body parts, their functions, and how to use them for communication.	• Use simple body movements (e.g., nodding or pointing) to express needs.
	Self-Advocacy	• Understand the importance and (concept) of making choices and expressing personal preferences. • Recognize different ways to communicate needs (e.g., gestures, AAC devices).	• Be able to choose among different options and express personal preferences • Be able to use different communication strategies to express needs, preferences or discomfort	• Understand simple choices (e.g., “I want” or “I don’t want” statements). • Express needs more confidently through gestures or communication aids. • Show comfort in asking for help when necessary.

		• Learn basic rights, such as the right to ask for help or a break when overwhelmed.	• Be able to request for help or environmental accommodations. Be able to express their will.	• Understand one's rights in school, peer and family settings
	Building Resilience	• Understand the importance of adapting to changes and challenges • Learn to be patient and mindful • Learn simple coping techniques, such as deep breathing.	• Adjust to minor routine changes with support and encouragement • Follow structured routines a to reduce anxiety. • Use simple coping techniques, as deep breathing.	• Show increased willingness to try new activities or changes with support. • Demonstrate patience and persistence in handling small challenges. • Recognize effort and self-progress as more important than immediate success.

	Stress Management	• Recognize stressors (e.g., loud sounds, crowded places). • Learn simple relaxation strategies to manage anxiety.	• Identify stressors and early signs of stress • Use simple relaxation techniques as breathing and mindfulness • Use sensory tools to calm-down and self-regulate	• Develop awareness of personal stress triggers and how to handle them. • Respond positively to stress management strategies
Level 2 ASD (High Functioning)	Self-Awareness	• Understand self-awareness as the ability to recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. • Learn about autism-specific challenges (e.g., alexithymia, sensory processing issues).	• Recognize internal state patterns - emotions and thoughts. Be able to use emotion tracking methods and strategies (journaling, mindfulness, tools). • Link physical sensations (e.g., tight chest) to internal emotions (e.g., anxiety) and thoughts (worry)	• Reflect on internal patterns using journals, mindfulness strategies or others . • Show openness to discussing their feelings thoughts and behaviours • Associate internal states with behaviour and consequences

		Understand the importance of self perception for reappraisal and self-regulation.	- Recognize oneself difficulties and environmental triggers - Recognize oneself strengths and interests	- Identify oneself difficulties and environmental triggers (self-perception) - Identify oneself strengths and interests (self-perception)
	Self-Advocacy	- Understand the importance of self-advocacy for independent living and autonomy - Understand self-advocacy as a way to communicate and express needs and preferences, in various settings and environments - Be aware of one own's rights in academic, social, professional and interpersonal relationship contexts.	- Make choices and take decisions in practical daily living situations(eg, selecting clothes, preparing meals, choose a hobby), solve everyday problems and manage responsibilities - Express needs and preferences, ask for adjustments and accommodations in different settings and social contexts - Setting personal boundaries in friendships, workplaces, and	- Show confidence and autonomy. - Develop a proactive mindset toward communicating preferences and choices. - Advocate for one's own rights, needs, preferences and decisions.

			social relationships, including saying “no” when uncomfortable. Understand the concept of “consent”.	
	Building Resilience	• Understand resilience as the ability to handle challenges, recover from setbacks, and maintain adaptability. • Acknowledge the importance of emotional regulation strategies and stress management (e.g., deep breathing, mindfulness practices, grounding exercises) • Recognize the importance of	• Engage in problem-solving and adaptive strategies to navigate everyday challenges. • Use emotional regulation strategies and stress management techniques to cope with difficulties • Organize structured routines and set realistic goals.	• Develop a growth mindset by framing challenges as learning opportunities. • Gain confidence in managing setbacks and trying new approaches

		setting realistic goals.		
	Stress Management	● Recognize stressors (e.g., transitions) and coping strategies like relaxation techniques. ● Understand stress management as the ability to regulate emotions and reduce anxiety. ● Learn different methods and strategies to manage stress, anxiety and disruptive behaviour.	● Identify early stress triggers and implement calming strategies. ● Be able to implement different strategies of self-regulation in stressful situations (eg, relaxation techniques, distraction, sensory-friendly strategies)	● Display increased awareness of personal stress triggers and how to manage them. ● Respond positively to relaxation techniques during high-stress situations. ● Use sensory tools proactively to reduce anxiety.

Key Topics: Please provide a short description for each topic.

Self-Awareness: The ability to identify and understand one's emotions, thoughts, and actions, as well as their impact on self and others (necessary for [emotional skills](#)). It encompasses awareness of public self-aspects (e.g., behaviors and general physical appearance), as well as recognition of one's strengths and limitations. This ability is crucial for personal growth, social interactions, and adaptation.

Self-Advocacy: Emphasizes empowering ASD individuals to express their needs and secure the necessary supports. It empowers them to make decisions that reflect their best interests and assert their rights.

Building Resilience: Resilience allows ASD individuals to cope with the stress and setbacks that often come with the condition. Building resilience allows for the development of skills necessary to face adversity, recover from setbacks, and adapt to change, enhancing personal strength and flexibility.

Stress Management: Stress management refers to the ability to recognize, address, and reduce stress through strategies that support emotional and physical well-being. Managing stress is particularly challenging for autistic individuals, due to heightened sensitivity to sensory experiences and an inherent difficulty in regulating emotional responses. Stress can be further compounded by challenges in social interactions, changes in routine, and communication barriers.

Module 2: Social Skills

Short Description: Social skills can be defined as a set of abilities and behaviors that facilitate effective and appropriate interpersonal interactions. These skills encompass communication, social interaction, and an understanding of relational dynamics.

Level of ASD	LEARNING OUTCOMES			
	TOPIC	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	ATTITUDES
Level 1 ASD (Low-Functioning)	Emotional Skills	Understand and recognize of one's own basic emotions and the emotions of others (the base of empathy)	Manage and associate certain basic emotions in known simple situations (for example, 'I feel happy when I play.'");	- Show curiosity to understand the emotions of others and their reactions. - Demonstrate some confidence in regulating their basic own emotions - Honing the ability to interpret social and emotional signals
	Team Work Skills	- Understand what is a team; - Understand the importance of being part of a team; - Recognise the elements that make a good Teamwork	- Work well on some clears and structured activities - Work well where the role of each member is well defined.	- Accept and show interest to stay in a group with other persons and have some interaction with them. - Accept to work with the team

		Recognize the basic rules of the team work;	Get help if necessary	Demonstration of self-confidence in error management
	Communication Skills	- Understand the others using simple languages; - Recognize the images and/or phonological symbols in base on the preferred communication channel.	- Develop a structured communication with others, following schemes or specific software for communication (ex. use asterixgrid or Nikitalk, ect); - Use the body to communicate (ex. Indicare, emit sound for communication. Ect)	Demonstrate some confidence in communicating with others my choices and needs through different output (AAC, Pecs, sound, gesture, voice, ect.)
	Conflict Management	- Recognize conflict situations when they are clearly defined (for example, when two people raise their voices or physically approach each other in a hostile way); - Recognize the stress situations	- Get help in case of conflict; - Implement reassuring behaviour (rocking, flickering with my hands, etc.) to manage the stress of the moment; - Identify the social dynamics of conflict	- Display an understanding of a conflict situation; - Accepts and applies basic strategies for handling conflicts and differences of opinion

Level 2 ASD (High Functioning)	Emotional Skills	• Understand own emotions and the emotions of others • Recognize some non-verbal signs of emotion in the other	• Manage basic emotional responses and sometimes i manage this in relation to the environment	• Being able to recognize emotions and understand how to react in all situations and contest known or not. • Being able manager my emotions with the right strategies in relation to the environment
	Team Work Skills	• Recognise the importance of collaboration • Understand the importance of personal project accountability • Recognize the advanced roles of the team and the flexibility of roles ;	• Work well on multiple different activities; • Manage small changes in the activity plan; • Interact with other team members in an appropriate manner	• Being able to stay in a group; • Show a willingness to be part of a team; • Demonstrate a little flexibility to changing tasks or roles within the project • Being able to listen and accept different points of view • Accept and develop a greater tolerance for errors • Development of autonomy in own work management

	Communication Skills	• Understand the others using complex languages terms; • Recognize non verbal communication.	• Engage a discussion with others, sharing opinions and thoughts; • Following the social communication rules.	• Show interest in learning more about communication with other persons;
	Conflict Management	• Recognize conflict situations in general; • Understand which persons are involved in the conflict.	• Express the situation of stress in adequating terms; • Engage to manage the conflict situation, interacting with others;	• Show a capacity to manage a his/her in a conflict; • Develop a proactive attitude towards the conflict.

Key Topics:

Emotional Skills: Emotional skill can be defined as the ability to recognise, understand, manage and express emotions in a healthy and effective way. It involves several components, including emotional awareness, emotional regulation, empathy and the ability to navigate social interactions using emotional intelligence. These skills are essential for building strong relationships, coping with stress and achieving personal well-being

Team Work Skills: teamwork is a complex skill that enables an individual to work effectively and collaboratively with others to achieve a shared goal.

Communication Skills: Communication can be defined as the ability of the individual, endowed with communicative intentionality, to transmit, receive and interpret information from one or more individuals. This ability can be expressed through verbal and non-verbal forms of communication.

Conflict Management: Conflict management is an advanced social skill that requires identifying a problem, listening to the views of others and finding shared solutions. Difficulties in empathy and emotional regulation can hinder the ability to manage conflicts constructively.

Module 3: Learning to Learn Skills

Short Description: This module is designed to support individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), either low or high-functioning, in developing key learning-to-learn skills such as time management, problem-solving, organization, planning, and independent study techniques. It offers tailored strategies to meet diverse needs, fostering structure, adaptability, and autonomy to enhance learning and daily life outcomes.

Level of ASD	LEARNING OUTCOMES			
	TOPIC	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	ATTITUDES
Level 1 ASD (Low-Functioning)	Time Management	- Recognize the importance of a daily routine (activity). - Identify the targeted visual aids (e.g., pictures or icons) to represent time and activities.	- Use visual schedules or timers, to follow a structured daily routine. - Complete tasks within the set time frames with necessary individualized assistance.	- Show willingness to engage with the proposed visual tools. - Develop comfort with adhering to a consistent and well-planned/timely schedule.

	Problem-Solving	• Understand the concept of making choices to resolve simple everyday issues. • Recognize when help is needed to solve a problem.	• Use basic problem-solving steps with guidance (e.g., identifying a problem and selecting a solution). • Communicate simple needs (in any AAC way) or challenges effectively.	• Exhibit patience and guidance when learning to address problems. • Accept assistance and support in problem-solving situations.
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	Organization and Planning	• Identify key daily tasks or activities. • Recognize assistive tools like checklists or sorting bins to aid organization and planning.	• Group objects or tasks into categories with guidance. • Follow simple, pre-planned steps for completing the assigned activities.	• Develop a positive attitude toward completing tasks in an orderly manner. • Show readiness to engage with organizational tools.
	Independent Study Skills	• Understand the concept of working unaccompanied while adhering to guidance or support. • Recognize familiar tools or resources for attending to independent	• Engage in brief, structured independent activities with the necessary prompts. • Use visual aids or tools to guide learning tasks involving studying and learning.	• Show willingness to attempt tasks independently. • Build confidence through small, achievable, well-planned steps while attending to individualized positive reinforcement.

		tasks, such as puzzles, sorting games or flashcards.		

Level 2 ASD (High Functioning)	Time Management	• Understand how to prioritize tasks, based on priority, importance, and deadlines. • Learn the significance of taking breaks in maintaining efficient productivity.	• Use timers, alarms, or digital tools to structure and track activities' pathways. • Create and follow a personalized daily schedule independently.	• Being able to understand the use of timers, alarms, or digital tools to better structure and track activities. • Recognize and follow the personalized daily schedule independently.
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	Problem-Solving	• Recognize different types of problems regarding daily activities and their potential solutions. • Understand the steps involved in effective problem-solving.	• Apply a structured approach to solving everyday problems. • Reflect on outcomes and modify strategies for future challenges.	• Build resilience and persistence when solving multifaceted problems, that may have previously caused difficulties. • Show confidence in making decisions independently.
	Organization and Planning	• Understand how to organize materials or tasks, in a logical order. • Learn the value of planning for achieving goals.	• Create to-do lists or plans for specific projects. • Maintain organized personal spaces (e.g., desk, backpack).	• Embrace the benefits of staying organized. • Demonstrate motivation to complete tasks efficiently and in an organized manner.

	Independent Study Skills	• Understand the importance of self-directed learning for triggering personal growth. • Identify resources, tools, or strategies to support independent study.	• Set realistic study goals and track personal progress. • Manage and avoid distractions and maintain focus on learning tasks.	• Show enthusiasm for learning new topics and enhance educational abilities, independently. • Foster self-confidence and increase learning awareness through successful independent achievements.

Key Topics

Time Management:

This topic focuses on teaching individuals how to organize and allocate their time effectively. It covers strategies such as using schedules, timers, and prioritizing tasks to enhance productivity and learning while reducing stress in daily activities.

Problem Solving:

This topic develops critical thinking and decision-making skills, enabling individuals to identify problems, analyze potential solutions, and implement appropriate actions to overcome challenges, in various situations.

Organization and Planning:

This topic emphasizes the importance of arranging and ordering tasks, materials, and goals systematically. It includes creating to-do lists, setting priorities, and preparing for activities to improve efficiency and reduce concerns and anxiety.

Independent Study Skills:

This topic aims to build autonomy in learning by teaching individuals how to set goals, manage distractions, and use resources effectively. It encourages self-motivation and confidence in completing tasks independently in the pre-set time concept.

Module 4: Balanced Diet

Short Description: This area focuses on educating and empowering young people with autism to understand and adopt basic principles of a balanced diet. This area incorporates sensory-friendly approaches to food exploration, making healthy eating accessible and enjoyable. Through interactive activities, youth will learn about food groups, portion sizes, and how to plan meals that cater their individual preferences and dietary needs.

Level of ASD	LEARNING OUTCOMES			
	TOPIC	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	ATTITUDES
Level 1 ASD (Low-Functioning)	Understanding Food Groups	Understand the different food groups (e.g., fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins, dairy).	Identify different food groups (e.g., fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins, dairy).	Show interest in learning more about healthy eating habits.
	Exploring Food Preferences	Recognise different types of foods (e.g., sweet, salty, sour, bitter).	Identify personal food preferences (e.g., favourite and least favourite foods).	Begin to develop a positive attitude towards trying a variety of foods.
	Meal Planning	Recognize different types of meals (e.g., breakfast, lunch, dinner). Identify simple healthy and unhealthy food choices. Understand suggestions for portion sizes.	Develop a daily meal plan that includes variety and balanced nutrition.	Demonstrate confidence and independence in meal planning.
	Food Preparation	Recognize basic ingredients and their uses (e.g., eggs for	Perform simple meal preparation tasks (e.g.,	Show a willingness to engage in food preparation tasks.

		omelets, bread for sandwiches). Identify common kitchen tools and appliances (e.g., spoon, knife, stove, microwave).	washing vegetables, spreading butter on bread).	Display an understanding that food preparation takes time.
Level 2 ASD (High Functioning)	Understanding Food Groups	Understand the basic nutritional value of common foods in each group.	Participate in group discussions about nutrition and food choices.	Begin to develop a positive attitude towards variety of foods.
	Exploring Food Preferences	Analyze how different textures, flavors, and aromas influence food preferences. Understand how cultural and environmental factors affect food choices and preferences.	Engage in discussions about food preferences with peers, enhancing communication skills and social interaction.	Cultivate an appreciation for diverse cuisines and the importance of flexibility in food choices.
	Meal Planning	Explain the role of macronutrients (carbs, fats, proteins) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). Understand the different nutrition plans (e.g., vegan, gluten-free).	Develop meal planning skills, incorporating foods from all food groups.	Adapt meal plans based on available resources or sudden changes.
	Food Preparation	Understand basic cooking methods such as boiling, frying, baking, and steaming.	Follow simple instructions during food preparation.	Demonstrate independence and confidence in food preparation.

			Prepare basic meals independently, such as sandwiches, pasta.	Show openness to experimenting with new recipes or variations.
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Key Topics:

Understanding Food Groups: This topic focuses on teaching the fundamental components of a balanced diet by introducing the main food groups: fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins, and dairy.

Exploring Food Preferences: This topic encourages youth with autism to identify and express their individual food preferences while exploring new foods in a supportive, sensory-friendly environment.

Meal Planning: This topic will develop the skills required to create balanced meal plans tailored to their nutritional needs and personal preferences.

Food Preparation: This topic focuses on building practical cooking skills, such as identifying ingredients and tools to use, familiarizing with basic cooking methods and following simple recipes.

Module 5: Physical Exercise Skills

Short Description: This module focuses on developing physical competence and motor skills in youth with autism while fostering an understanding of physical health and promoting active lifestyles. It emphasizes structured, accessible, and enjoyable physical activity tailored to different functioning levels, supporting overall well-being and inclusion through movement.

Level of ASD	LEARNING OUTCOMES			
	TOPIC	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	ATTITUDES
Level 1 ASD (Low-Functioning)	Gross Motor Skills	- Understand that movement can improve physical health and mood. - Recognise basic body movements (e.g., jumping, running, stretching).	- Perform basic gross motor actions with support (e.g., walking, jumping). - Follow simple movement patterns (e.g., step-forward, reach-up).	- Show interest in engaging in physical activities. - Express enjoyment in movement-based activities.
	Body Awareness and Coordination	- Identify basic body parts and their function in movement. - Understand spatial concepts (e.g., up/down, near/far).	- Coordinate basic body movements (e.g., arm-leg coordination). - Improve balance with guided exercises (e.g., standing on one foot).	- Be willing to explore movements and body space. - Show curiosity in new body-based experiences.
	Strength and Endurance	Recognize that physical activity can make the body stronger.	Participate in low-intensity endurance activities (e.g.,	Display persistence in physical tasks.

		Understand that repetitive activity builds stamina.	- walking, climbing stairs). - Use simple equipment (balls, resistance bands) with assistance.	Demonstrate pride in physical accomplishments.
	Recreational Activities and Sports	- Identify familiar recreational activities (e.g., ball games, dancing, yoga). - Understand simple rules of participation.	- Engage in simple, structured play or sport with assistance. - Take turns and follow one-step instructions in games.	- Show excitement in participating with others. - Develop comfort being part of a group activity.
Level 2 ASD (High Functioning)	Gross Motor Skills	- Understand the role of exercise in fitness and health. - Learn names and benefits of different physical activities.	- Execute complex motor tasks i.e. dancing, playing tennis - Practice consistency and accuracy in movements.	- Demonstrate motivation to improve performance. - Show a proactive approach to physical challenges.
	Body Awareness and Coordination	- Understand how posture, alignment, and movement relate to physical performance. - Learn about proprioception and balance.	- Perform body movements with improved control and fluidity. - Navigate obstacle courses or balance challenges with increasing precision.	- Show attentiveness to bodily sensations during activity. - Value the connection between movement and self-regulation.
	Strength and Endurance	Learn the difference between strength,	Perform age-appropriate	Accept gradual progress and

		flexibility, and endurance. • Understand how these elements contribute to fitness.	strength-building exercises. • Maintain activity for longer periods with structured rest	physical effort as part of learning. • Show responsibility in continuing fitness routines.
	Recreational Activities and Sports	• Understand basic rules of common sports or games. • Learn the value of fair play and cooperation.	• Participate in team-based games or adapted sports with minimal support. • Apply learned rules to new games or physical challenges.	• Display enthusiasm for group participation. • Respect others' turns and roles in group play.

Key Topics:

Gross Motor Skills: This topic focuses on developing large muscle movements such as walking, jumping, throwing, and climbing. These skills are foundational for physical independence, daily functioning, and participation in recreational activities.

Body Awareness and Coordination: This topic aims to enhance the ability to recognize and control body parts in space, improving movement precision, posture, and spatial orientation. It supports self-regulation and the execution of physical tasks in a structured environment.

Strength and Endurance: This topic promotes the development of muscular strength and cardiovascular endurance through repetitive and age-appropriate physical activity. Building these capacities improves stamina, physical resilience, and overall fitness.

Recreational Activities and Sports: This topic encourages participation in structured and semi-structured physical games, sports, and leisure activities. It supports social interaction, rule-following, teamwork, and enjoyment through movement-based play.

Conclusion

The AutismFIT Competence Framework offers a structured and inclusive foundation for supporting autistic youth in developing essential life skills. By recognizing individual differences and fostering strengths across cognitive, emotional, physical, and social domains, the framework contributes to building a more inclusive society.

This resource is more than a guide—it is a call to action for youth workers, educators, families, and communities to engage with young people on the autism spectrum with empathy, creativity, and respect. Through ongoing collaboration, capacity building, and the application of this framework, we aim to empower autistic individuals to thrive in every aspect of life.

