

MENTOR TOOLKIT

Specialist Settings

Practical Strategies to Support PST Growth

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Every Pre-Service Teacher (PST) is different, arriving with varied skill sets, backgrounds, and abilities. Adapting to the unique, high-differentiation environment of a specialist setting is a major learning curve. Requiring additional guidance is a normal part of learning and does not automatically mean a PST is at risk of failing. Early conversations, clear expectations, and timely feedback are the most effective ways to support growth.

This toolkit aligns with the Monash Professional Experience Intervention and Support Policy, providing practical guidance across **4 core areas: knowledge and skills, communication, behaviour, and wellbeing**. Use the matrix below to:

- **Identify:** Match your PST's observed behaviours to one of the concern areas.
- **Act:** Consider and apply the practical strategies suggested under that area.
- **Address:** If issues persist after trying these approaches, **contact the PPC team at edu-ppc@monash.edu** for further support and advice.

SUPPORT AREA: KNOWLEDGE & SKILL



This could look like:

- **Rigid & Generic Planning:** Lessons are too broad or verbal, ignoring IEPs/ABLES goals, sensory needs, or student communication styles.
- **Underestimating Capability:** Confusing low verbal speech with low cognitive ability, or resisting visual supports and assistive technology.
- **Misreading Behaviour:** Failing to see dysregulation or sensory overload as communication, and struggling to adapt when lessons fail.
- **Weak Data Tracking:** Failing to collect observation data, differentiated plans, and reflections for portfolio evidence.

Practical Mentoring Strategies

- **One-Student Co-Design:** Co-plan a task entirely tailored to one student's IEP and communication needs, then have the PST lead a small routine.
- **Adaptive "Think-Alouds":** Model a lesson and debrief explicitly on why you adjusted language, pace, or sensory resources in the moment.
- **Focused Strategy Capture:** Task the PST to observe and document three specific things: one visual support, one communication tool, and one lesson detour.
- **Behaviour & Evidence Debrief:** Review a dysregulation incident together to analyse student triggers, linking their reflections directly to APST portfolio evidence.

SUPPORT AREA: COMMUNICATION

This could look like:

- **Overly Verbal Delivery:** Giving long, abstract instructions; failing to read non-verbal cues or check student understanding.
- **Low Visual/AAC Use:** Omitting visual schedules, choice boards, gestures, first/then frameworks, or concrete prompts.
- **Collaboration Gaps:** Failing to use neuro-affirming language or coordinate student routines effectively with ES staff/allied health.
- **Unstructured Transitions:** Losing communication clarity or failing to use proactive prompts during routine changes or dysregulation

Practical Mentoring Strategies

- **Visual-First Coaching:** Guide the PST to script short, one-step directions paired with an active visual support, choice board, or first/then tool before they speak.
 - **Communication Rehearsal & Team Brief:** Rehearse the exact words, gestures, and neuro-affirming phrasing the PST will use with ES staff and students prior to transitions.
 - **System Shadowing:** Have the PST shadow you specifically to observe how individual students use their alternative communication systems (behaviour, movement, visuals, or verbal language).
 - **Mid-Session Refocus:** Pause post-routine to ask three rapid questions: "What communication system worked? What did the student's behaviour show us? What will you adjust next time?"
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SUPPORT AREA: BEHAVIOURAL/PROFESSIONALISM

This could look like:

- **Safety & Policy Breaches:** Ignoring school induction protocols, emergency plans, ASCIA/medical action plans, or Child Safe Standards.
- **Passivity in Routines:** Standing back during setups, pack-ups, yard duty, or student regulation support instead of collaborating.
- **Unsafe Behaviour Management: Attempting to manage high-risk or challenging behaviours** independently without checking mentor guidance or student safety plans.
- **Deficit-Based Language & Disrespect:** Using an inappropriate tone, non-inclusive language, breaching student confidentiality, or failing to engage respectfully with ES/allied health staff.

Practical Mentoring Strategies

- **Day 1 Specialist Induction:** Walk the PST through supervision blind spots, medical plans, student-specific protocols, and exact parameters for when to call for immediate help.
- **Defined Active Role:** Eliminate passivity by assigning specific duties per routine (e.g., "Your job right now is to manage the visual schedule and monitor this student's regulation cues").
- **Behaviour Support Boundaries:** Set explicit rules on what the PST can and cannot do during dysregulation, including when to step back and support the rest of the room.
- **Immediate Language Reset & Warning:** Provide instant, neuro-affirming replacement phrasing for any deficit-based remarks, and immediately escalate persistent policy/safety breaches to a written warning cc'ing the PPC team.

SUPPORT AREA: WELLBEING

This could look like:

- **Sensory & Workload Overwhelm:** Feeling anxious, exhausted, or paralysed by the fast pace, intense sensory demands, student distress, or documentation workloads.
- **Burnout, Commute & Fatigue:** Low energy and physical exhaustion linked to long travel times, external study pressures, or balancing personal life.
- **Isolation, Culture Shock & Withdrawal:** Signs of homesickness, difficulty adapting to Australian school culture, or avoiding feedback and withdrawing due to low confidence

Practical Mentoring Strategies

- **The "Circuit Breaker":** Step in and temporarily take over a routine or transition to give an overwhelmed PST a 5-minute mental break.
 - **Micro-Goal Mapping:** Reduce workload anxiety by helping them set just one manageable goal per day.
 - **Normalise the Learning Curve:** Reassure the PST that specialised, adaptive teaching takes time, and use predictable daily check-ins to celebrate one small success.
 - **Monash Support Connection:** Remind the PST of Monash's free student wellbeing services, and contact the PPC team yourself to notify them that the student needs extra support.
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Thank you, Mentors!

Thank you for the vital role you play in helping future teachers develop the confidence and skills needed to succeed.

Need further support? If challenges or concerns persist after using this toolkit, please reach out to the PPC team at edu-ppc@monash.edu for continued advice and guidance

