



Toolkit 2

New Homes and Renovations

An Autism-Friendly Home from the Ground Up



This toolkit is for whānau and individuals looking at designing a new home or making renovations to an existing home.

www.autismhousingtoolkit.co.nz

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About This Toolkit

Toolkit 2 is for when you're designing or building a new home (or planning to) or you're planning a renovation to an existing home or space.

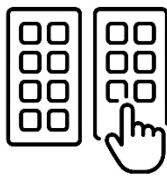
The information includes suggestions that can assist you when for discussing your needs and working with architects, designers, or builders.

These suggestions help you make sure autism-friendly design is considered as part of the architecture, not as an after-thought.

If you are looking to modify your existing home, see Toolkit 1.

How to Use This Toolkit

Toolkit Organisation

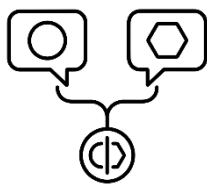


This toolkit is split into two sections.

Whole Home Sections cover suggestions that are relevant for any part of the home.

Room by Room Sections cover practical ideas for specific rooms and spaces in your home.

Language in This Toolkit



Sometimes this toolkit uses technical language.

This will help you talk to designers and builders in terms they understand.

It doesn't matter if you don't understand the figures and terms fully. Being able to use precise terms helps make sure things are done the way they should be.

See the [Glossary of Building Terms](#) for more details as needed.

How the Toolkits Work Together



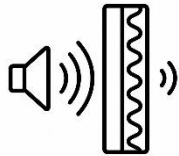
Toolkit 2 focuses only on architectural and building-specific areas.

It is designed to be used alongside Toolkit 1 for Existing Homes, which includes other suggestions for your home that can be introduced over time, as you are ready.

Whole Home Considerations

These suggestions are for things to think about across the whole home. They are not tied to one room. They work alongside the Room by Room suggestions, which give more specific ideas for each space.

Acoustics



Acoustics, or the sound in a space, is made up of lots of different parts. If you want to know more about the terms used, see the Glossary for more information.

While noise is a big issue for many autistic people, it's something that is often very hard to fix completely. But there are some things you can do to make it less of a problem.

Install acoustic insulation in internal walls

Specify acoustic batts in the walls of bedrooms, bathrooms, laundries, and between living spaces to reduce sound transfer. Aim for an STC (Sound Transmission Class) rating of 50-55 (calculated from both insulation and plasterboard choices) for very good performance, or above 60 for best practice.

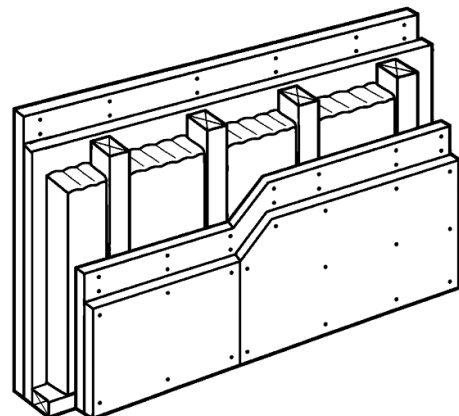
This can help block noise from televisions, conversations, plumbing, appliances, and other everyday activity in nearby rooms. Acoustic insulation is especially useful in shared homes, multigenerational homes, and homes where some people need more quiet than others.

Typically, insulation is only installed inside the outside walls of a house, and is more aimed at thermal performance. Acoustic insulation still works for thermal as well, but does an extra good job with sound. Having extra insulation in the internal walls of a house will reduce the noise coming from other rooms.

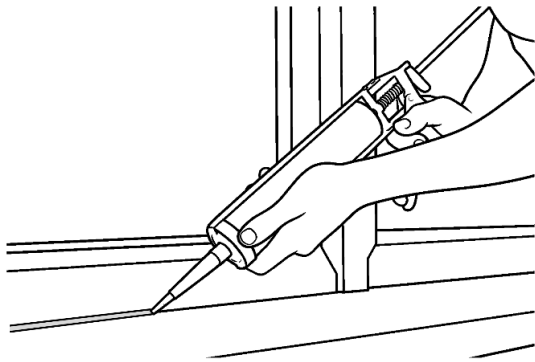
Use acoustic plasterboard or double-layer linings

In noise-sensitive areas, specify acoustic-rated plasterboard or double layers of standard board with staggered joints. Aim for an STC (Sound Transmission Class) of 50-55 (which is calculated from both insulation and plasterboard choices) for very good performance, or above 60 for best practice.

This can help reduce sound passing through walls in bedrooms, work areas, and other spaces where calm and focus matter. It is most effective when combined with acoustic insulation and good sealing around the edges.



Seal gaps and penetrations during construction



Ask for acoustic sealant around door frames, skirtings, service penetrations, and between wall linings to reduce sound leaks. Even well-insulated walls can let sound through small gaps around pipes, wiring, trims, and joinery. Paying attention to these details during construction can make a noticeable difference to how quiet a room feels.

Use acoustic underlay with hard floorings

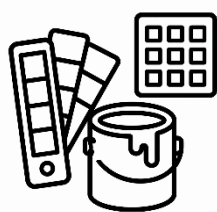
If using hard flooring, specify acoustic underlay to reduce footstep noise and vibration.

This can be helpful in movement areas, upstairs rooms, and homes where sound travels easily between spaces.

Design ceilings to support acoustic treatments

Ask your builder for ceiling battens or fixing points that allow future installation of acoustic panels. This keeps options open if you later decide a room needs more sound absorption. It can be useful in bedrooms, living areas, and workspaces where echo or background noise become tiring over time.

Visual and Colour



These features are the visual elements within a home that help people understand spaces, recognise important information, and feel comfortable. This can include colours, contrast, symbols, and the overall look and consistency of the environment.

Use consistent, low-stimulus colour palettes

Choose calming colours for walls and cabinetry to reduce visual overload. Low-stimulus colour palettes can make rooms feel steadier and easier to process, especially when a space already has a lot of furniture, objects, or activity.

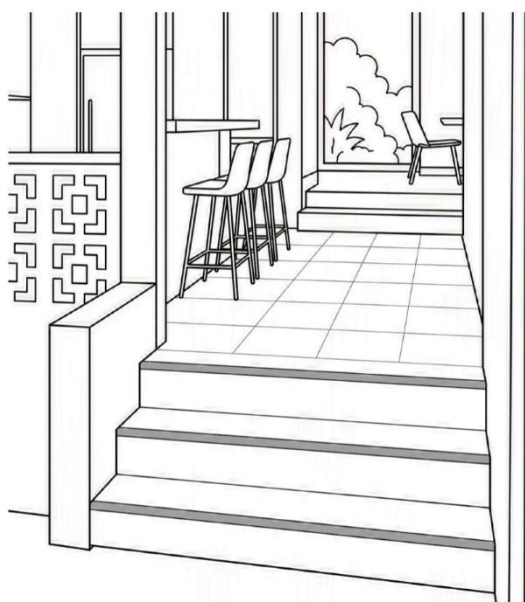
Low-stimulus colour palettes generally have desaturated or low saturation colours. Saturation is different than hue (colour) or brightness (how close to white or black the colour is). Low saturation means that the hue is pushed closer to grey rather than a bright saturated colour. Low saturated colours include most pastels, natural colours, and earth tones. Soft blues and muted greens are often popular.

Specify matte and low-reflectance surfaces

Choose low-sheen or matte paint and low-reflectance materials to reduce glare from surfaces. This includes on walls, cabinetry, benchtops, and flooring.

This can reduce harsh reflections and unpredictable shine. It can make rooms feel calmer and easier to look at, especially in bright daylight or under artificial lighting.

Make edges and level changes easy to see



Ask for contrasting nosings on stairs and clear visual markers on thresholds, small steps, or raised areas. Clear visual cues can support depth perception and make movement safer and more predictable, especially in low light or when attention is already stretched.

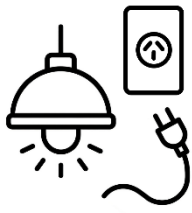
Specify clear wall to door colour contrast

Use contrasting colours or finishes for doors compared with walls so the doors are easy to identify in low light or when stressed.

For large areas like doors, a clear colour contrast would be a difference in Light Reflectance Value (LRV) of at least 30%. Most paints have an LRV or similar in their colour code, a number from 0-100 (pure black to pure white, measured in percentage), so you're looking for a difference of at least 30.

Strong visual contrast can make it easier to find important rooms quickly and reduce the effort of scanning a space. This can be especially useful in larger homes, shared homes, or homes where people need clear cues during busy parts of the day.

Lighting and Electrics



Autistic people often feel sensitive to glare, harsh lighting, flickering, or noise from lights that many others don't notice. These things can make it harder to focus, relax, or move through routines. Good lighting supports calm, safety, and daily functioning.

Thoughtful electrical planning can also support daily routines by making it easier to power, charge, control, and access devices and technology many people use every day.

Lighting

Design for a whole-home smart lighting system

A smart lighting system combines both brightness and colour temperature to create a whole-home lighting setup that can be controlled from a phone or other device. It uses automation and scheduling. Many families don't realise it exists or how helpful it can be.

Automatic changes throughout the day can support sleep by providing bright, cooler light during the day and warmer, dimmer light in the evening to match circadian rhythms. The smart system reduces the need to remember lighting adjustments, and helps create consistent daily routines.

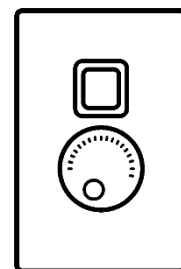
If you want smart lighting, ask for neutral wires at every switch. You will also need space in the switchboard for a smart lighting hub. You can ask for circuits and controls that let lights dim, change colours, or be automated later.

If you are using standard bulb fittings, you can use smart bulbs that screw straight in and connect easily. If you prefer downlights, you can install smart lighting units as part of the build. These often need to be wired in, so they should be specified early to avoid costly retrofitting and installed by an electrician.

Use wired-in dimmable lighting throughout the home

Note: only specify this if not using a smart lighting system.

Specify that you require dimming switches. Also specify dimmer-compatible fittings and high-frequency LED drivers to your electrician. These help reduce flicker. Dimmable lighting gives predictable control over brightness and supports comfort across different activities.



Wired-in dimmable lighting can also make it easier to keep light levels steady instead of switching suddenly between too bright and too dark. This can support calmer routines in living areas, bedrooms, and other spaces used in different ways across the day.

Install individually switched lighting circuits

In rooms with multiple downlights as the overhead lighting, ask your electrician for each light or small group of lights to be on its own switch.

This lets you turn on only the amount of light you need instead of flooding the whole room with brightness. It can make living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms feel more comfortable and easier to use, especially when one activity needs more light than another. This also gives more control if different household members prefer different light levels.

Plan lighting zones by colour temperature

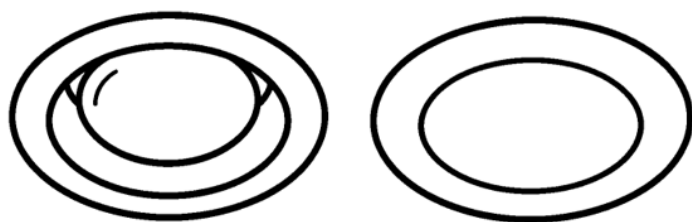
Use warm-white fittings in bedrooms and living areas, and cool-white fittings in kitchens, bathrooms, and laundries.

Warm light often feels calmer and safer, and can support winding down for rest. Cool light can make it easier to see clearly for tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and sorting colours.

Different people have different preferences. If colour temperature matters to you, ask for it to be specified clearly in the lighting schedule.

Use low-glare recessed fittings

Choose recessed fittings with diffusers to reduce glare from light sources.



This helps soften the light and avoid harsh brightness. It can reduce visual overstimulation, especially in bright rooms or when lights are on at night. This can make spaces feel calmer and easier to use.

Add low-level lighting for night-time movement

Specify LED step lights or floor level recessed LED strips in hallways, bathrooms, and stairs to support safe, low-stimulus movement at night.

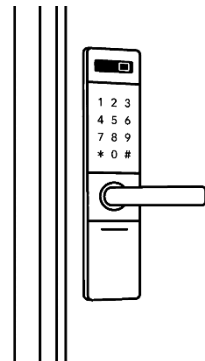
Low-level lighting can help you move around without turning on bright ceiling lights that may feel jarring after dark. It can also support more predictable night-time routines, especially in homes where people wake at different times or need to move through shared spaces quietly.

Electrics

Keyless entry system

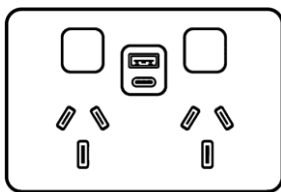
Install a keyless entry system, such as a keypad, smart lock, swipe tag, or phone-based lock, if remembering or managing physical keys is difficult.

Keyless entry can support more predictable access and reduce the stress of lost keys, rushed departures, or hands-full arrivals. It can be especially helpful in shared homes, for those who have support workers, or for people who want one less step in their daily routine.



Provide ample power and charging options

Specify more outlets than you think you will need, as many people rely on multiple devices, sensory supports, assistive technology, or charging stations. Having plenty of power outlets reduces reliance on extension cords or power boards.



Some modern outlets have built-in USB-A and USB-C charging ports to provide more charging options without requiring adaptors. Not every outlet has to have these type installed, even having a handful in strategic places provides extra options. Consider installing these in areas where many devices are charged and used, such as bedrooms and living areas.

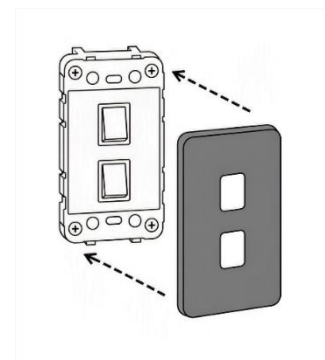
Choose switches and outlet plates that have clear colour contrast

Many modern light switches and outlets have face plates that have colour options. Choose plates that have clear colour contrast to the wall around it – like dark switches on light walls, and white switches on coloured walls. Having clear colour contrast between walls and light switches can make switches easier to find in low light.

Because these are small, a clear colour contrast would be a difference in Light Reflectance Value (LRV) of at least 30 and ideally up to 60. Dark grey or black switches on white walls will always exceed this.

For coloured walls, paints have an LRV or similar in their colour code, a number from 0-100 (pure black to pure white). You're looking for a difference of at least 30 and up to 60 between the colour of the switch plate and the paint on the wall.

There may be some guess work involved in the LRV of a switch plate, but use a matching paint swatch to get an easy idea of the colour and therefore LRV of it. Being out a few points isn't a big deal – a typical white is usually 94-97 depending on the shade, which would be a good estimate for most white switches.



Temperature and Air Quality

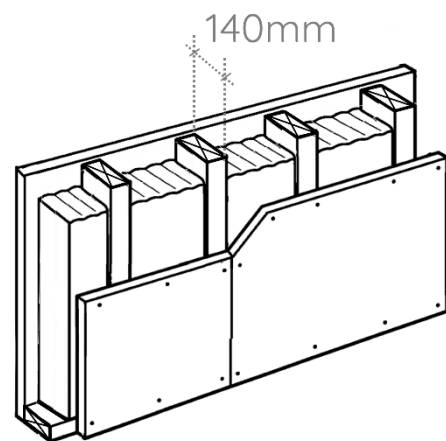


Many autistic people are sensitive to changes in heat, drafts, humidity, or the presence of dust and allergens. Keeping the air stable, predictable, and clean can help make a home feel safer and more comfortable.

Specify high-performance insulation

Choose insulation with greater than minimum R-values for your climate to slow heat loss and heat gain. Higher R-values mean better resistance to heat flow. This helps keep indoor temperatures more stable across the day and across seasons.

Usually, you can increase the R-value of insulation a bit without thickening the walls from a standard 90x45mm stud. Very high performance thermal insulation needs a thicker stud, like 140x45mm, which means the walls are wider.

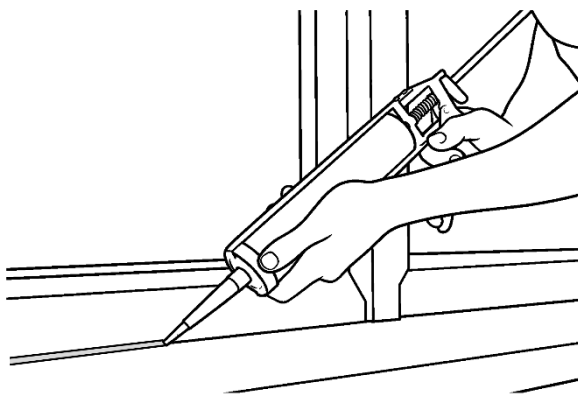


Specify high-performance windows

Choose windows with thermal breaks and double or ideally triple glazing. These reduce the transfer of heat through the glass and frames. Homes generally lose and gain the most heat through the windows, so this can make a big difference in keeping temperatures stable.

High performance windows will also improve acoustic performance by reducing the amount of sound that transmits through them.

Use good sealing and airtight construction



Ensure the builder seals gaps around doors, windows, and building joins to reduce unwanted air leakage. Airtight construction limits draughts and sudden temperature changes.

Install mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MHVR)

MVHR systems provide continuous fresh, filtered air while recovering up to 90-95% of the heat from removed stale air. This means fresh air without drafts and helps keep humidity stable, as well as lowering heating costs.

Ask your designer and system supplier to include ducting routes early so the system can be integrated neatly and reduce noise with careful ducting location choices.

An MVHR system can support a more predictable indoor environment by reducing stale air, condensation, and avoids strong temperature changes from opening windows. It may be especially helpful if air flow from open windows, humidity, or outdoor noise makes open-window ventilation difficult.

Position vents and diffusers away from seating areas

Ensure the HVAC layout is designed so air coming out of the vents does not blow directly onto where people are likely to be located, including above beds, desks, dining tables, or sofas.

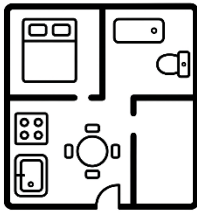
Gentle, predictable airflow is often more comfortable than strong or unexpected drafts, especially in places where people sit still, sleep, or work for long periods.

Install quiet extractor fans

Choose low-noise fans with run-on timers for bathrooms and laundries. Specify ducting that minimises vibration.

Quiet extractor fans can help manage moisture and smells without adding harsh or sudden noise. This can make bathrooms and laundries easier to use, especially if loud fan noise is stressful or discourages people from using ventilation properly.

Floor Plan and Layout



The way rooms, doors, hallways, and stairs are arranged can have a big impact on everyday life. A well-planned layout can support privacy, reduce noise and interruptions, and make it easier to move through the home safely and predictably.

Room Layout

Consider transitions between social and private spaces

Arrange the home so that movement from busy shared areas to private spaces feels gradual and predictable. This can help reduce sensory and social demands by providing a clearer separation between socialising, daily activities, and rest.

Locate bathrooms and toilets with privacy in mind

Avoid placing bathroom or toilet doors where they are directly visible from the main entrance, living areas, or dining spaces. This can support privacy and dignity for people who may forget to close the door fully, need support with personal care, or feel uncomfortable with highly visible bathroom locations.

Separate bedroom and visitor areas

Where possible, avoid requiring visitors to pass through bedroom areas to access living spaces, bathrooms, or outdoor areas. For example, avoid locating bedrooms directly off a hallway near the front entrance that leads to living spaces.

This can support privacy and reduce unexpected interruptions. It may also reduce pressure to interact with visitors, allowing people to join social activities when they are ready rather than being interrupted or encouraged to leave their bedroom as people pass by while entering.

Separate bedrooms from noisy household activities

Where possible, locate bedrooms of autistic residents away from kitchens, laundries, bathrooms, garages, and other areas that generate noise. Reducing exposure to household sounds and smells can support sleep, rest, concentration, and recovery from sensory overload.

Locating storage such as wardrobes and linen closets between bedrooms and noisier spaces like adjacent bathrooms is a good way of creating an extra acoustic buffer.

Create quiet bedroom locations

Bedrooms are often positioned together in homes, particularly children's bedrooms, but this may not be the best option in all cases. Some people may benefit from bedrooms

being separated rather than clustered together, particularly when household members have different sleep patterns, sensory needs, or activity levels.

Plan bedroom window orientation and blinds for light preferences

If morning light is helpful, orient windows east. If morning light is difficult, reduce early sun exposure or specify high-performance blinds or curtains. Thinking about window orientation early can help align the bedroom with personal sleep preferences and support more predictable waking and rest routines.

Doors and Movement Spaces

Design entry spaces for predictable routines

Include space for shoes, bags, keys, coats, and any other everyday items that are part of arriving home or leaving. Built-in storage, hooks, shelves, benches, or a clearly defined drop zone can all help support consistent habits and the tikanga of a home.

A predictable entry setup can make routines smoother and reduce the stress of searching for important things at the last minute.

Widen doorways and hallways

Ask for doorways and hallways that are wider than standard – doorways of 810 to 910mm (standard 760mm) and hallways of 1200mm (standard 1000mm).

This helps support comfortable movement and reduce sensory pressure, as proprioception and vestibular differences are common for autistic people. More generous door widths can make spaces feel less cramped and easier to navigate. This is especially true when carrying items, moving quickly, or sharing the home with others.

This also ensures greater accessibility for people with mobility needs – which many autistic people may have themselves, or have friends or whanau with, now or in the future.

Choose sliding or cavity doors in tight spaces

Sliding or cavity doors can reduce obstruction in tight spaces and make movement paths easier to predict. They can be useful in bathrooms, laundries, wardrobes, and other areas where a swinging door would block circulation or create awkward movement.

Design predictable circulation routes

Avoid tight corners or dead ends wherever possible. Keep sightlines clear between key spaces and make main pathways easy to follow. This can help make it easier to move through the home during busy times, especially when several people are using the space or when quick transitions are hard.

Offset entry door from hallways

Wherever possible, avoid placing the front door directly in line with a hallway or main circulation route. Positioning the entry door offset within an entry space can help reduce the likelihood of someone moving straight from inside the home to outside without stopping. Creating a less direct path can provide valuable extra moments for noticing and responding if there is a risk of elopement. It can also create a more gradual transition into the home and support a calmer arrival experience.

Stairs

Install handrails on both sides

Specify handrails on both sides of stairs to your designer and builder. Ensure the stairs themselves are wide enough to allow room for this, ideally with 1000mm between finished handrails.

Handrails on both sides of the stairs can support safer, steadier movement and make stairs feel more predictable to use. They can be helpful for carrying items, moving when tired, or navigating quickly during everyday routines.

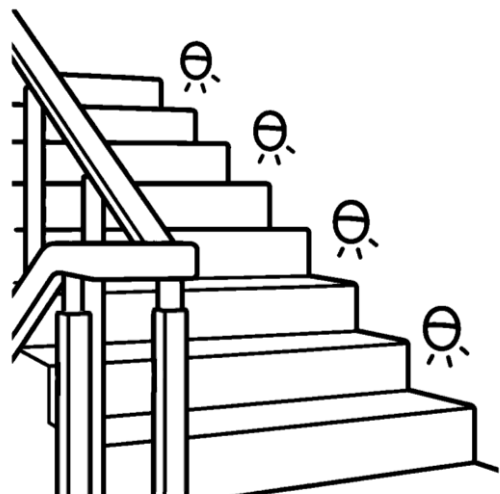
Specify non-slip treads and contrasting nosings

Specify non-slip treads and contrasting nosings during design so they are integrated rather than added later. These details can make stairs safer and easier to read visually, especially in low light or when depth perception is affected by stress, fatigue, or rushing.

Add integrated step lighting

Low-level integrated step lighting can improve safety without adding the glare of bright ceiling lights. These are often small, low glare fittings placed close to the ground or built into the wall beside the stairs.

They provide gentle, even illumination without creating shadows. This can support calmer movement at night and make stair edges easier to see during evening and early morning routines.



Design landings with clear sightlines

Avoid tight turns or blind corners at landings. Clear sightlines can make stairs feel easier to understand and move through, especially in homes where several people use them or where fast transitions are common.

Room by Room

These suggestions are for specific rooms and spaces in the home. They focus on how each room is used, and what may help that space feel safer, calmer, and easier to manage.

They sit alongside the Whole Home Considerations, which cover things to think about across the whole home, including lighting, acoustics, storage, and more.

Bathrooms and Toilets



Bathrooms and toilets can be busy, sensory-rich spaces. For some autistic people they can also be places where noise, temperature, or unexpected sensations feel overwhelming.

Design at least one bathroom to be a wet room

This requires planning for drainage and waterproofing, so it is best decided early in the design process.

A wet room is a fully waterproofed bathroom where the shower area blends smoothly with the rest of the floor, without a separate tray or enclosure. They can make the bathroom more predictable and easier to use if balance, coordination, or quick transitions are difficult.

Specify slip-resistant surfaces. For tiles this means a rating of either P4 or R11 (or greater). For other surfaces, specify a friction coefficient of at least 0.4 under wet conditions.

Install underfloor heating

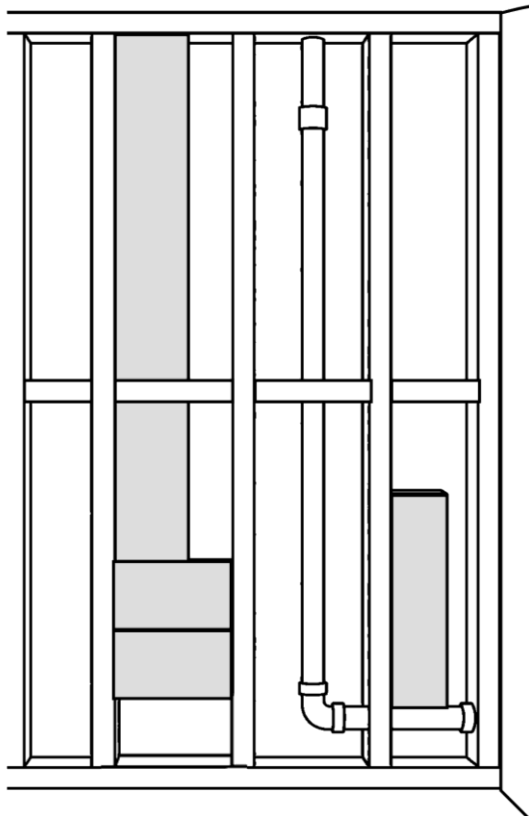
This requires planning as it is installed beneath flooring, so it is best specified early.

Underfloor heating keeps bathroom floors warm and a steady temperature. This is great for those who find cold tiles or sudden temperature changes uncomfortable. Underfloor heating uses electric cables or warm-water pipes under the bathroom floor. This warms the surface evenly, making tiles feel nice and cosy instead of cold.

Specify glass shower enclosures instead of curtained showers

Glass shower enclosures can feel more visually stable than curtains, which move unexpectedly and may cling to the body. A fixed enclosure can make the shower area feel more predictable and reduce sensory discomfort from movement, touch, and water escaping into the rest of the room.

Include structural blocking in walls for future grab rails

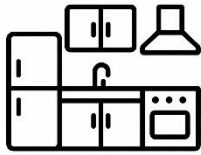


Ask the builder to install timber blocking behind wall linings in likely grab rail locations (next to the toilet and in the shower), even if not needed now. This keeps future options open without needing major wall work later. It can be a useful future-proofing step for changing needs over time.

Choose quiet-flush toilets and insulated cisterns

Ask your plumber for low-noise flushing systems and cistern insulation to reduce sound. This can help bathrooms feel calmer, especially at night or in homes where the toilet is close to bedrooms or living spaces.

Kitchens



Kitchens can be busy and unpredictable spaces. They can have a lot of sensory input. Thoughtful choices in appliances, layout, cabinetry and surfaces at the design stage can provide a strong base to help the kitchen feel safer and support independence.

Install drawers instead of base cupboards

Drawers provide full visibility and reduce bending, reaching, and searching. They can make it easier to see what you have at a glance and return items to consistent places. This is easier to specify during design than to retrofit later, and it can support more predictable kitchen routines.



Include integrated task lighting

Specify wired under-cabinet LED strips for clear, shadow-free lighting on benchtops.

Good task lighting can make food preparation safer and easier by improving visibility without relying on bright overhead lights alone. This can also help create a more even and predictable work surface.



Install heat-resistant benchtops beside the cooktop

Specify a heat-resistant benchtop on both sides of the cooktop. A great option is stainless steel, which now comes in modern textured options that hide marks and look less clinical. Porcelain and some natural stones like granite are also good choices.

This provides a predictable place to set hot pots and pans down without needing to move quickly or search for space. It can reduce the risk of burns, spills, or damage to surfaces. It also supports smoother cooking by keeping tasks contained within a clear, organised area.

Choose an induction cooktop

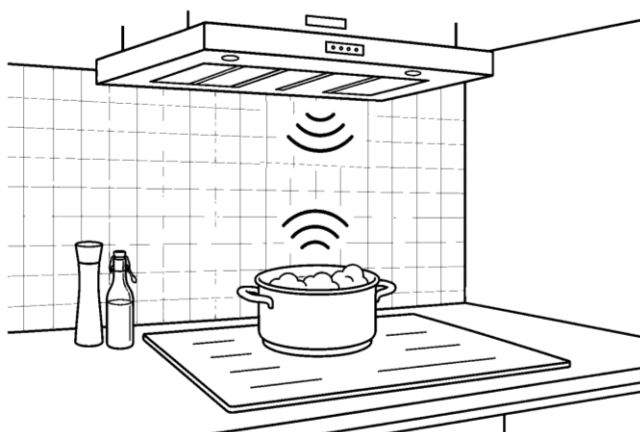
Choose an induction cooktop in a new build to improve safety and reduce risk. Induction cooktops heat cookware directly using magnetic energy, and they turn off automatically when no pot or pan is detected. Many models also include overheat sensors to reduce the chance of boiling over or boiling dry. The surface stays cooler than traditional electric or gas cooktops and cools quickly once cookware is removed, which reduces burn risk and makes cleaning easier.

Induction systems need dedicated and high capacity electrical circuits, so they should be specified early and installed by an electrician.

Choose an automatic extractor fan system

Choose a cooktop and extractor fan from the same manufacturer that can connect via Bluetooth. The fan will turn on automatically when the stove is used and adjust to steam detected.

This helps keep moisture and cooking smells under control without relying on memory or extra steps. This can be useful if sequencing or multitasking is difficult.



Plan for quiet-operation appliances

Choose low-noise dishwashers, rangehoods, and fridges wherever possible. Quieter appliances can make kitchens feel less tiring and less chaotic, especially in open-plan or shared homes where kitchen noise carries into other spaces.

Laundry Areas



Laundries often involve noise, heat, moisture, and strong sensory input. Thoughtful choices in appliances and surfaces at the design stage can help reduce sensory load.

Design for moisture control

Include space for a heat-pump dryer, ducting and external venting if needed, and good airflow to reduce humidity.

Laundry areas are usually humid, hot, and noisy. So, managing moisture can make the space more comfortable. It also protects the rest of the home from dampness and condensation. This can be especially important in shared homes or homes where lots of laundry is done.

Specify good drainage and waterproofing

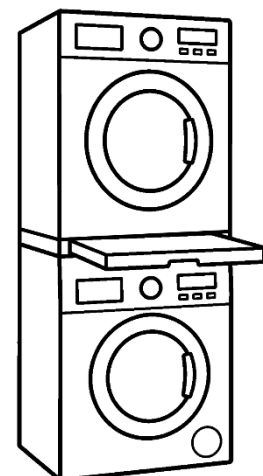
Design for proper drainage with floor slopes that direct water to drains, sealed and water-resistant finishes to floors, and waterproof membranes in all wet areas from the beginning.

This helps prevent unexpected puddles or dampness, which can be both a sensory and safety issue. Good drainage also helps protect surrounding spaces from water damage.

For stacked appliances, use a stacking kit with a pull-out shelf

When stacking a dryer above a front loading washing machine, using a proper stacking kit keeps both appliances stable and secure. Some stacking kits include a built in pull-out shelf.

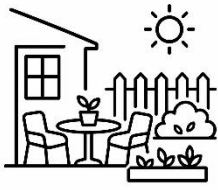
This provides a convenient surface for loading, unloading, or sorting laundry without needing extra bench space. These kits are model specific, so availability depends on the brand and appliance sizes.



Choose quiet-operation machines

Choose quiet-operation washing machines and dryers where possible, and specify vibration-damping mounts if needed. Reducing machine noise and vibration can make laundries less stressful to use and can also reduce sound transfer into nearby rooms.

Outdoor Spaces



Outdoor spaces can offer a lot of sensory and movement opportunities, and a chance to connect with te taiao (the natural environment). Outdoor spaces change with weather and seasons. They can feel grounding, or overwhelming, depending on the moment.

Create covered entry areas

Extend the roof out over entry areas to create a sheltered space, or specify an awning or canopy over the door.

Sheltered entries reduce sensory load during transitions and provide a more predictable space for arriving and leaving. This can reduce exposure to rain, glare, and wind. It can also make it easier to manage bags, parcels, mobility aids, or children without needing to rush.



Use stable, non-slip surfaces

Specify textured concrete, pavers, or composite decking with good slip ratings. Stable, even surfaces can make outdoor areas safer and easier to use in wet weather or when carrying washing, bins, groceries, or other items between spaces.

Specify slip-resistant surfaces. For tiles this generally means a rating of either P4 or R11 (or greater). For other types of surfaces, this means a friction coefficient of at least 0.4 under all conditions for level (flat) surfaces.

Design clear, predictable pathways

Avoid sudden changes in direction and ensure paths are wide, stable, and well lit. Clear pathways can make movement outdoors feel safer and more predictable, especially between the house, bin area, clothesline, parking, or gate.

Plan secure, visually clear boundaries

Use fencing, gates, hedges, or low walls that are easy to see and easy to operate. Clear boundaries can make outdoor areas easier to understand and navigate, especially in shared or multi-unit housing. They can also help define which spaces are private, shared, or part of everyday routines.

Glossary of Building Terms

For the full Glossary, visit the website at www.autismhousingtoolkit.co.nz

Acoustic absorption	How a material soaks up sound. Soft materials like carpet or wall panels absorb sound and make spaces quieter.
Acoustic reverberation	How sound bounces around a room and takes time to fade away. Too much can make spaces noisy or echoey.
Acoustic sealant	A flexible seal used to close gaps in walls, floors, or ceilings. It helps stop sound leaking through.
Acoustic transmission	How sound travels through walls, floors, or ceilings from one space to another.
Acoustic underlay	A layer placed under flooring to reduce noise. It reduces noise echoing in the space it is in, and also how much noise would reach below if used on an upper story of a building.
Blocking	Extra pieces of timber placed inside a wall between studs. Extra dwangs/nogs, usually from thicker wood. They give strong fixing points for things like handrails or shelves.
Built-in	Furniture or storage that's permanently installed and part of the home structure (e.g., built-in wardrobes)
Cavity door	A sliding door that moves inside the wall instead of swinging open. It saves space. Sometimes called a pocket door.
Colour contrast	When two colours are clearly different, like light and dark. This helps people see edges, steps, or switches more easily. "Good" colour contrast is 30% for large areas like walls and doors, while up to 60% is best for small areas like switches and strips. Measured from the difference between how much light two surfaces reflect.
Colour temperature	The type of light colour a bulb gives off. Only used for white coloured light on a scale of warm to cool. Cool white (blue-toned) light is more like the colour of daylight and helps us stay alert and focused. It tells our brains that it's daytime and we should be awake. Warm white (yellow-toned) light feels safer and more relaxing. It supports winding down for sleep.

Diffuser	A cover or fitting over a light that spreads the light out more evenly. It softens brightness and reduces glare, making the light more comfortable to look at.
Double or triple glazing	Windows made with two or three layers of glass. These help keep heat in and reduce noise.
Downlight	A light fitted into the ceiling that shines downwards. It often sits recessed in the ceiling.
Ducting	Tubes or pipes that carry air through a building, often used with heating or ventilation systems.
Dwangs/nogs	Short pieces of timber between studs inside a wall frame. They also support the wall and provide fixing points.
Fixture	Something permanently attached to a home, like a sink, toilet, or built-in lighting.
Floor plan	A drawing showing the layout of rooms and spaces in a home, viewed from above.
Framing	The basic structure of a home made from timber (or rarely, steel). It includes parts like studs, nogs/dwangs, top and bottom plates (horizontal pieces at the top and bottom of walls, between the studs), joists (floors), and rafters or trusses (in the roof). These parts work together to support the building and hold everything else in place.
Freestanding	Furniture or fixtures not attached to the building — they can be moved easily.
HVAC	Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning Systems that control temperature and air flow in a building, like heat pumps and ventilation systems.
Insulation	Material placed in walls, ceilings, or floors to keep heat in during winter and out during summer. Often made of glass wool (fibreglass), polyester, or sheep's wool.
Layout	The arrangement of rooms, furniture, and pathways within a home.
LED (Light Emitting Diode)	A type of light bulb that uses less energy and lasts longer than older bulbs. Comes in many colours.

Level	A flat surface with no tilt or slope. This makes it easier and safer to walk on.
Major renovation	Building work where walls are moved, removed, or rebuilt. It may include extensions or full upgrades inside a home.
Matte or low sheen	A surface finish that is not shiny. It reduces glare and reflections.
MVHR	Mechanical Ventilation with Heat Recovery A system that brings in fresh air while keeping warmth inside. It helps keep indoor air healthy and stable.
Neutral wiring	A type of electrical wiring needed so some modern devices (like smart switches) can work properly.
Non-permanent modification	A change that can be removed without damaging the home. Includes peel-and-stick wallpaper, command hooks, freestanding furniture, and removable rugs. Ideal for renters.
Open plan	A home design where multiple living areas (kitchen, dining, living) flow into one larger space without walls between them.
Permanent modification	A change that becomes part of the home — like new flooring, paint, or built-in shelving. Usually only suitable for owned homes.
Plasterboard	Flat panels used to line walls and ceilings inside a home. They are fixed to the framing to create a smooth surface ready for painting.
R-value	A number that shows how well insulation keeps heat in. Higher numbers mean better insulation. In New Zealand, minimum R-values are set by the Building Code based on where in the country a home is.
Recessed	Set back into a surface, like a light fitted into the ceiling instead of sticking out.
Relative humidity	The amount of moisture in the air compared to the most it could hold at that temperature. It is measured as a percentage (%). Higher numbers mean the air feels damper, while lower numbers mean the air feels drier.
Sightlines	The lines of vision from one part of a room or home to another.
Slip resistant	A surface that helps reduce slipping, especially when wet. Often used for floors in bathrooms or outdoor areas.

Slope	A surface that is not flat and goes up or down. Ramps have a high slope. Slopes can make walking harder and may need extra care to keep them safe.
Soft furnishings	Cushions, curtains, rugs, throws, and upholstered items.
Specify	To clearly say what product, material, or feature should be used when building or renovating. This is usually written in plans or notes for builders.
Stair nosing	The front edge of a stair step. It is often highlighted or textured to make it easier to see.
Stair tread	The flat part of a stair where you place your foot.
STC (Sound Transmission Class)	A rating that shows how well a wall or floor blocks sound from going through. It is calculated from the performance of the frame, insulation, and plasterboard combined. Higher numbers mean better sound blocking.
Stud	A vertical timber inside a wall frame. It supports the wall and provides fixing points.
Switch plate	The cover that sits over a light switch or power switch on a wall. Usually made of plastic. It protects the wiring and gives a smooth, finished surface. Can be removed by popping off and replaced on many newer switches.
Switchboard	The main box where electricity enters a home, on the inside of the building. It holds circuit breakers and controls power supply. Not the same as the meter box on the outside of a building.
Thermally broken windows	Windows designed to reduce heat transfer through the frame. This helps keep indoor temperatures more stable.
Wayfinding	How people navigate and find their way through a space. Good wayfinding uses clear signs, colour coding, or other cues to help people know where they are and where to go.
Wired-in	Fixed directly into a building's electrical system. It cannot be unplugged like a portable device.
Zoning	Dividing a home or room into clearly defined areas for different activities — for example, a sleep zone, a calm zone, and a play zone.