

Supporting Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Facts and Tips for Building Staff and Bus Staff

The information on this sheet will help you play a positive role in the entire school experience of students on the autism spectrum. Thank you for your willingness to learn about and support these kids!

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are quirky, endearing kids who struggle with a wide range of challenges in any or all of the following areas:

Anxiety: Students with ASD often have limited coping skills, which can lead to extreme anxiety in unfamiliar situations. They depend heavily on routines, structure, and repetitive interests to help them feel safe.

Rigidity: Students with ASD tend to be rigid rule followers. Rules help make life feel more manageable and predictable. *These students very much want to follow the rules, but may not understand exactly what the rules are.* This same rigidity means these students tend to get extremely agitated when rules are broken or when something unexpected happens.

Communication: Many of these students have a hard time making their thoughts and needs known clearly. They may also have difficulty understanding your words.

Socialization: These students rarely understand how to interact with others in socially expected ways. Conversation may be awkward, one-sided, or nonexistent. Be aware that social challenges make these students *very* vulnerable to bullying.

Sensation: Students with ASD often have sensory challenges. They may take in far too much or far too little sensory input. Hand-flapping, spinning, rocking, and similar behaviors are necessary to help students to cope with their sensory challenges.

Inside/Outside: Some students with ASD demonstrate many obvious external challenges: They may flick their fingers, have trouble speaking, or talk endlessly about a single obscure topic. Don't underestimate these students; they may have lots of clever, creative ideas going on inside. Other students are primarily affected by *internal* challenges: They may seem typical in appearance or in conversation. Don't overestimate these students; they may struggle intensely with cognitive, communicative, emotional, sensory, and other challenges that can't readily be seen.

Behavior: *All behavior is a form of communication.* Difficult behaviors tell you that something is wrong. When students with ASD misbehave, they need help—not consequences.

Here are some simple ways you can support these kids in your everyday interactions with them:

- ✓ Use concrete and specific language. Try to make your expectations as clear as possible.
- ✓ Be calm and reassuring. Loud, angry voices will make things worse, not better.
- ✓ Remember that making conversation is a developing skill. Be patient and supportive.
- ✓ Praise them for the skills they are doing well and remember that manners may not be a priority—yet.
- ✓ Keep a watchful and protective eye out for bullying or other disrespectful treatment by peers.
- ✓ Above all, be mindful of the enormous challenges these students face at every turn and help them feel safe and supported in our school.

Flip the page for specific suggestions in your area of the school community!

Cafeteria Workers: The cafeteria is sensory chaos: Kids are shouting, chairs are scraping, smells are stewing. The lunch line presents new challenges every day, requiring quick thinking and decision making. The social pressure is intense. And it's all without the support of the teacher and the comfort of the classroom! Be patient and help students through this unrelentingly stressful experience.

Recess Monitors: The playground, which is supposed to be fun, can be a sensory and social nightmare for students with ASD. They may need help taking turns with equipment and understanding the rules of games. They often get teased, left out, or bullied, so they need close supervision when they are out among their peers. Keep in mind that you cannot recognize bullying from a distance; keep a *close* eye and ear on peer interactions to be sure that everyone is okay.

School Nurse: The fragile equilibrium of students with ASD can be easily shattered. Some students have strong sensory reactions and feel discomfort very intensely, even if their symptoms may not seem so bad to you. They're not being hypochondriacs; trust that if they say something hurts, something hurts. But be aware that some students may find it very difficult to communicate clearly what hurts and in what way it hurts.

On the other hand, some students with ASD may be *less* aware of pain and discomfort than others. They can get badly injured but feel nothing. They need to be watched for fever, nausea, dizziness, internal bleeding, and other internal problems, especially following a fall or collision.

Office Staff: Know that it may be a significant achievement for students with ASD simply to leave the classroom on their own. Remembering the route to the office, and figuring out what to do when they get to you, may be all they can handle now. Congratulate them on a job well done, even if they don't greet you with a proper "Good morning."

Custodians: You are often the first-responders when drinks spill or when vomit happens. These incidents are extremely upsetting to students with ASD because their rigid rules and expectations may have been accidentally and dramatically broken. Also keep in mind that some students have difficulty with motor coordination, which may make them especially clumsy. No matter what happened, be gentle and reassuring and know that the incident is far more troubling to them than it is to you.

Bus Staff: The bus ride poses endless challenges for students with ASD. It's loud, it's crowded, it's a social minefield, and it's an anxious transitional time between one comfort zone (home) and another (school). You cannot be available to support sensory challenges and social skills while you're driving, but you can encourage vulnerable students to sit near you and allow them to wear earplugs or headphones if it helps them feel better.

Keeping It on the D.L.

Be aware that any information you receive about specific students must, by law, be kept strictly confidential. You may not share any personal information about students with other building staff, bus drivers, students, or with your friends and family.

However, if you observe or are involved in an incident with a student, discuss it with the school personnel who work with a particular child—e.g., his or her teacher, the principal, or the student's aide. But take care that such conversations are not overheard by others.

Classroom Teacher Notes: _____

For more information, touch base with the classroom teacher or principal (or browse through *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom*).