

Supporting Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Facts and Tips for Classroom Paraprofessionals

The information on this sheet will help you play a positive role in the 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. Visual schedules, routines, structure, and repetitive interests help them feel safe. *Be patient and supportive.* Life on the autism spectrum can be overwhelming. That's why you're here.

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 may get extremely agitated when rules are broken or when something unexpected happens.

Communication: Many of these students express themselves in unusual ways or have a hard time making their thoughts and needs known. They may also have difficulty understanding your words. Use visual symbols and concrete, specific language to make communication as clear as possible.

Socialization: These students struggle to make friends. Interactions may be awkward, one-sided, or nonexistent. Be aware that social challenges make these students very vulnerable to bullying. Keep a watchful and protective eye out for provocation, teasing, or other disrespectful treatment by peers. Many people don't see past the challenges; help others recognize your student's fabulousness!

Sensation: Most students with ASD take in far too much or far too little sensory input. Hand-flapping, rocking, and similar behaviors are necessary to help students cope with their sensory challenges. When they feel overwhelmed, be calm and reassuring. Loud, angry voices will make things worse, not better.

Inside/Outside: Some students with ASD demonstrate obvious, *external* challenges: They may flick their fingers or talk endlessly about a single 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 appear typical. Don't overestimate these students; they may struggle intensely with many challenges that can't readily be seen.

Behavior: *All behavior is a form of communication.* Difficult behaviors indicate that something is wrong. When students with ASD misbehave, they need help—not consequences. Be a detective. Look for patterns and warning signs so that you can ease the situations that trigger strong reactions *before* difficult behaviors erupt.

For guidance on offering meaningful one-on-one support in the classroom, flip the page.

Support for Supporters

On the Front Lines: You are on the front lines of challenging behavior. There will be moments when it is hard for you to stay calm and patient—but it’s crucial that you remain professional. When a student loses control, try not to take her words or behaviors personally. She can’t control herself or learn independently yet. Remember that impulsivity is *part of her disability*. Your student needs to be guided to learn more positive ways of functioning in the classroom and beyond. Be prepared to repeat yourself. This kind of learning takes time.

What’s Up: While the teacher must attend to the needs of many students, you have a uniquely up-close-and-personal perspective to see details the teacher cannot. When you notice small signs of progress or new areas of concern, offer to share them with the classroom teacher.

Backing Off: *The best help you can provide is to gently guide your student toward independence.* Be on the lookout for hot spots—those times when he needs you to help him manage a challenging situation. But also look for times when you can fade your support and let him do his thing, independently.

Don’t worry about “appearing” busy: The teacher and principal understand that you don’t need to be interacting every moment in order to be doing your job well. This doesn’t mean you can zone out. Instead, you need to remain fully engaged and attentive to your student, even from a distance.

Keeping It on the D.L.: Be aware that all personal information 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, other parents, or with your friends and family. Don’t even share the *name* of the student to whom you are assigned.

You can discuss this student only with other school professionals who work with him or her, such as the classroom teacher, principal, or therapists. But take care that such conversations are not overheard by others.

The Rules of Cool: Needing a 1:1 aide can be a tremendous source of embarrassment, especially in upper elementary and middle school. Do your best not to make your student feel singled out and different. Keep your interventions discreet and low-key, give him a little space when possible, and offer help to other students when you are available.

Classroom Teacher Notes: _____

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

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