

Supporting Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Facts and Tips for Special Area Teachers

The information on this sheet will help you create a positive learning environment for students on the autism spectrum while they are with you. Thanks for your willingness to learn about and support them!

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 and structure, and may cling to certain objects or repetitive interests to help them feel safe.

- ✓ Ask the teacher to help you prepare a visual schedule to create predictability and reduce anxiety.

Rigidity: Students with ASD tend to be rigid rule followers. Rules make life 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.

- ✓ Use concrete and specific language. Try to make your expectations as clear as possible.

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.

- ✓ Remember that making conversation is a developing skill. Be patient and supportive.

Socialization: These students struggle socially. Interactions may be awkward, one-sided, or nonexistent. Be aware that social challenges make these students very vulnerable to being bullied.

- ✓ Keep a watchful and protective eye out for provocation, bullying, teasing, or other disrespectful treatment by peers.

Sensation: Most students with ASD take in far too much or far too little sensory input. Hand-flapping, rocking, and similar behaviors are related to sensory challenges.

- ✓ Adapt the sensory environment based on individual needs and teacher input. *Offer options* whenever possible.

Behavior: *All behavior is a form of communication.* Difficult behaviors indicate that something is wrong. Chances are, a behavioral problem is the result of one of the challenges described above.

- ✓ When students with ASD misbehave, they need help—not consequences.

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.

Know Your Student

- Don't reinvent the wheel! Talk with the classroom teacher or case manager to find out what your student's special interests are, how best to engage her, what tends to set a student off, and what makes things better.
- Read the IEP to find out more about the challenges this student faces and what goals have been set.
- Attend team meetings to learn about current stressors and new strategies. If you can't get there, ask for a summary of the discussion and recommendations.

Flip the page to find ideas for your special area!

Perspectives on Art

Break the Mold: Sensory challenges abound in the art room, any of which may be unbearable: the *feel* of fingerpaint, glue, clay, charcoal, papier maché, or oil pastels; the *smell* of paints, markers, plaster, pottery dust; the *sound* of markers, Styrofoam, or wood sanders. Offer choices of medium.

Paint With a Broad Brush: Be aware that fine motor and visual-motor challenges may cause students to grip and press on art implements so hard that they tear the paper or so lightly that their work is illegible. Allow use of various implements and accept alternative outcomes.

Realism Versus Impressionism: Some students with ASD struggle to differentiate colors, shapes, and other detailed elements of pictures, such as subject versus shadow and figure versus ground. Accept general impressions if details are elusive.

Music Notes

Scale It Back: The sounds of some instruments may be painful to some kids—sometimes. Watch the volume. Headphones, earplugs, and area rugs are effective at making the sound and acoustics manageable for students with ASD.

Tune In: Sensory discrimination challenges may prevent some students from distinguishing among musical tones and rhyming sounds. Allow flexible types of musical interpretation.

Drum Up Alternatives: Consider fine motor, oral motor, and visual-motor challenges when students play or read music. Offer instruments that require less or different types of coordination.

Library Reference

Brave New World: Moving abruptly from the noisy hallway into the silent library can be very challenging for students with ASD. Help them shift gears by providing gentle support and allowing them time to make the adjustment.

Great Expectations: Among many students with ASD, decoding is far stronger than comprehension. Look for books that pair age-level content with simpler text. Graphic novels can be very accessible to students with ASD.

A Series of Fortunate Events: Engagement is one of the greatest obstacles in getting students with ASD to read. Take the time to introduce students to a series. Once your student is acquainted with Violet, Claude, Sunny, and Count Olaf (or with Harry, Ron, and Hermione), those characters provide a thread of familiarity that can open up whole new worlds.

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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Elaborating on Collaborating

Group work is a special challenge for students on the spectrum. Here's how you can maximize success:

- Give a whole-class lesson on group-work skills including flexibility, negotiation, compromise, tolerating mistakes, problem solving, and recognizing when and how to get help.
- Choose group-mates mindfully.
- Create structure by assigning roles that are suited to individual strengths. Consider positions like media manager, art critic, music critic, efficiency expert, or fact-checker.