

Asperger Syndrome/HFA and the Classroom

Accessing Services: Your Child's Right to Public Education

■ The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), first enacted in 1975, mandates that each state provide all eligible children with a free and appropriate public education that meets their unique, individual needs. IDEA was most recently revised in 2004 (and, in fact, renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, but most people still refer to it as IDEA).

IDEA specifies that children with various disabilities, including autism, are entitled to early intervention services and special education. If your child has been diagnosed with a form of autism, the diagnosis is generally sufficient to gain access to the rights afforded by IDEA. The IDEA legislation has established an important role for parents in their children's education. You, as a parent, are entitled to be treated as an equal partner with the school district in deciding on an education plan for your child and his or her individual needs. This enables you to be a powerful advocate for your child. It also means that you must be an informed, active participant in planning and monitoring your child's unique program and legal rights. This is a very important role and at times, it can seem overwhelming and confusing. Two books that may be helpful are *Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy – The Special Education Survival Guide*, by Pam Wright and Pete Wright, and *How to Compromise with Your School District Without Compromising Your Child*, by Gary Mayerson. You will also find additional books and websites at the back of this kit that will be helpful in this process.

You, as a parent, are entitled to be treated as an equal partner with the school district in deciding on an education plan for your child.

■ Throughout your child's educational process, it is important to remember that each child has a unique set of abilities and challenges. Educating both yourself and your child's educational team at school will be fundamental to your child's success in the classroom. Since children with AS/HFA can be diagnosed at all different stages of the education process, it is imperative to make sure that the proper accommodations are given to them no matter when they are diagnosed. Individuals with AS may show evidence of distinct issues; they may struggle more with social interactions and communication than with their studies and schoolwork. Since each child is different, the parents and educators need to work collaboratively in order to play on the child's strengths and enable them to have a positive and successful educational experience.

Once your child is diagnosed, it is crucial to make sure they have the proper supports in school. As you work with your school system, it is important to remember that your child's program should be designed individually, as each child has unique needs, even if the diagnosis is the same as that of another child. Acquiring these services will help your child and will also ensure that his or her teacher can provide the best and most effective education possible.



In the classroom, the student and the teacher will face different challenges. The Organization for Autism Research (OAR) offers the following six step plan, which is included in their comprehensive kit entitled, [*An Educator's Guide to Asperger Syndrome*](#), to help your child enter a classroom, and throughout their education:

Step 1: Educate Yourself

Different behaviors are a large part of Asperger Syndrome. Learning about Asperger Syndrome and the specific characteristics of your student will help you effectively manage the behaviors. Here are some helpful hints that can guide everyday school life for students with Asperger Syndrome.

- **Operate on “Asperger time.”** “Asperger time” means “Twice as much time, half as much done.” Students with Asperger Syndrome/HFA often need additional time to complete assignments, gather materials, and orient themselves during transitions.
- **Manage the environment.** Any change can increase anxiety in a student with Asperger Syndrome/HFA. Strive to provide consistency in the schedule and avoid sudden changes.
- **Create a balanced agenda.** Make a visual schedule that includes daily activities for students with Asperger Syndrome/HFA. Some parts of the daily schedule or certain classes or activities should be monitored or restructured, as needed.
- **Simplify language.** Keep your language simple and concise, and speak at a slow, deliberate pace. Students with Asperger Syndrome/HFA have difficulty “reading between the lines,” understanding abstract concepts like sarcasm, or interpreting facial expressions. Be clear and specific when providing instructions.
- **Manage change of plans.** Make sure the student with Asperger Syndrome understands that sometimes planned activities can be changed, canceled, or rescheduled. Have backup plans and share them with the child with Asperger Syndrome/HFA.
- **Be generous with praise.** Find opportunities throughout the day to tell the student with Asperger Syndrome what he or she did right. Compliment attempts as well as successes. Be specific to ensure that the student with Asperger Syndrome knows why you are providing praise.

Step 2: Reach Out to the Parents

The parents of your student with Asperger Syndrome are your first and best source of information about their child; they can provide you with information about their child's behavior and daily activities. Ideally, this partnership will begin with meetings before the school year. After that, it is critical to establish mutually agreed-upon modes and patterns of communication with the family throughout the school year.

Step 3: Prepare the Classroom

Having learned about the individual sensitivities and characteristics of your student with Asperger Syndrome, you now have the information you need to organize your classroom appropriately. You can manipulate the physical aspects of your classroom, making it more comfortable for children with Asperger Syndrome without sacrificing your general plans for the class. The Educator's Guide to Asperger Syndrome contains information



about specific approaches for structuring the academic and physical environment to address the needs of your student with Asperger Syndrome.

■ *Step 4: Educate Peers and Promote Social Goals*

Children with Asperger Syndrome/HFA have social deficits that make it difficult for them to establish friendships. However, with appropriate assistance, they can engage with peers and establish mutually enjoyable and lasting relationships.

The characteristics of Asperger Syndrome/HFA can cause peers to perceive a child with the disorder as odd or different. This can lead to situations that involve teasing or bullying. Children with Asperger Syndrome/HFA often cannot discriminate between playful versus mean-spirited teasing. Teachers and school staff must be aware that students with Asperger Syndrome/HFA are potentially prime targets of bullying or excessive teasing, and must watch for signs.

Many social interactions occur during unstructured times in settings outside the classroom where students with Asperger Syndrome/HFA may end up isolated. You may want to create a “circle of friends,” a group of responsible peers for the student with autism, who will not abandon him, serve as a model of appropriate social behavior, and protect against teasing or bullying. This tactic can also be encouraged outside of school.

■ *Step 5: Collaborate on the Educational Program Development.*

■ *Step 6: Manage Behavioral Challenges*

School is a stressful environment. Commonplace academic and social situations may create extreme stress for students with Asperger Syndrome/HFA. The stressors may include difficulty predicting events because of changing schedules, tuning into and understanding teacher’s directions, interacting with peers, anticipating changes, such as classroom lighting, sounds/noises, odors, and so on.

Tantrums or meltdowns (terms that are often used interchangeably) typically occur in three stages that can be of variable length. Students with Asperger Syndrome/HFA rarely indicate that they are under stress. While they may not always know when they are near a stage of crisis, most of their meltdowns do not occur without warning. There is a pattern of behavior, which is sometimes subtle, that suggests an imminent behavioral outburst. Prevention through the use of appropriate academic, environmental, social, and sensory supports and modification to environment and expectations is the most effective method.

There are many strategies that can be used to help your child avoid tantrums or meltdowns. By using a “functional behavior assessment,” a professional trained in ABA, education, or psychology can help you determine what triggers the tantrum, change the environment to reduce the stress it is causing, and teach your child to express his or her desires or feelings in a more adaptive manner.



Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Throughout your child's education, it will be essential for both you and your child's various educators to continue learning more about AS. You will need to collaborate during each school year and stay motivated to make certain that your child is excelling and feels comfortable in their learning environment. It is vital that your child's needs continue to be assessed and that you work with the team at school to set goals and objectives in your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Your child's IEP will be the road map for their education each year. As the parent, you will aid the school in crafting this plan and will sit in on all important meetings and evaluations. IEP's are formed by many members of the school staff, including teachers, therapists, psychologists and special education teachers. After your child's IEP is established, this team of educators will meet regularly to discuss your child's progress, both successes and struggles. These meetings will address not only academic concern, but also social and emotional issues as well.

Prior to the IEP planning meeting, the school professionals will offer guidance and evaluate your child. The official planning meeting will then take place. IEP's generally contain goals for your child (both long- and short-term), and services that will be provided throughout the year. In addition to the goals set for your child, the IEP must also include ways that these goals will be measured and steps that will be taken for your child to accomplish them. The IEP will be designed each year according to your child's progress and needs.

You may also find useful information in the Autism Speaks School Community Tool Kit at
www.autismspeaks.org/community/family_services/school_kit

