

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Cheat Sheet

What is autism?

Autism (sometimes called “classical autism”) is the most common condition in a group of developmental disorders known as the autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Autism is characterized by impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, and unusual, repetitive, or severely limited activities and interests. Other ASDs include Asperger syndrome, Rett syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (usually referred to as PDD-NOS). Experts estimate that three to six children out of every 1,000 will have autism. Males are four times more likely to have autism than females. (National Institute for Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2009).

Sensory Processing Characteristics of kids with ASD

- The kids can have “super” hearing or be “extra” sensitive to smells, light, and touch.
- Or they could be the direct opposite and not appear to register pain or seem to crave extreme sensations like loud noises, bright lights, pressure, etc.
- EX. fluorescent lights and crowds can be too much, so grocery stores or malls become overwhelming.
- They may be **impulsive** and/or **display odd repetitive behaviors (“stimming”)**
- They may get hot or cold easily and may forget to take off or put on extra clothing so make sure to check in now and then with them.



“Can’t” and “Won’t” is not the same thing

- The kid is not just “being difficult” or refusing to listen to hurt your feelings or because they don’t want to follow directions- they might not understand or be focused enough to hear you.
- **It’s not personal!**
- EX. you give a direction and the kid is still fidgeting with a toy, you repeat it several times and it appears he doesn’t hear you or is ignoring you.



Give clear and concise directions

- **Idioms (ex. “hold your horses”)** or sarcasm may not be understood
- Kids with ASD are often **literal** and will not follow your direction if it doesn’t make sense to them.
- **Limit your words**- use small sentences and say what you mean.
- A clear direction is “Jonny, please pick up your backpack and put it on the table”
 - Jonny hears- “Jonny, backpack goes on the table”
- An unclear direction is yelling from across the room, “I told you a million times, Jonny! Put your backpack over there with the others kid’s stuff!...”
 - Jonny hears
“Jonny...\$%^&^\$@%&&**&^”
- **Check for understanding** – ask them to repeat what you said and correct if necessary.



Language may be difficult

- The kid may be almost **nonverbal or have echolalia** (where they repeat words you said to them back to you, ex. “How are you today, Jane?” Jane responds, “How are you today, Jane?”)



- They may **talk excessively and in great depth about a particular subject** (it could be any subject, a few seen most commonly are movies, science fiction, cars, trains, clocks, vacuums, computers, electronics, video games, etc.)
- Speaking in **scripts (speaking in words and phrases directly memorized from another source)** is common as well (often taught at school or by memorizing favorite movies.)

Pictures or visual cues are helpful

- **Show the child what you want them to do**- draw a picture, find one online, take pictures in advance if you can to help them think about they should do.
- If you are familiar with simple signs in sign language, some kids may be familiar with simple signs for visual prompts.
- **Picture cards or PECS** (Picture Exchange Communications System) can be used

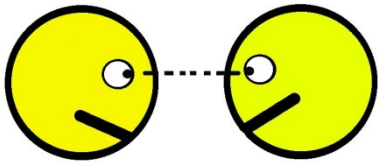


- PECS EXAMPLES

Eye contact and social cues are difficult

- **Eye contact is very difficult and kids with ASD often can't "read" expressions** (ex. eye rolling for annoyance).
- If you want them to look at you because what is being said is important or necessary, ask them in a firm and calm voice to look at you, then wait until they meet your gaze- even so, they may not sustain it for very long.

Eye-Contact



- **They may stand too close** or need to touch you while talking- remind them of personal space and even show them the distance they should be away from someone while talking by asking them to take two steps back or hold their arms straight out in front of them. If they are touching you then they need to move back to where their arms are straight and fingers are not touching you.
- They may have **trouble appropriately initiating and maintaining a conversation- be patient.**
- They may **wander off during conversation even when they initiated it**- direct them to wait and finish the conversation.



- They may be unable to understand that someone is sad if they are not crying, or angry if they aren't yelling, because they can't get the social cues if they aren't explicit.
- Offer ways to turn take like games or high fives- they often struggle with turn taking so practice as the opportunity arises.

- They may **not see the other person’s perspective** in any given situation- try thinking out loud while talking with them about a problem that needs to be fixed.
 - Ex. Sara took Bob’s ball and he wasn’t done playing with it, so he hit Sara and now Sara is crying and you go over to work it out between the two kids
 - You could say, “Bob, I know it makes you upset when you’re not done with your turn, but when you hit Sara, how do you think she felt?”
 - Answer might be a shrug or he might launch into some long explanation: just listen and empathize.
 - You say, “Hmmm, well when I really want my ball back I can get really upset too, but when I hit my friends it makes them sad or angry. I may not get my ball back and I may get into trouble. I don’t want my friends to be sad or angry with me. Next time, if I am not done with my turn, and I am upset, I am going to find a grown up to help me so I don’t get so angry and hit someone.”
 - This is a mini-**social story**- it tells them what they did, how they might feel, and what to do next time. It is something they can practice.

Provide consistency and routine

- Providing a **written schedule** or going over what to expect throughout the day can be important.
- If there will be changes in the routine or activities explain it to the kid and make sure they know what to expect.
- Changes, surprises or seemingly minor shifts in routine are often **major sources of meltdowns and heightened anxiety** for many kids with ASD.



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Remember, to see the whole kid!

- **The kid isn't just Autistic!** He or she has wonderful traits and just needs ways to successfully navigate through the world!



Have patience and find humor!

Also check out: Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew By Ellen Notbohm

<http://www.amazon.com/Things-Every-Child-Autism-Wishes/dp/1932565302> (a condensed article style version of this book is available if you Google it)