


# *For Specific Members of the School Community*

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 With an understanding of the basic characteristics and intervention strategies often found to be helpful for students with autism, it may also be beneficial to consider the experiences of students in the school community and their needs in specific settings and relationships. While these targeted sections are intended to address recognized issues relating to the specific needs of a component of the school community, it is also critical to reinforce the need for teamwork and reliance on the personnel who know an individual student best.

Every member of the school community has a right to feel knowledgeable and empowered in interacting with all of a school's students, so it is critical that lines of communication are open across the school team. While a bus driver rarely attends an IEP meeting, it does not follow that the needs of a child on the bus—and the strategies available to the bus driver—should not be part of the IEP planning process or the workings of the team. At all levels of interaction, it is important for the success of all involved that ask questions are encouraged and answered—of the child's teachers, paraprofessional or parent, so that each staff member feels supported and effective. The better each staff member knows each student, the more effective the support and the gifts and strengths of the student with autism will be recognized and appreciated.

A bulleted, comprehensive list of ideas across settings, many of which are included here, can be found at [Strategies at Hand](#).



# BUS DRIVERS AND TRANSPORTATION SUPERVISORS



# *Bus Drivers/Transportation Supervisors*

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Many students with autism start and end their day on the bus, and their transportation circumstances can vary considerably. Routing issues are important, but it may also be necessary to schedule accommodations for the child's sensory, behavioral, medical or organizational needs. A student might be placed on a smaller bus and/or accompanied by an aide, or may require supports or considerations in the midst of a full bus and busy situation. Understanding autism, as well as the particular characteristics of an individual child, is important for the transportation department planning for the child, as well as the drivers and aides who may transport him.

## *Things to think about:*

- Awareness of the characteristics of autism as well as the specifics of a student can be helpful in avoiding or managing upsetting situations
- Be aware of the impaired judgment, sensory issues or significant fears that might provoke unexpected behaviors in a student with autism—a lack of respect for traffic considerations may result in a tendency to dart into the street, or the presence of a dog on the sidewalk might mean the child refuses to get off of the bus—know what to do to avoid or manage particular needs
- Be mindful of communication challenges; solicit guidelines for communication from his family or special education staff, knowing that you may need to wait for a response to a question or use an alternative communication device or strategy such as pictures
- Be aware that a need for adherence to routine may result in anxiety (and behavior) surrounding changes to the bus route, substitute drivers, seat changes, etc—reduce anxiety by communicating with the student in advance, using visuals wherever possible
- For a child with medical issues such as seizures, it is important to develop a protocol for safety and management with the family and school nurse
- Be aware of the social vulnerability of this population of students and the propensity for them to be victims of bullying behaviors
- Students with autism are not socially savvy; therefore, if a student is being bullied or tortured quietly, he is likely to react or respond—and that is the overt behavior of which you are likely to become aware; consider the communication difficulties of a student with autism and make every attempt to fully understand the elements of a situation before reaching judgment regarding fault or behavior
- Transitions are difficult for some students – this may result in trouble getting on or off the bus
- Many students with autism like predictability and have good long term memory—a student might be able to assist a new or substitute driver with the route



## Strategies

- Adjust the route—shorten, or use preferential pickup/drop off situations (e.g. to the calmer side of the school, earlier or later than the rush of students, etc)
- Consider if the support of an aide is needed
- Be calm, positive and an appropriate behavior model for the student with autism as well as other students—greetings, etc.
- Reinforce the behaviors you wish to see with behavior-specific praise (e.g. “I love the way you went straight to your seat and buckled up!”)
- Use [About Me](#) to get to know relevant facts about each particular student’s likes, fears, needs, etc. Ask specific questions regarding safety and impulsivity.
- Visual schedules can be helpful in establishing and perpetuating routines, ensuring compliance (such as buckling a seat belt) and managing behavior. Following is a generic example, but a custom schedule can easily be made using a digital camera to take a picture of each step or action.
  1. Wait at the bus stop
  2. Get on the bus
  3. Sit down
  4. Buckle my seat belt
  5. Ride quietly to school
  6. Get off the bus
- Provide written rules or pictures of expectations of bus behavior for the child—as well as the school staff and parents so that they may provide additional support (e.g., if there is no eating on the bus, mom needs to know not to send the child out the door with a bagel)
- Work with the school team to provide social narratives or rule cards that might help a student understand a rule or expectation (e.g. why sitting too close is annoying to another rider, why a bus may be late, or what traffic is). Especially for a student who might have trouble understanding subtle social cues, provide ‘Unwritten rules for the bus’ and input on what the social conventions are on a particular route (e.g. seniors sit in the back)
- Give positive directions, minimize the use of ‘don’t’ and ‘stop’ e.g. ‘Please sit in your seat’ can more effective than ‘Don’t stand up’. This provides the student with the direction of exactly what you would like him to do.
- Allow ear plugs or allow use of music or headphones
- Allow hands on sensory items (e.g. squeeze toys)
- Consider peer buddies to support and shield a vulnerable student. It may be helpful to have support from school staff in finding a way to pair students.



- For a student with particularly challenging behavior, work with the school team to develop and employ an element of the positive behavior support plan specific to the needs on the bus



# ■ CUSTODIAL STAFF



# *Custodial Staff*

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## *Things to think about:*

- Awareness of the characteristics of autism as well as the specifics of a student can be helpful in avoiding or managing upsetting situations. Know who the students with special needs are.
- Be aware of the complex communication, social and behavioral needs of these students, as well as that some children may have impaired judgment or be at risk of running away; alert school staff if you see something of concern.
- Be alert that the smell of cleaning supplies or the sound of a vacuum cleaner might represent a sensory assault—know what to do to avoid or manage a student’s particular needs.
- Be aware of the social vulnerability of this population of students and the propensity for them to be victims of bullying behaviors; inform other staff if you observe situations that are of concern.

## *Strategies:*

- Be calm, positive and an appropriate behavior model for the student with autism as well as other students—greetings, etc.
- Be aware of communication and social concerns that might make talking to a student with autism difficult. Be prepared to wait for a response, whether it is an action or verbal answer.
- Give positive directions and minimize the use of ‘don’t’ and ‘stop’ e.g. ‘Please stay on the sidewalk’ can be more effective than ‘don’t walk on the grass’ for a student who might not hear the don’t or for one who isn’t sure where the acceptable place to walk may be.
- Use [About Me](#) to get to know relevant facts about each particular student’s likes, fears, needs, etc.



# GENERAL EDUCATION AND SPECIAL AREA TEACHERS



# *General Education and Special Area Teachers (including Physical Education, Music, Art, Library)*

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Teachers of students with autism in the general education setting should be supported by the school team in understanding and providing effective supports and interventions for these students. Communication among IEP team members, including the parents, is critical to recognizing areas of strength and need and being prepared to support a student with autism in a way that is beneficial to the student, as well as the remainder of the class. Inclusion and mainstreaming are not the same as dropping a child into a classroom—and significant planning, coordination, collaboration and supports are essential to building a positive experience for all involved. In addition, it may be necessary to start with small but successful periods of inclusion, building these opportunities as the student gains competence and confidence in varying settings.

Critical to appropriate support is a positive mindset that you can be successful, with the caveat that your definition of success might adjust along the way. Celebrate small victories.

Knowing the characteristics of autism and the particular qualities of a student will allow for appropriate planning on his behalf. Be prepared to adjust expectations—for example, in an art class, it might be appropriate to provide pre-cut samples for a project to a student with fine motor challenges, while also expecting that student (with his great memory and love of color) to be the class advisor on color combinations.

Activities that are often challenging for students with autism include:

- multi step directions and activities
- following verbal directions
- organization and following the schedule
- circle time, since it generally means sitting, listening to auditory information and verbal output
- centers time, since this involves academic tasks, sometimes unclear expectations, following directions
- free play, because it involves social skills, co-operative play and verbal skills with very little structure
- group instruction
- assemblies, music and PE classes for students with sensory issues



## *Strategies*

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- Be calm, positive and an appropriate behavior model for the student with autism as well as other students—greetings, etc.
- Be aware of the characteristics of autism and general strategies—for quick reference reminders use [Autism Basics](#) or [Asperger's Syndrome Basics](#).
- Use [About Me](#) to get to know relevant facts about each particular student's likes, fears, needs, etc. Ask specific questions regarding safety and impulsivity.
- Promote a welcoming environment, and provide opportunities for your student (and others!) to develop social interaction skills and extended learning
  - Teach understanding and acceptance—see [Resources](#) for suggested reading, including books and programs to use with the students
  - Pair the student with positive role models
  - Allow times for students to work in pairs, small groups
  - Be aware that students with autism can become isolated within the classroom (interaction only occurring between an aide and student) and be on the lookout for isolation and preventing its occurrence by working with the students and the paraprofessional to support social exchange among peers
- Ensure that organization, communication and sensory issues are addressed (see [General Strategies](#) and [Classroom Checklist](#))
  - Establish clear routines and habits which support regular activities and transitions. Alert student to changes in routine, staffing, etc.
  - Consider seating--situate the student for optimal attention to instruction or sensory needs
  - Pay particular attention to the general strategies outlined for supporting communication and organization (simple directions, wait-time for processing verbal requests or directions, visual schedules, prompts and cues, etc.)
  - Be tuned into sensory issues particular to your class (e.g. echoing locker rooms and loud, fast activity can make P.E. over-stimulating and overwhelming)
- Provide written rules of the classroom, including 'unwritten' conventions if necessary. Use social narratives to help a student understand a rule or expectation, as learners with autism often increase compliance if they understand why a rule exists. (e.g. It is important to remain quiet (no noise or talking) while the teacher is speaking. If it is noisy, the students will not be able to hear her.)
- Use descriptive praise to build desired behaviors (e.g. 'I like the way you put your trash in the trash can!')
- Consider needs/supports for class presentations (i.e. cue cards, visual supports or a power point presentation for a child with impaired expressive language skills), field trips, etc.
- Utilize teacher training on multi-modal instruction! Find ways to teach and reinforce by expecting your student to learn not only by hearing, but also seeing (pictures, maps, diagrams, patterns), doing (movement and hands on activities), saying (repeat after me...) and even singing.



- Collaborate with the student's special education staff to provide strategies for modifying curriculum, supports such as visuals, communication access, organizational tools, and directly teach study skills (note taking, time management, etc.)
- Make sure that activities such as field trips, class presentations, assemblies, and plays are addressed ahead of time. Think about ways the student can be included and discuss and plan for them with the support team.
  - Field Trips: use a social narrative to describe to the student where the trip is, who he will be with, what will occur and the schedule for the day. When possible include pictures (websites and Google Images are great resources)
  - Assemblies/ Plays/Presentations: prepare the student ahead of time with materials and social narratives; be attuned to sensory issues; be creative such as offering the student an opportunity to be “producer” with a run down of the program and the ability to sit off to the side away from other students and out of the noise.

In addressing curricular issues and making **academic modifications or accommodations**, it is important to keep the following suggestions in mind. These might be adjustments made by the general education teacher or in collaboration with a student's special education teacher or paraprofessional. For a student participating in an inclusive setting, the more he is able to follow along and participate in the activities of the classroom *in real time*, the better he can access the curriculum as well as the social objectives being targeted by inclusion.

- Define core curriculum objectives and concentrate on those—for some students this may be as simple as one or two basic components within a unit
- Concentrate on teaching less content, but teach to mastery and where appropriate, fluency
- Make sure student/support staff have classroom materials ahead of time
- Pre-teach relevant new vocabulary and key concepts, concentrating on those that build and repeat throughout the curriculum
- Make the information presented by the teacher accessible to the student: know the amount of verbal information the student can process, consider ways to break the information into manageable parts, highlighting key points, providing outlines, study notes, etc
- Use visuals wherever possible—to organize, improve comprehension and assess
- Review information
- Recognize that functional academic skills—note taking, test taking, true/false, organizing information, etc. may need to be taught and reinforced directly, separately from subject area content
- Consider homework—establish a method for recording assignments, present defined expectations, consider if accommodations or more time is needed



- Consider long term projects—support managing a timeline for due dates, chunk the assignment into smaller parts with a completion schedule and checklists
- In assessing, reduce expectations of performance in areas of difficulty for the student—to test concept knowledge, replace essays with multiple choice or fill in the blank questions with word banks or replace paragraphs with webs that show relationships, etc,
- Teach and test regularly and in small chunks: check for comprehension
- Consider allowing more time or an alternate setting for testing
- Review, repeat and move on when the student demonstrates proficiency
- If the student has difficulty learning a concept or skill, re-think how material is being presented understanding is being assessed
- Supply study guides ahead of tests
- Pre warn the student and paraprofessional when you give a pop quiz

## *Reading*

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- Students are likely to have difficulty comprehending material, predicting events, and reading between the lines/infering from the text.
- Be aware of a high proportion of students with high functioning autism who are adept at encoding and word calling, but may have significant issues with comprehension. Some students may be diagnosed with hyperlexia.
- Provide summaries or pre-exposure to a new reading book prior to its initiation. Identify the story line, plot, main characters and setting—with visuals as possible—to situate the student to the book.
- Provide specific structure to questions when expecting an answer for comprehension. Use multiple choice, cloze sentences with a word bank, or starter responses. Whereas it might be very difficult to answer “John, how did the wolf find grandmother’s house”?, a student with autism might show comprehension when asked, “John, the wolf found grandmother’s house by crossing the river and \_\_\_\_\_”?
- When giving choices, know how many choices are appropriate. Some may be able to pick from four choices, some from only two. Reducing the number of choices is a simple way of making a task simpler for the student, while still expecting independence and indication of learning.



## *Writing*

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It is essential to recognize that writing involves expressive language skills, word retrieval, organization of thoughts and fine motor skills, all of which are often challenges for students with autism. Strategies to support each of these areas of need are often required.

- Use visuals to prompt language—pictures, word banks, etc.
- Begin with cloze sentences or sentence starters
- Actively teach brainstorming, developing descriptive vocabulary, etc.
- Use template organization tools for all writing assignments—webs, outlines, etc. How to use of these tools will need specific instruction, and consistent and repeated use of the same tools is likely to result in greater independence and success.
- Provide significant structure and direction for the assignment.
- Consider using keyboarding, dictation and computer graphic organizer programs to support your student. Consider an [AlphaSmart](#) or other traveling keyboard that can be used across settings.
- Look for content rather than length of a written piece, knowing that writing may need to be evaluated by alternate methods than those used for the class in general. For example, rather than expecting the three paragraphs assigned, consider whether the student responded to the questions and the content objectives of the assignment.

## *Social Studies*

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If a student with autism has an interest in this area, he might become the class's resident expert on a certain topic, such as Egypt or modes of transportation. This might be a chance to allow this student to shine, as well as provide a motivational opportunity by using his particular area of interest to motivate flexibility or availability to learning new subject matter. Additional suggested strategies for those who might need additional assistance to grasp subject matter:

- Employ timelines, maps and visuals to support concepts and ideas
- Use videos (check out [YouTube](#)) to bring to life past events
- Teach idioms and analogies
- Act or role play



## *Science*

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As in other subjects, if a student with autism has a particular interest he might become the class's expert on the solar system, dinosaurs or rocks. Build confidence and interest in learning by celebrating this strength, while stretching flexibility and interest in other areas. Strategies and considerations:

- Support hands on activities
- Be aware of impulsivity and safety concerns
- Define rules for lab work
- Whenever possible, point out relationships between science concepts and real life experiences

## *Math*

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Although some students with autism excel in mathematical ability, and others might have an affinity for the rote aspects of memorizing math facts and functions, the language of math and associated abstract concepts can be difficult for many students with autism. Recognizing that this area often represents great variability in skill levels means that instruction is likely to need great individualization—a student who can perform double digit multiplication in his head may have great difficulty conceptualizing negative numbers or measurement. Word problems in particular are a notable area of struggle. Use the student's areas of strength to build his self confidence and motivation to working on areas of challenge.

- Break math down into specific parts, using visuals and manipulatives
- Use strategies such as [TOUCHMATH®](#) to support computation
- Students with autism often learn the patterns involved in a skill, rather than the concepts, so beware of over-learning—a child who spends months learning how to add and months learning how to subtract, may then take months *to learn to look for the sign* on a mixed addition/subtraction page
- For skills that require precise learning and execution, employ errorless teaching strategies that ensure correct development of a skill from the start, as corrective teaching is generally less effective and unlearning bad habits can be very difficult for students with autism



## *Physical Education*

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- Be aware of a student's particular motor, timing, language and attentional issues that might affect his performance and interest, and make appropriate accommodations
- Be attuned to the high sensory input inherent in echoing locker rooms, whistles, students running and shouting, and how this might affect your student
- Recognize that while a student may not be able to keep up with the pace of learning and activity of the whole class, he still might be able to learn components of a sport or activity that will offer a valuable social outlet or exercise opportunity
- Break tasks into small scaffolded components and celebrate successes—a student who learns how to shoot hoops has gained a valuable skill in turn-taking and an opportunity for social interaction with peers, even if he has not mastered the ability to participate in a 5 on 5 game
- Solicit the assistance of special education staff in providing training in appropriate locker room behavior, social conventions regarding privacy, etc. using social narratives, etc.

## *Music*

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Many individuals with autism have musical strengths, which can be celebrated, used to reinforce and motivate, and teach. A sense of rhythm and interest in music can be used to motivate a child to participate in an activity. Since music is processed in a different area of the brain than language, some individuals with limited language ability are able to sing, and song can be used to teach concepts or aid in memory development.

However, it is worth noting that the issues with timing, processing and motor planning often make choral responding—singing or reciting with a group—very difficult. It has been noted that if a student with autism *initiates* the choral (such as the Pledge of Allegiance) he can be successful, whereas the timing required for *joining in* can impede this ability.



## *Art*

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Strong visual skills, a heightened sense of visual perception or a unique perspective can often result in significant artistic ability in some individuals with autism. Others might take a special interest in color, and be the class expert on color combinations and the application of the principles of the color wheel.

Because of sensory/tactile issues, some students may have a difficult time with art class or certain art projects (e.g. clay on the hands, odors from materials, etc).

## *Computers and Technology*

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Even a very young child with autism can show great affinity for technology, being able to immediately find the 'on' button on any TV he encounters, or the rewind knob on any VCR. Visual acuity and varied ways of storing/accessing information and creating thought processes often make some individuals with autism adept at computer utilization and programming, stereo operation, film making, etc. A student with autism may be a great asset in developing technological resources, but his communication challenges may prevent him from being able to explain how something works. Use a student's problem-solving and technical expertise to make other tasks easier (replace handwriting with typing, produce a video instead of writing a paper) or to motivate attention to other areas being targeted.



# ■ LUNCH AND RECESS AIDES



# *Lunch/Recess Aides*

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Many schools schedule a student's familiar aide or teacher with a break or lunch during the child's recess or lunch. However, in most cases, this is the most critical time for a child with autism to have experienced staff support, particularly those who are trained in supporting social interactions and helping a child to become more independent. Recess and lunch are typically the least structured times of a student's day, and therefore, the most difficult for a child with organization, communication and social challenges. The support required during these times ranges from the practice of negotiating cafeteria tables, busy lunch lines and ordering (fast, with 67 hungry kids just behind you!) and figuring out how to keep busy and have fun on an expansive playground with no set rules. In addition to the organizational and sensory issues, this is a time where deficits in communication and social ability become readily apparent and exceptionally painful.

If scheduling is such that lunch and recess responsibilities fall to unfamiliar staff, some understanding of autism and basic strategies will be helpful in making a difference for a student.

- Being aware of the characteristics of autism (see [Autism Basics](#) and [Asperger's Syndrome Basics](#) summaries) as well as the specifics of a student can be helpful in avoiding or managing upsetting situations; some children may be at risk of wandering or running away; a door buzzer, fire alarm, certain odors or a school bell might represent a sensory assault—know what to do to avoid or manage particular needs
- Be mindful of communication challenges; solicit guidelines for communication from his special education staff, knowing that wait time for a response to a question, use of an alternative communication device or use of a communication strategy such as picture exchange might be necessary
- Be mindful of the student's need to develop daily living skills, and promote as much ability and independence as possible (e.g. let him get his napkin, teach him to enter his meal code in the cafeteria computer, etc.)
- Explore opportunities for school staff to think creatively—recess can be a great time for a push-in intervention from the speech pathologist or occupational therapist, who could model strategies and set up games that daily staff (and peers) could continue on days when they do not provide direct therapy
- Be tuned into the strategies modeled by the student's trained support staff and ask for their help with areas of concern
- Friendly greetings, acceptance and patience can help to make the child feel comfortable in the school and small responsibilities can help him to feel like a contributing member of the community—celebrate successes!



## *Strategies:*

- Be calm, positive and an appropriate behavior model for the student with autism as well as other students—greetings, etc.
- Use [About Me](#) to get to know relevant facts about each particular student's likes, fears, needs, etc.
- Create a quiet spot, if necessary, for mellow activities or a less hectic lunchtime
- Ask familiar staff to practice or help troubleshoot skills outside of the chaos of scheduled times—start the lunch line routine five minutes before others arrive, ask the OT to teach techniques for learning to swing independently, etc.—build skills toward independence
- Use a visual menu for making choices in the cafeteria
- Reduce the number of choices or make a choice and practice ordering (with necessary visual supports, etc) earlier in the day
- Visual schedules can be helpful in establishing and perpetuating routines, ensuring compliance (such as putting the tray and silverware in the appropriate places) and managing behavior.

### Clearing My Lunch

- ✓ Put my plate, silverware and trash on my tray
- ✓ Walk carefully with the tray to cleanup area
  - ✓ Toss trash (only!) into trashcan
  - ✓ Put my silverware in the gray tub
  - ✓ Place my plates on the counter
  - ✓ Stack my tray in the cubby
  - ✓ Give myself a sticker!

- Visual prompts and cues can be employed to help a child make choices, or know how to initiate or respond (e.g. cue card 'I would like pizza please')
- Seek help in learning how to create structured settings—organizing a game of follow the leader, setting up Uno at a lunch table, etc. Use the child's existing skills and interests to motivate him to participate, since the social demands are enough for him to work on
- Set up and explain rules of playground games. If the playground is too much for a student, designate a quieter area for board games or cards with a peer.
- Use descriptive praise to build desired behaviors (e.g. "I like the way you put the ball back where it belongs")
- Give positive directions to allow for incomplete language processing. Minimize use of 'don't' and 'stop' e.g. instead of 'Don't stand in the

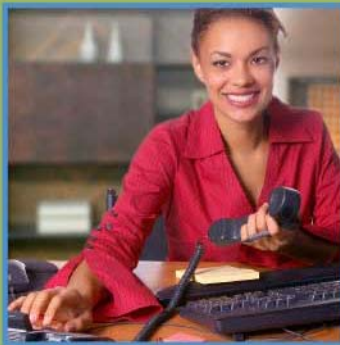


hallway' try 'Please sit at your lunch table' for a student who might not hear the 'don't' – or for one who isn't sure where the acceptable place to sit might be.

- Allow peers the opportunity to be a lunch buddy (this often works better than assigning a buddy, as it selects students who are motivated to take on this role)
- Be aware of the vulnerability of this population of students and the propensity for them to be victims of bullying behaviors
- Students with autism are not socially savvy; therefore, if a student is being bullied or tortured quietly, he is likely to react or respond—and that is the behavior of which you are likely to become aware; consider the communication difficulties of a student with autism and make every attempt to fully understand the elements of a situation before reaching judgment regarding fault or behavior
- Work with the school team to provide social narratives to help a student understand a rule or expectation, e.g. why sitting too close is annoying to another student, bathroom etiquette and hand washing, etc.
- Work with the school team to provide written or visual supports for 'Unwritten rules for the cafeteria or recess' and input on social conventions
- Consider peer buddies to support and shield a vulnerable student—it may be helpful to have support from other staff in finding a way to pair students.
- For a student with particularly challenging behavior, work with the school team to develop and employ an element of the positive behavior support plan specific to the needs at lunch/recess




# OFFICE STAFF



# Office Staff

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 A school's administrative staff often represents a consistent and welcoming community within the school, and can provide an excellent opportunity for individuals with autism to practice social interactions and perform small tasks and jobs.

- Awareness of the characteristics of autism as well as the specifics of a student can be helpful in avoiding or managing upsetting situations—know the communication, social and behavioral needs of each student
- Be mindful of communication challenges; solicit guidelines for communication from his special education staff, knowing that wait time for a response to a question, use of an alternative communication device or use of a communication strategy such as picture exchange might be necessary
- Be tuned into the strategies modeled by the student's trained support staff
- Friendly greetings, acceptance and patience can help to make the student feel comfortable in the school and errands or small responsibilities in the office can help him to feel like a contributing member of the community—celebrate successes!
- Once a routine has been broken into steps and effectively taught, most students with autism will consistently and reliably perform—and then become a dependable assistant

## *Strategies:*

- Be calm, positive and an appropriate behavior model for the student with autism as well as other students—greetings, etc.
- Use [About Me](#) to get to know relevant facts about each particular student's likes, fears, needs, etc.
- Visual schedules can be helpful in establishing and perpetuating routines, ensuring compliance (such as putting the attendance records in the appropriate box) and managing behavior.
- Social narratives might be employed to help a student understand a rule or expectation (e.g., It is important to say good morning to Mrs. Smith. Saying hello is being friendly. It makes others happy when you are friendly.)
- Visual prompts or cue cards can be employed to help a child make choices, or know how to initiate or respond
- Use descriptive praise to build desired behaviors (e.g. "It was great that you put the attendance sheet in the mailbox!")
- Remember to create strategies to include all students on all school correspondence. Many students who do not have a homeroom like the other classes miss school picture day, yearbooks, information on extracurricular activities, etc. because papers do not go home.
- Support school announcements over the intercom with written notes home for students who might have trouble processing—or recalling—information.



# ■ PARAPROFESSIONALS



# Paraprofessionals

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A paraprofessional assigned to a classroom of children with special needs or a 1:1 aide for a student with autism is in a unique position to effect great changes in that individual's life and function, and to help set the tone for his place in the school community. It is also likely that little training with respect to autism spectrum disorders has been given to prepare for this role. In addition, since the primary responsibility of a paraprofessional is viewed as supporting the student, it is likely that IEP meetings and other opportunities for learning about the abilities and needs of a student, and strategies that might be effective in supporting him, have occurred without the paraprofessional's involvement.

It is essential to have knowledge of the characteristics of autism in general, and the assigned student in particular. Know his learning style, preferences, needs and strengths. In addition, it will be helpful to understand the special implications about any of the other school environments described in this Target section in which the paraprofessional participates with the student. If support is provided at lunch, then be aware of the sensory and communication needs—and strategies to employ—during lunch. Implementation of the behavior support plan and sensory strategies are likely to fall primarily in the paraprofessional's hands, as may academic modifications or supports.

Of all the individuals who support a student over the course of a school day, a 1:1 aide is the most likely to become the one on whom the student becomes most dependent. As such, it is critical to maintain the mindset of trying to work oneself out of a job; otherwise, there is the risk of developing the 'Velcro aide' syndrome (overly attached) and creating a prompt-and-personnel-dependent student. Remember to strive towards raising expectations and promoting independence in the student at whatever level he is capable of handling.

Think of your primary responsibility not as an ongoing support for the student, but as working yourself out of a job.



## *Strategies:*

- Be calm, positive and an appropriate behavior model for the student with autism as well as other students—greetings, etc.
- Be proactive about learning about the student—ask questions, request to take part in meetings and trainings, know the strategies to be employed, etc.
- Become expert in understanding and supporting his communication challenges; solicit guidelines for communication from his special education staff, knowing that wait time for a response to a question, use of an alternative communication device or communication strategy such as picture exchange might be necessary
- Use [About Me](#) to get to know relevant facts about each particular student's likes, fears, needs, etc.
- Carve out a quiet spot in the school, if necessary, for when the student needs time to regroup
- Be creative about finding opportunities to practice or troubleshoot skills outside of the chaos of scheduled times—bus loading, lunch line, locker room, etc. and work on building skills toward independence
- Build your student's independence
- Practice skills across settings and promote generalization
- Recognize that the paraprofessional's actions, attitude and responses can help—or hinder—the growth and behavior of the student
- As the student becomes more independent, the IEP team might decide to alter the level of intervention—such as replacing a 1:1 pairing with a classroom aide situation. To test and practice increasing a student's level of independence use the [Invisible Aide](#) strategy.



## *The Ten Commandments of Paraprofessional Support*

1. Thou shalt know well both your students and the disabilities they manifest.
2. Thou shalt learn to take your students' perspectives, and realize that they have significant difficulty taking yours.
3. Thou shalt always look beyond your student's behaviors to determine the functions that those behaviors serve.
4. Thou shalt be neither blinded by your by your students' strengths, nor hold them to standards they cannot meet.
5. Thou shalt master the art of rendering the appropriate degree of support for your students' level of skill development and behavior.
6. Thou shalt exercise vigilance in fading back prompts and promoting competence and independence in your students.
7. Thou shalt be proactive both in seeking out information to help your students, and in preparing and implementing the support that they need to be successful.
8. Thou shalt neither usurp the teachers' role, nor be albatrosses around their necks.
9. Thou shalt leave your egos at the school house door!
10. Thou shalt perform your duties mindfully, responsibly and respectfully at all times.

*Source: How to Be a Para Pro by Diane Twachtman-Cullen*

*How to Be a Para Pro <http://www.starfishpress.com/products/parapro.html> offers further reinforcement of these specific areas, as well as vignettes and troubleshooting suggestions, or see other educational/social support options in Resources.*




# ■ PEERS



# Peers

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 In some research on behavior in autism, classmates are referred to as 'peer confederates.' Establishing this mindset of peers as the guys in the trenches and collaborators in the mission is essential to building an environment that appropriately and wholly supports, values, challenges and provides growth to a student with autism. Typically developing children will vary in terms of temperament and interest, but in general most will eventually give up on a child who does not reciprocate, unless they are provided with a bit of specific understanding and skills themselves. Despite this, children are often natural teachers and instinctively toss aside the 'can't' mentality that generally develops once we become adults. While not all children will take a specific interest in engaging or supporting children who are different, almost all can benefit from efforts at improving understanding and building sensitivity and acceptance.

Autism education or sensitivity training can occur in a generalized manner, where students learn about differences and sensitivity not related to a particular student. These class activities or assemblies do not have to target autism specifically, as formulating open minds and hearts is helpful to individuals with needs of all sorts. Autism Awareness Month (April) offers many opportunities to focus a class on learning more about the statistics and impact of autism.

Assembly content and classroom programs will vary with the age levels of the students. For younger children the message might be more about knowing the word autism and treating people who might be different with tolerance and understanding. Peers in upper grades might learn more about specifics of autism (signs) and what they might do to help. As with other supports, employing a team approach is usually beneficial, as it provides various perspectives, as well as a body of resources for the students who might want to discuss concerns or ideas at a later time (parents in the community, siblings of students with autism, and professionals such as school psychologists, counselors, and teachers).

One school has used the following format for a general autism awareness assembly, followed up by more direct discussion and reinforcement of learning.



## Autism Assembly

### Multi-Purpose Room

30 minutes

#### Introduction

1 minute

- Who we are and why we are doing this?

#### What is Autism?

2.5 minutes

- Definition, examples, statistics, gender bias, rising incidence, co-morbidities
- Show video clips of various people with autism with different communication abilities
  - *Temple Grandin*
  - *Normal People Scare Me*
  - *Autism Everyday*
  - *Five for Fighting*

#### Being a Parent of a Child with Autism

2.5 minutes

- Challenges, family life, etc.

#### Treatments for Autism

2 minutes

- Intensive, early, ABA, TEACCH, speech, OT

#### Social Aspects of Autism

2 minutes

- Impact of social piece, how you can help

#### School Social Support Club Member

4 minutes

- Personal connections, what the club has done so far

#### Closing

1 minute

- Thanks and what we will do in classrooms

### Breakout Sessions In Classrooms

30 minutes

- Distribute school psychologists, special education staff, parents and members of the social club throughout the breakouts

- General discussion and question and answer (if needed, jumpstart conversation with three anecdotes for the club members to read/act out)

Distribute "***How to be a Friend***" handout

Reinforce learning by filling in "***What I Learned About Autism***" puzzle pieces.



In addition to addressing the obvious—peers—it is also important to reach out to those who know the classmates best and are often their primary source of information and advice, the parents of the peers. Since many of these parents will not have had autism experience themselves, they may not understand or have the tools they need to appropriately support their children in making allowances or fostering relationships with children who seem different or challenging. Involving the overall school community in awareness and sensitivity building is often beneficial, as compassion usually builds with understanding. This can take the form of assemblies or PTO presentations to parents in general, or may require a more direct approach within a classroom or grade level. Some families may prefer to protect their student's privacy (which is their right), while others might be inclined to share information in a letter or meeting about their student's challenges and interests with his classmates' parents, finding that greater understanding and perspective reduce fear and improve acceptance.

Many schools have found it helpful to have a parent, caregiver or school representative who knows the student well introduce the student at the beginning of a school year or a new inclusion opportunity. If the family or team feels that protecting the student's privacy is important, the student may not even be mentioned by name and general sensitivity training may be all that is addressed. Out of respect for the student, a more specific introduction is often done while he is not in the room. It is important to present the student as a person with unique abilities and similarities (a family, siblings, pets, love of music, favorite foods, video games and movies), as well as present some of the challenges and differences the students might notice or need to be aware of, such as sensory needs. For younger children, it sometimes helps to point out that autism is not something you can 'catch.' Workshop activities that help typical students understand how difficult it might be to have specific learning disabilities or autism, such as having the student with the best handwriting in the class use his non-preferred hand, while wearing an oven mitt, to try to produce an equally neat presentation. Allowing time for observations and questions is critical to making the peers feel like active players in the process.

Curriculum and books that teach about differences and acceptance often can be worked into the social studies curriculum in classrooms, or targeted peer groups can use these as a way to set the tone for classroom supports or social skills groups. Use [\*How to Be a Friend\*](#) or [\*Ideas from The Friend Program at SARRC\*](#) or investigate these tools that employ literature and DVDs to spark discussion, and also include lesson plans for exploring, role playing and developing an understanding and supportive school population:



Trevor, Trevor by Diane Twachtman Cullen  
[www.starfishpress.com/about/dianet.html](http://www.starfishpress.com/about/dianet.html)

The Autism Acceptance Book by Ellen Sabin  
[www.wateringcanpress.com/html/aboutellen.html](http://www.wateringcanpress.com/html/aboutellen.html)

Wings of Epoh by Gerda Weissman Klein  
<http://shop.wingsofepoh.org/main.sc>

With Open Arms by Mary Schlieder, M.S.  
[www.schoolswithopenarms.com/contact.php](http://www.schoolswithopenarms.com/contact.php)

The Sixth Sense II by Carol Gray  
[www.thegraycenter.org/store/index.cfm?fuseaction=product.display&product\\_id=45](http://www.thegraycenter.org/store/index.cfm?fuseaction=product.display&product_id=45)

It is important in developing skills in peers that they serve as appropriate models and social partners, so creating mini-therapists is not the objective of peer training. However, it is often helpful to put communication and social differences in context, so teaching some basic understanding of autism and specific strategies for interacting with a particular student are often effective.

Another option is the [Circle of Friends](#) approach—a trained group of peer mentors who provide good social role models and are scheduled to interact with a specific student on a consistent basis; activities can include teaching scripts and how to ‘chat’ (using topic lists or boxes), noncompetitive games, book clubs, extracurricular activities and more.

Peer Training should also occur in an ongoing fashion, where students are supported and trained in working in pairs or small groups by trained staff, who work to fade the intensity of their interventions on behalf of the student with autism and allow the natural supports of the students to take over as much as possible.

### ***Student Clubs for Autism Speaks (SCAS)***

[Student Clubs for Autism Speaks](#) help further the mission of Autism Speaks by creating the opportunity for students to engage and actively participate in positively affecting the lives of people with autism. Through education, awareness, friendship and fundraising, SCAS includes students at the middle school, high school and college level.




# SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION, PRINCIPALS, INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM MEMBERS



# *School Administration, Principals, Interdisciplinary Team Members*

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 An inclusive-minded, informed administration sets the stage for a successful inclusive school. It is essential that school administrators and principals have a positive attitude about their students with special needs, as their attitudes establish expectations and the tone for the entire school staff and students. Knowing the benefits of inclusion, to the students with exceptional needs as well as the typical population is helpful in developing this perspective. Keeping this information in perspective is also essential, as the wishes of the family and the needs of the student might mean that inclusion might start with five minutes a day—and build from there with increasing competence and confidence.

Just valuing inclusion is not enough, and being informed and prepared is essential for a positive experience for everyone involved. For schools with students on the autism spectrum, it is critical that the administrative staff know the characteristics of autism, and the particulars of each specific student, in making decisions about classroom and staffing assignments, training and support for the team and programming for the student. Staffing is critical, since untrained or ineffective staff supports can aggravate a challenging situation or cause increased anxiety and difficulty for a student. Be informed about whether a student's needs are being met, and listen to the concerns of the family and other staff members, knowing that 'good teaching' for a typical student might be the wrong approach for a student with the complex needs of autism.

In many schools the school psychologist or case manager will be the gatekeeper for referrals and special education services. It is helpful that this coordinator is aware of the characteristics of autism, as well as the greater risk of co-morbid emotional and behavioral disorders that might benefit from surveillance and targeted treatment. Students with autism may experience aggression, self-injury, depression, anxiety, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and tics, but children and youth with autism often do not receive targeted treatments for these issues since parents and school personnel may not recognize them as separate or treatable disorders. Symptom overlaps, varying presentations and cognitive factors may make separating out diagnoses difficult and there are no screening tools for these other disorders in individuals with autism. Similarly, other educational challenges, such as dyslexia, vision problems, and auditory processing disorders can occur in students with autism, without the usual cues suggesting assessment (e.g., a student with limited verbal ability is not likely to say "mommy, I can't see the blackboard.") Concerns raised by IEP team members should be considered in the context of these issues, as effective assessments and accurate diagnoses are essential to appropriate intervention planning.



Since school administrators are often called in to challenging situations, it also is important to be involved in and knowledgeable about a child's **positive behavior support plan (PBS)** and the strategies in place for that student. Respecting the needs of the student and embracing the mindset that behavior is communication are essential at times when intervention is necessary.

- Be flexible and open-minded
- Provide introductory and on-going staff training and awareness, ranging from raising the skill levels of special education staff, to supporting general education teachers, specials providers, bus drivers, lunch aides, etc. in their understanding and knowledge of autism and their students
- Support the exchange of information and promote collaboration among departments and staff, as this is essential for supporting a student across settings. Distribute the tools in the [Appendix](#) as appropriate
- Work to include 1:1 or classroom support paraprofessionals in trainings, IEP meetings, related therapies (speech, OT, etc.) sessions and positive behavior support planning and evaluation; often these individuals spend more time with a student with autism, across settings, than any other staff in the school
- Promote opportunities for regular team meetings and open communication
- Be proactive—support the IEP team in developing positive behavior plans with an emphasis on providing the supports and interventions necessary to AVOID behaviors. See [Resources](#), [Appendix](#) for information on PBS.
- Support school staff in thinking creatively—recess can be an ideal time for a push-in intervention from the speech pathologist or occupational therapist, who even once a week could model strategies and set up games that daily staff (and peers) could continue over the rest of the week
- Prepare for transitions. Invite the student to view a new classroom or school prior to the first day so that he has time to take in the new surroundings (and staff, if possible) without overwhelming sensory stimuli.
- Get personal. Friendly greetings and a sense of acceptance can help to make a student feel comfortable in the school. Use *About Me* in Resources to get to know relevant facts about each particular student's likes, fears, needs, etc.
- Learn something about each student to form a personal connection, and celebrate successes with behavior specific praise (e.g. "I like how you are walking in the hall so quietly!")
- Be mindful of a student's communication challenges; solicit guidelines for communication from his special education staff, knowing that wait time for a response to a question, use of an alternative communication device or communication strategy such as picture exchange might be necessary



- Be cognizant of the student's need to develop living skills, and promote opportunities for inclusion in the school community and steps toward independence as possible
- Allow opportunities for staff to practice skills outside of the chaos of certain situations so that they might develop the skill without all the confounding sensory and social issues (e.g. allow a child to go early to dress for P.E. in a quiet locker room or to practice using a tray or ordering lunch a few minutes before classmates arrive)
- When planning fire drills, etc., know that this can be extremely anxiety provoking for a student with autism. Warning these students and staff in advance will go along way in helping the students manage the noise and change in routine the fire drill triggers.
- Be aware of the vulnerability of this population of students and the propensity for them to be victims of bullying behaviors—proactively build a school culture where bullying is not acceptable through awareness building, peer sensitivity, strategies and procedures
- Students with autism are not socially savvy; therefore, if a student is being bullied or tortured quietly, he is likely to react or respond—and that is the overt behavior of which you are likely to become aware; consider the communication difficulties of a student with autism and make every attempt to fully understand the elements of a situation before reaching judgment regarding fault or behavior
- Provide staff and peer training and team collaboration opportunities
- Ensure that students are part of the school community and informed of school events and opportunities—this is often overlooked for students in specialized classrooms who might not participate in homeroom. For students with autism it would be helpful if emails or memos were sent home to the child's parents if announcements are made during school regarding important school information; students with autism may not go home and let their parents know of announcements that they have heard in school.
- Promote opportunities for social interaction and development--find ways to include students in school productions, extra curricular activities and clubs
- Consider peer groups for social skills trainings, and peer buddies to support and shield a vulnerable student.
- Provide peer supports and training
- Meet frequently with the student's IEP team to see if the PBSP is working and that it is being implemented across all environments. Support efforts with [Classroom Checklist](#), [Reinforcement Strategies](#) and [Data Collection](#).
- Be considerate of the family's needs and expectations. Be sure to include them in all meetings and discussions involving the student.
- Be respectful to parents when meeting as a team. If everyone is using a formal title, such as Mrs. or Mr., do not refer to them as "the mom" or "the dad."



In many schools, when a student exhibits a maladaptive behavior that is seen as aggressive, dangerous or refractory to other interventions, the principal, case manager or another administrator is called in to the situation. In these instances, it is essential to remember that behavior is a means of communication, and not necessarily an overt desire to inflame or harm others. It is rare that an extreme behavior just occurs one day, as usually there is a pattern of inappropriate supports and interventions and a build up of frustration over time. If called in to assist:

- Be familiar with the details of the student's positive behavior support plan
- Remain calm
- Take care not to embarrass or reprimand the child immediately and in view of others
- With the student, use limited verbal directions. Less can be more. Excessive talking and agitated adults can escalate a situation. A few minutes of quiet can help everyone. Then short simple sentences.
- Use established guidelines for communication and be prepared to wait for a response
- Give choices to help to engage the student and de-escalate his sense of being pushed around, e.g. 'Do you want to talk about this in the nurse's office or in my office?'
- Employ written input/visual choices/cartooning/social narratives to investigate the student's perspective, feelings and interpretation and to teach why his actions were unacceptable
- Sending the message to the student that the team is working to understand his perspective and trying to figure out why he exhibited maladaptive behavior (and then following up by instituting appropriate supports and preventive measures) will be more helpful to changing the student's behavior than a consequence such as suspension
- Obtain the facts relating to the situation from a variety of sources, remembering to gather information on the behavior, as well as the events and conditions leading up to the behavior (especially sensory issues that are often not considered) and the consequences typically employed for similar behaviors that have occurred previously (responses or inadvertent rewards for maladaptive behaviors can build, rather than reduce, them)
- Recognize and consider that interventions and strategies in place, even if well-intentioned, may be contributing to the development of the behavior
- Take care in interacting with the student's parents, who generally dread reports of behavior. Remember that this happened at school, and while the child is their responsibility, the conditions that led to the behavior were outside of their control. Be mindful of their perspective and insights in working as a team in assessing the underlying cause of the behavior and developing a plan for promoting effective replacement behavior.



# ■ SCHOOL NURSES



# School Nurses

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It is important to be aware of any medications or additional health issues that a student has—or may be inclined to have, such as those described in the Other Challenges section. Be aware of multiple medications and co-morbid conditions—physical or psychological.

It is also important to be aware that, in addition to traditional medical care, some families may follow the advice of physicians and alternative medicine providers who follow less conventional approaches to treat the underlying medical issues or symptoms of autism; these can range from dietary supplements or acupuncture to chelation of heavy metals. To better understand some of these approaches, visit the [Autism Research Institute website](#) .

Many students with autism have other health needs, as well as the illnesses and bumps and bruises that all children experience. The nurse's office should be a safe and supportive place for students with special needs, but effective interaction will require some programming.

- Awareness of the characteristics of autism as well as the specifics of a student can be helpful in avoiding or managing upsetting situations; some children may be at risk of running away; a door buzzer, fire alarm or school bell might represent a sensory assault—know what to do to avoid or manage particular needs
- Be mindful of a student's communication challenges; solicit guidelines for communication from his special education staff, knowing that wait time for a response to a question, use of an alternative communication device or communication strategy such as picture exchange might be necessary.
- Since a trip to the nurse's office may not be an everyday occurrence, it is often helpful to get to know the student prior to an emergency situation; spend time in his day, invite him to visit the nurse's office, etc. so that fear of the unknown is not coupled with injury or illness
- Understand the student's medical needs, and converse with the family and/or physician with respect to special interventions or medications
- Many children with autism are on medications or special diets; even if these are not taken during the school day, it might be helpful to know what those medications are and possible side effects; be aware that the medical team/family may wish to keep other caregivers (teachers, aides) blind to changes in medication so as to elicit unbiased observations of the effects of interventions
- Consider using a questionnaire so that this information is available in the case of side effects or an emergency
- Remember that behavior is communication—consider injury, pain, etc. if a child has significant new behaviors



### *Strategies:*

- Be calm, positive and an appropriate behavior model for the student with autism as well as other students—greetings, etc.
- Use [About Me](#) to get to know relevant facts about each particular student's likes, fears, needs, etc.
- Allow a student with autism the support of a familiar aide or caregiver while in the nurse's care, as this should offer better access to communication, increased compliance and reduced anxiety (e.g. the aide might ask the student to open his mouth—and *then* you can look in)
- Getting a child to take medication can be challenging—ask about strategies that have been used successfully at home; other strategies that have been *employed* successfully are use of visual schedules, social stories, or reward systems to promote compliance with taking medication
- Utilize a [visual pain scale](#) so that a student can give a framework of the severity of the pain, and pictures so that he can point to where the pain is felt
- Use visual supports and examples where possible (e.g. “open your mouth” might be replaced with “do this” and appropriate modeling)
- Allow students a place where they can keep things like a change of clothes to independently manage situations that require medical intervention such as soiling.




# SCHOOL SECURITY



# *School Security*

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 All too often there are news reports of the misinterpretation of an individual with autism's behavior resulting in the use of excessive force and harm to the individual. It is critical that security staff—and ideally the local first responders—are knowledgeable about who the individuals with autism in the community are, and the characteristics of autism. A student with autism might not respond to his name, or to a specific command to do or stop doing something. Understanding the issues with communication, anxiety, unreasonable fears, and sensory issues as well as lack of appropriate fear, and a tendency for some individuals with autism to wander or run away (elope) are critical to successful and safe support.

This information piece was developed as a wallet card, specifically to inform first responders about an interaction with an individual with autism. Additional information, including training videos and materials in many languages, is available at Dennis Debbaudt's [\*Autism Risk & Safety Management\*](#).



*From: Debbaudt Legacy Productions' On Scene Autism Information Card*

*The person you are interacting with:*

*Communication:*

- May be non verbal or have limited verbal skills
- May not respond to your commands or questions
- May repeat your words or phrases; your body language and emotional reactions
- May have difficulty expressing needs

*Behavior:*

- May display tantrums or extreme distress for no apparent reason
- May laugh, giggle or ignore your presence
- May be extremely sensitive to lights, sounds or touch
- May display a lack of eye contact
- May have no fear of real danger
- May appear insensitive to pain
- May exhibit self-stimulating behavior: hand flapping, body rocking or attachment to objects

*In Security Situations:*

- May not understand rights or warnings
- May become anxious in new situations
- May not understand consequences of their actions
- If verbal, may produce false confession or misleading statements

*Tips for Interactions with Persons with Autism:*

- Display calming body language; give person extra personal space
- Use simple language
- Speak slowly; repeat and rephrase question
- Use concrete terms and ideas; avoid slang
- Allow extra time for response
- Give praise and encouragement
- Exercise caution
- Person may have seizure disorders and low muscle tone
- Given time and space, person may deescalate their behavior
- Seek advice from others on the scene who know the person with autism.

*Debbaudt, D. and Legacy, D. On Scene Autism Information Card. Debbaudt Legacy Productions. Port Saint Lucie , Florida - Waterford , Michigan . 2004.*

