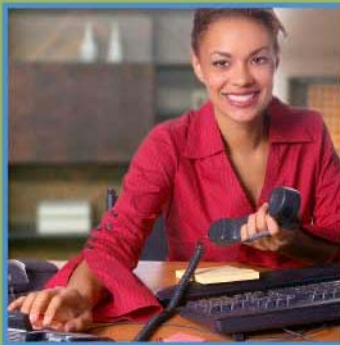


# OFFICE STAFF



# *Autism Basics*

---

## *What does autism look like?*

Autism is a term commonly used for a group of neuro-developmental disorders also known as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) or Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The core symptoms of autism are challenges related to:

- **communication**
- **social interaction**
- **restrictive or repetitive behaviors and interests**

Individuals with autism can also experience other difficulties, including medical issues, differences in coordination and muscle tone, sleep disturbances, altered eating habits, anxiety or disordered sensory perceptions. The features, abilities and severity of symptoms vary considerably among individuals with autism.

These differences may also present as exceptional abilities, and autism can occur with or without other learning challenges. It is important to think of each individual with autism as intelligent, even if language or behavioral difficulties might not reveal abilities in the way one might expect. A student with autism may display some or all of the following characteristics, which may represent challenges from a certain perspective, or strengths from another (e.g. a student who appears inflexible or rigid may also be the most compliant with the rules of a classroom):

- Difficulty understanding language, gestures and/or social cues
- Limited or no speech, or verbalizations that repeat or maintain a particular topic
- Limited or no eye contact
- Difficulty relating or participating in a back-and-forth conversation or interaction
- Social awkwardness
- Intense or odd interests in unusual topics or objects, unusual play
- Repetitive behaviors, such as pacing or lining things up, spinning, hand flapping, or rocking
- More or less sensitivity to light, sound, smell, taste or touch than usual
- Abnormal fears and/or lack of appropriate fear of real dangers
- Difficulty managing transitions, changes in routine, stress, frustration
- Strong visual skills
- Good rote and long term memory (math facts, sports statistics, etc.)
- Adherence to rules, Honesty
- Intense concentration or focus, especially on a preferred activity
- Understanding and retention of concrete concepts, patterns, rules
- Musical, mathematical, technological or artistic ability or interest



## *Where does it come from?*

There is no known cause of most cases of autism, though the best scientific evidence points toward a combination of genetic and environmental influences. Autism is a neurological/biological disorder, not a psychological/emotional condition.

Autism is found in all social, racial and ethnic groups, and is 3-4 times more prevalent in boys than in girls. Autism occurs in 1 out of 150 children, up from 1 in 10,000 in 1980.

## *What do I need to keep in mind?*

- Individuals with autism can learn and many make dramatic improvements, especially with early and intensive intervention
- Communication challenges can encompass a broad range, both in terms of understanding and speaking (understanding gestures or spoken language, delays in processing, inability to form sounds or full sentences, word retrieval difficulties, misunderstanding idioms or sarcasm, timing of body movements or conversational exchanges, remaining on topic, etc.)
- Many people with autism are visual learners, or have attention difficulties that make visual supports essential
- Most are concrete thinkers and literally interpret jokes, idioms or sarcasm
- Social skills are underdeveloped, but interest in friendships and social interaction is often present
- Anxiety and frustration are common
- *Each student* is an individual - with a distinct set of likes and dislikes, strengths and challenges, and a unique personality

## *How can I make a difference?*

- Be welcoming and supportive. Meet the student where he is and learn from him. Respect the individual. *Please* do not talk about him in his presence.
- Set clear expectations and boundaries. Be consistent. Develop structure. Practice and provide repetition to build understanding and skills.
- Recognize that behavior IS communication.
- Develop strategies to compensate for or overcome challenges—offer preferred seating, additional response time, organizational supports (written schedules, lists, labels, etc.), visual information paired with verbal directions, etc.
- Be aware of the student's sensory needs, and adjust supports and expectations as appropriate. Avoid or prepare for known triggers, such as fire alarms. Give breaks for self-regulation.
- Expect growth and keep standards high, with small steps and supports to allow the student to exhibit success. Promote age appropriate interests, behavior, independence and life skills.
- Reward what you want to see utilizing positive reinforcement strategies. Use the student's interests to engage and motivate him.



- Educate peers and promote acceptance and understanding. Support social development with role playing, modeling, rewards. Include with typical peers.
- Communicate among team members, including parents. Ask questions, share what works and problem-solve what does not. Keep learning. Be creative.
- Assume intelligence, teach competence, promote independence and be respectful.
- Relax, have fun, celebrate successes and treasure the individual!



# *Asperger's Syndrome Basics*

---

## *What does Asperger's Syndrome look like?*

Asperger's Syndrome, sometimes viewed as a high functioning form of autism, is a neuro-developmental condition that is one of the Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) or Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The core symptoms of Asperger's Syndrome are challenges related to:

- **social interaction**
- **restrictive or repetitive behaviors and interests**
- **but not delays in language development or intellectual ability**

Individuals with Asperger's have average or higher intelligence, with many exhibiting exceptional skills, knowledge or abilities. Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome can experience other difficulties, including medical issues, differences in coordination and muscle tone, sleep disturbances, altered eating habits, anxiety or disordered sensory perceptions.

These differences may also present as gifts. A student with Asperger's may display some or all of the following characteristics, which may represent challenges from a certain perspective, or strengths from another (e.g. a student who appears inflexible or rigid may also be the most compliant with the rules of a classroom):

- Difficulty understanding figurative language, idioms, gestures and/or social cues
- Literal or excessive speech, often with concentration on a particular topic
- Limited or no eye contact
- Difficulty relating or participating in a back-and-forth conversation or interaction, such as a game
- Inflexibility, Social awkwardness
- Intense or odd interests in unusual topics or objects, unusual play
- Repetitive behaviors, such as pacing or lining things up, or self-stimulatory actions like spinning, hand flapping, or rocking
- More or less sensitivity to light, sound, smell, taste or touch than usual
- Anxiety, Abnormal fears and/or lack of appropriate fear of real dangers
- Difficulty managing transitions, changes in routine, stress, frustration
- Ability to decode written language (read) at an early age (but not necessarily comprehend)
- Strong visual skills
- Good rote and long term memory (math facts, sports statistics, etc.)
- Adherence to rules, Honesty
- Intense concentration or focus, especially on a preferred activity
- Understanding and retention of concrete concepts, patterns, rules
- Musical, mathematical, technological or artistic ability or interest



### *Where does it come from?*

There is no known cause of most cases of Asperger's Syndrome, though the best scientific evidence points toward a combination of genetic and environmental influences. Asperger's Syndrome is a neurological/biological disorder, not a psychological/emotional condition.

Asperger's is found in all social, racial and ethnic groups and is diagnosed up to ten times more frequently in boys than in girls. The autism spectrum disorders, including Asperger's Syndrome, occur in 1 out of 150 children, up from 1 in 10,000 in 1980.

### *What do I need to keep in mind?*

- Individuals with Asperger's can learn and many make dramatic improvements. Academics are often an area of strength.
- Communication challenges can encompass a broad range of subtle differences, both in terms of understanding (gestures, others' perspectives, idioms or sarcasm,) and speaking (word retrieval, timing conversational exchanges, remaining on topic, inappropriate comments, etc.)
- Many people with Asperger's benefit from visual supports and other accommodations helpful to visual learners and those with auditory processing challenges or difficulty focusing attention. Most are concrete thinkers and make literal (and often incorrect) interpretations of jokes, idioms or sarcasm.
- Social skills are underdeveloped, but interest in friendships and social interaction is often present—and students are often painfully aware of social status.
- Individuals with Asperger's are often the victims of bullying behavior.
- Anxiety, depression and frustration are common.
- *Each student* is an individual - with a distinct set of likes and dislikes, strengths and challenges, and a unique personality.

### *How can I make a difference?*

- Be welcoming and supportive. Meet the student where he is and learn from him. Respect the individual. *Please* do not talk about him in his presence.
- Set clear expectations and boundaries. Be consistent. Develop structure. Practice and provide repetition to build understanding and skills.
- Recognize that behavior IS communication.
- Develop strategies to compensate for or overcome challenges—offer preferred seating, additional response time, organizational supports (written schedules, lists, labels, etc.), visual information paired with verbal directions, social curriculum, etc.
- Be aware of the student's sensory needs, and adjust supports and expectations as appropriate. Avoid or prepare for known triggers. Give breaks for self-regulation.
- Expect growth and keep standards high, with small steps and supports to allow the student to exhibit success. Promote age appropriate interests,



- Reward what you want to see utilizing positive reinforcement strategies. Use the student's interests to engage and motivate him.
- Educate peers and promote acceptance and understanding. Support social development with role playing, modeling, rewards. Teach self reliance. Include.
- Communicate among team members, including parents. Ask questions, share what works and problem-solve what does not. Keep learning. Be creative.
- Assume intelligence, teach competence, promote independence, be respectful.
- Relax, have fun, celebrate successes and treasure the individual!



# *About Me:*

---

## *Personal Information Form*

*It also helps to send along photos of family or favorite activities or people!*

Student's Name:

Person completing this form:

Phone:

Email:

What are some of the things that you are most interested in?

What upsets you?

What are you afraid of?

What makes you laugh?

What is ONE thing you would like to improve upon this year?

What calms you down when you are overwhelmed or upset?

What rewards work well for you?

What do you do after school or on weekends?

What days or times are convenient for Parent Meetings (during the school day)?

What is the best way to contact your family?


What issues would your family like to discuss or hear more information about?

*Adapted from the Welcome Survey*



# Office Staff

---

 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.

