

# ■ PARAPROFESSIONALS



# *Autism Basics*

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## *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*

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## *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:*

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## *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*



# *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.*

