

■ PEERS



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,



behavior, independence and life skills. Specifically teach social skills and understanding.

- 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



Peers

 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 - Who we are and why we are doing this?	1 minute
What is Autism? - Definition, examples, statistics, gender bias, rising incidence, co-morbidities - Show video clips of various people with autism with different communication abilities <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ <i>Temple Grandin</i>▪ <i>Normal People Scare Me</i>▪ <i>Autism Everyday</i>▪ <i>Five for Fighting</i>	2.5 minutes
Being a Parent of a Child with Autism - Challenges, family life, etc.	2.5 minutes
Treatments for Autism - Intensive, early, ABA, TEACCH, speech, OT	2 minutes
Social Aspects of Autism - Impact of social piece, how you can help	2 minutes
School Social Support Club Member - Personal connections, what the club has done so far	4 minutes
Closing - Thanks and what we will do in classrooms	1 minute
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. See the [Resources](#) section, 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

The Autism Acceptance Book by Ellen Sabin
www.wateringcanpress.com/html/aboutellen.html

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

With Open Arms, Mary Schlieder, M.S.
www.schoolswithopenarms.com/contact.php

The Sixth Sense II, Carol Gray
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.

