

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION, PRINCIPALS, INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM MEMBERS



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



School Administration, Principals, Interdisciplinary Team Members

 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](#) 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.

