

autism speaks®

School Community Tool Kit

A guide to provide information for use in tandem with parents/caregivers and schools to support students with autism

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Introduction

The purpose of this tool kit is to provide information for use in tandem with parents/caregivers and schools to support students with autism so they can reach their full academic potential. It includes an overview of autism, the rights of an autistic student and strategies to promote academic and social success with an overarching goal to increase autism awareness and acceptance in the school environment. The audience for this includes parents and caregivers, school administrators and educators in primary and secondary settings, school support staff and the student body. The information can be used for school staff training, when students with autism enroll in a new school and to advocate and problem-solve throughout the school year.

Supporting autistic students starts with understanding the following:

- There is not one type of autism. Each person with autism is unique with their own set of strengths and challenges. No one should assume that all students with autism are alike just because they have the same diagnosis.
- Educators want the best for all students. The National Education Association (NEA) code of ethics describes this commitment as: "The educator strives to help each student realize [their] potential as a worthy and effective member of society. The educator therefore works to stimulate the spirit of inquiry, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding and the thoughtful formulation of worthy goals."
- Special education, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), 504 Plans and related accommodations are not privileges. They are rights afforded to those with disabilities under federal law.
- An increasing number of students with autism are enrolled in general education classrooms. Yet, autism-specific training for educators and school district staff is not keeping pace with this trend.
- It is always best to assume intellect and know that every individual deserves the opportunity to learn and reach their fullest potential.
- The best outcome for a student is when parents/caregivers and school staff assume positive intent, collaborate and communicate in order for their autistic student to achieve success in school.

NOTE: With help from respected experts in autism and special education, experienced parents, caregivers, and teachers, we have included strategies for supporting autistic students. However, this is not intended to serve as or replace a curriculum for special education. Rather, special education and administration staff may find it helpful as a supplemental resource to support students with autism in general education environments and involvement in the school community.

Acknowledgments

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About Autism

> "If you met one person with autism, you met one person with autism."
>
> ***–Dr. Stephen Shore, autistic adult, professor and Autism Speaks board member***

What is Autism?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. According to the Centers for Disease Control, autism affects an estimated 1 in 36 children and 1 in 45 adults in the United States today.

We know that there is not one type of autism, but many.

Autism looks different for everyone, and each person with autism has a distinct set of strengths and challenges. Some autistic people can speak, while others are nonverbal or minimally verbal and communicate in other ways. Some have intellectual disabilities, while some do not. Some require significant support in their daily lives, while others need less support and, in some cases, live entirely independently.

On average, autism is diagnosed around age 5 in the U.S., with signs appearing by age 2 or 3. Current diagnostic guidelines in the DSM-5-TR, the diagnostic manual for ASD, break down an autism diagnosis into three levels based on the amount of support a person might need: level 1, level 2, and level 3. See more information about each level ***here***.

Anybody can be autistic, regardless of sex, age, race or ethnicity. However, research from the CDC says that boys get diagnosed with autism four times more often than girls. According to the DSM-5-TR, the diagnostic manual for ASD, that is due to the fact that autism may look different in girls and boys. Girls may have more subtle presentation of symptoms, fewer social and communication challenges, and fewer repetitive behaviors. Their symptoms may go unrecognized by doctors, often leading to under diagnosis or misdiagnosis.

Autism is a lifelong condition, and an autistic person's needs, strengths and challenges may change over time. As they transition through life stages, they may need different types of support and accommodations. Early intervention and therapies can make a big difference in a person's skills and outcomes later in life.

Signs of Autism

The two core signs of autism are:

1. Challenges with social communication and interaction skills and
2. Restricted and repetitive behaviors.

Challenges with social communication and interaction skills

School-aged children with autism may have difficulty engaging in the give-and-take of everyday human interactions. They may find it challenging to make friendships, take part in conversations or find common interests with other children.

Some autistic students have difficulty engaging in eye contact. They may also use speech in unusual ways. For example, they may speak in a monotone voice, with an accent or in a very proper and formal way. Some may find it hard to follow anything but a very simple set of instructions with one or two steps.

Autistic students may also experience language delays. Some may not begin to speak until much later or only selectively speak. When they do learn to speak, some may stutter or have difficulty combining words into meaningful sentences. They may speak only single words or repeat the same phrase over and over. Some repeat what they hear verbatim. This is called echolalia.

Some autistic children might even develop advanced language with large vocabularies, yet they also may have difficulty sustaining a conversation. Or they may talk for a significant amount of time about a favorite subject yet may not have the ability or tools they need to manage the back and forth of conversation.

Speech therapy is common for school-aged students. Some will learn to use communication systems, such as pictures, sign language, electronic word processors or even speech generating devices.

Restricted and Repetitive Behaviors

Repetitive behaviors are not unique to autism. They are also seen in other conditions of the developing brain and are characteristic of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and schizophrenia.

Stimming – or self-stimulatory behavior – is most associated with autism but is seen throughout the general population and part of typical development. Examples include rocking back and forth, hand flapping, spinning and even pencil tapping and hair twirling. Stimming is typically done to help regulate and manage emotions. In other words, they are a form of communication.

Lining up toys in a row, repeatedly flipping switches and repeating words or phrases (also known as echolalia) are also common repetitive behaviors among autistic people.

Children with autism often need and thrive when there is consistency in their environment. Even slight changes – at mealtime, going to school at a certain time, or taking a different route – can be confusing and/or upsetting. Order and sameness seem to serve to provide stability and comfort for many.

Repetitive behavior sometimes takes the form of an intense interest, and sometimes can become a preoccupation. For example, an autistic child might be obsessed with learning all about vacuum cleaners, train schedules or lighthouses. It may be all they can talk about or a frame of reference for every conversation.

Common Co-occurring Conditions

Allergies

Both food and environmental allergies are common in people with autism. Their pediatrician, a gastrointestinal specialist or allergist may recommend specific protocols that need to be followed. Common among them are nutritional diets and interventions, like

eliminating certain foods. School staff may be responsible to assist in the effective delivery of dietary interventions.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

ADHD affects an estimated 30 to 60 percent of people with autism, versus 6 to 7 percent of the general population. It involves a persistent pattern of inattention, difficulty remembering things, trouble with managing time, organizational tasks, hyperactivity and/or impulsivity that interferes with learning and daily life.

Behaviorally, ADHD may manifest as difficulty staying on track and appearing easily distracted by external and internal stimuli, whether in the context of social conversations or in relation to completing tasks. Hyperactivity may present as interrupting others, talking excessively, or finding it difficult to sit still in one place. Students with ADHD may come across as impulsive and impatient.

Symptoms of ADHD can overlap with those of autism. Both are on a spectrum, meaning that individuals can present with varying combinations of characteristics from either condition. As a result, ADHD can be difficult to distinguish in someone on the spectrum.

Anxiety

Anxiety disorders affect up to 42 percent of people with autism. By contrast, they affect an estimated 3 percent of children and 15 percent of adults in the general population. But not all anxiety is the same. Neuroscientists have found structural differences in autistic people's amygdala, the brain's emotion and fear center, which suggest autism-related anxiety is different from general anxiety. While autistic people can present with both forms, management can be vastly different, and different from non-autistic anxiety management.

Because people with autism may have trouble assessing and expressing how they feel, behavior often provides the best clues in those experiencing anxiety. Anxiety can trigger racing heart, muscle tightness and stomach aches, some people may event feel frozen in place.

Social anxiety – or extreme fear of new people, crowds and social situations – is especially common among people with autism. In addition, many people with autism have difficulty controlling anxiety once something triggers it.

Anxiety can be triggered at different points in time and by different activities – including some that were previously enjoyable.

Bipolar Disorder

People with bipolar disorder tend to alternate between a frenzied state known as mania and episodes of depression.

It is important to understand the symptoms of true bipolar disorder from those of autism by looking at when the symptoms appeared and how long they lasted. For example, a child with autism may be consistently high-energy and socially intrusive through childhood. As such, their tendency to talk to strangers and make inappropriate comments are likely part of autism, and not a symptom of a manic mood swing.

Depression

Depression affects an estimated 7 percent of children and 26 percent of adults with autism. By contrast, it affects around 2 percent of children and 7 percent of adults in the general population.

Depression rates for people with autism rise with age and intellectual ability. Autism-related communication challenges can mask depression. Telltale signs can include loss of interest in once-favorite activities, a noticeable worsening in hygiene, chronic feelings of sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness and irritability. At its most serious, depression can include frequent thoughts about death and/or suicide.

Down syndrome

Research shows that about 16 to 18 percent of people with Down syndrome also have autism spectrum disorder (Richards et al., 2015).

When autism occurs in someone with Down syndrome, the characteristics of autism (social and behavioral challenges, communication difficulties and restricted interests) may be observed in addition to the symptoms of Down syndrome (intellectual disability, speech and language delays).

Epilepsy (seizure disorder)

As many as one third of people with autism develop seizures. These often start in early childhood or during adolescence.

Seizures, caused by abnormal electrical activity in the brain, can produce a temporary loss of consciousness (a "blackout"), a body convulsion, unusual movements, or staring spells. Sometimes a contributing factor is a lack of sleep or a high fever. An electroencephalogram (EEG, a recording of the electric currents in the brain through electrodes applied to the scalp) can help confirm the presence of irregular electrical activity or seizures.

People with autism may experience more than one type of seizure activity. The easiest to recognize are large "grand mal" (or tonic-clonic) seizures. Others include "petit mal" (or absence) seizures and sub-clinical seizures, which may only be apparent in an EEG.

Especially in the case of absence seizures, school staff may be the first to note that something is awry, and it is important to alert the family and school team if seizures are suspected.

Recurrent seizure activity is called epilepsy, and treatment typically involves anticonvulsant medicines to reduce or eliminate occurrence. For a student with a seizure disorder, it is important for the school team to recognize seizure signs and to know the best way to manage the student and ensure their safety should a seizure occur. The team should be made aware of any side effects that might be caused by seizure medications.

HELPFUL TIP

Sometimes it can be difficult for autistic students to understand what is happening when they are having a seizure. In addition, it can be very scary for their peers to witness them. Autism Speaks has put together the following that may be helpful to grade school students to explain epilepsy.

Visual Story for Children with Epilepsy

Visual Story for Peers of Children with Epilepsy

Feeding and Eating Issues

Feeding and eating problems affect around 7 out of 10 children with autism. These issues can include extremely restricted food habits and aversions to certain tastes and textures. They often stem from gastrointestinal concerns, sensory issues, oral motor delays, and/or a strong need for sameness. This may result in concerns about nutritional health.

Chronic overeating
Chronic overeating leading to obesity is another challenge. It can stem from an inability to sense when "full" and/or eating as a soothing sensory behavior.

Pica
Pica is an eating disorder involving eating things that are not food. Children between 18 and 24 months (about 2 years) old often eat non-food items, but this is typically a normal part of development. Some children with autism and other developmental disabilities persist beyond the developmentally typical

time and continue to eat items such as dirt, clay, chalk, or paint chips.

Gastrointestinal (GI) Disorders

GI disorders are nearly eight times more common among children with autism than other children. They commonly include:

- Chronic constipation
- Abdominal pain
- Gastroesophageal reflux
- Bowel inflammation

In addition to the associated discomfort, these issues coupled with communication and sensory difficulties can result in challenges surrounding toileting for some autistic children.

Genetic Disorders

A small number of children with autism may also have a neuro-genetic condition such as Fragile X Syndrome, Angelman's Syndrome, Tuberous Sclerosis, Chromosome 15 Duplication Syndrome, or another chromosomal abnormality. It is important to know if a student has one of these syndromes because there may be accompanying medical issues.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Research suggests that OCD is more common among teens and adults with autism than it is in the general population.

However, it can be difficult to distinguish OCD symptoms from the repetitive behaviors and restricted interests that are a hallmark of autism.

Pain Sensitivity

Autistic people may have different pain sensitivity than that of most of the population. Some experience more intense pain to certain stimuli while others feel little when they should feel a lot. It is always helpful to establish a scale of pain and ask the student what a 1 would mean for them and what a 10 would mean for them.

When there is an inability to verbally communicate, pain in a child with autism is sometimes recognized only because of patterns or changes in their behavior, such as an increase in self-soothing behaviors (e.g., rocking), outbursts of aggression or self-injury. This may be true of treatable physical pain, such as a toothache or injury, a minor cut or gastrointestinal distress.

Sleep Dysfunction

Over half of children and adolescents with autism – and possibly as many as four in five – have one or more chronic sleep problems.

Many have trouble falling asleep, experiencing night waking, or seem to function on considerably less sleep than is usually considered normal. Lack of sleep can affect attention and learning and the student's ability to benefit from therapeutic interventions.

Experienced school behaviorists may provide the family with strategies that will improve sleep and function for all involved, increasing the student's ability to benefit from educational efforts.

Additional Concerns That May Accompany Autism

Sensory Integration Dysfunction, Sensory Processing Disorder or Sensory Integration Disorder

Many people with autism have responses to sensory input (also called stimuli). These responses are due to difficulties in processing and integrating sensory information. Vision, hearing, touch, smell, taste, the sense of movement (vestibular system) and the sense of position (proprioception) can all be affected. This means that while information may be sensed normally, it may be perceived much differently.

Even for those who do not receive a formal classification, it is important to recognize that a student may have significant sensory issues as an isolated issue or accompanying a variety of learning and neurological disorders such as autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, multiple sclerosis, and speech delay.

A student's sensory issues can involve hypersensitivity, also known as sensory defensiveness, or hyposensitivity (under reactivity). Many people with autism are highly attuned or overly sensitive to certain sounds, textures, tastes, and smells. Some may find the feel of clothing touching their skin almost unbearable or might be distracted by the buzz of an airplane or a bee long before anyone else is aware of its presence.

Hyposensitivity might be apparent in an increased tolerance of pain or a constant need for sensory stimulation. Some people with autism do not notice extreme cold or heat (dangerous when playing outside or when standing near a heat source). A child with autism may fall and break an arm, yet never cry.

Responses to sensory overload can range from shutting down and "checking out" of the environment, to preoccupation or distraction, or negative behaviors such as aggression or running away. Sensitivities can change or improve over time.

Sensory imbalances can also occur in an incongruous combination in a single person, for example one who might crave deep pressure (such as a hug) but cannot tolerate the sensation of light touch (such as a kiss on the cheek.) Shirt labels or seams on socks can annoy a child to distraction, while the hum of a vacuum can be terrifying, or the flicker of a fluorescent light completely disorienting. Many young children with autism seem particularly upset by the 'Happy Birthday' song (or the clapping that follows), so it is helpful to be aware that this might be distressing as it is likely to come up many times over the course of a school year. Indoor lunch, recess, physical education classes and assemblies are also times where the lack of structure, large numbers of students, unpredictability and excessive noise can become overwhelming.

Executive function processing

Many executive function tasks can be disordered in autism. Just as sensory issues are often related to challenges in making sense of the whole, executive function skills are instrumental for proper coordination of cognitive resources: planning and organization, flexible and abstract thinking, short term and working memory, initiating appropriate actions, and inhibiting inappropriate actions. Basically, they relate to carrying out everyday tasks and living.

Executive function deficits can have broad effects on a learner. For example, if it is impossible to recall the question a teacher just asked, then it becomes equally impossible to answer it. For many higher functioning individuals this deficit is especially problematic, as these organizational skills are not usually taught directly. For example, a student might be able to compose sentences, but not create a journal entry on a specified topic because of the challenges with organizing thoughts and putting these in an understandable sequence on paper.

Many people with autism experience challenges with muscle tone and/or coordination that can affect their ability to function at age-appropriate levels. In some, the difficulty is in motor planning and execution. This can extend from speech to gross motor activities.

Impairments in the ability to coordinate and perform purposeful movements in the absence of motor or sensory impairments are termed dyspraxia (disordered ability) or apraxia (absence of this ability). If a child has apraxia or dyspraxia speech, the brain's ability to plan the movement of the lips, jaw, and tongue may make intelligible speech incredibly difficult, even if they have intact language and know what they want to say.

In others, muscle tone might be intact, but they may have challenges in timing and the ability to attend. Sports can be difficult, and fine motor tasks (buttoning, handwriting, using utensils and tools) often require intervention and support using occupational therapy techniques. Some children have difficulty in understanding where their body is in space (a sensation that comes automatically to the rest of us), which is extremely disconcerting when moving throughout the environment, navigating stairs,

balancing on a bicycle, or even walking down a hallway without 'checking in' with the location of the wall. The communicative, social, and behavioral implications of imprecise timing and motor abilities are worth considering when planning for and interacting with a student. There may be specific strategies recommended by the speech pathologist or occupational therapist supporting the team in addressing these issues.

Unique Abilities That May Accompany Autism

Some individuals with autism possess unusual skills and exceptional abilities, as outlined below. While it is important to never assume that any individual student has any or all of these strengths, awareness that a student has a skill such as one described here might create an opportunity to form a connection, to motivate or reward attention to more difficult challenges, or to use that strength in overcoming other areas of deficit.

- Strong visual skills
- Ability to understand and retain concrete concepts, rules, sequences, and patterns
- Good memory of details or rote facts (math facts, train schedules, baseball statistics)
- Long-term memory
- Mathematical aptitude
- Computer and technology skills
- Musical ability or interest
- Intense concentration or focus, especially on a preferred activity
- Artistic ability
- Honesty

The Rights of Students With Autism

A Child's Right to Public Education

Every child has the right to a free appropriate education. The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** enacted in 1975, mandates a public education for all eligible children and the school's responsibility for providing the support and services that will allow this to happen. IDEA was revised in 2004 (and, in fact, renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, but most people still refer to it as IDEA). The law mandates that the state provides an eligible child with a free appropriate public education that meets their unique individual needs. IDEA specifies that children with various disabilities, including autism, be entitled to early intervention services and special education. The IDEA legislation has established an important team approach and a role for parents as equal partners in the planning for an individual child and promotes an education in the least restrictive environment.

In addition to the IDEA stipulations, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) sets forth, as a civil right, protections, and provisions for equal access to education for anyone with a disability. Section 504 of the **Rehabilitation Act of 1973** is another civil rights law that prohibits disability discrimination in programs and activities, public and private, that receive federal financial assistance. The individuals protected by these laws include anyone with a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more life activities.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

IDEA provides for a "free appropriate public education" for all children with disabilities. Each child is entitled to an education tailored to their special needs and a placement that will allow them to make reasonable educational progress, at no cost to the family.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

IDEA provides that students with disabilities are entitled to experience the "least restrictive environment." School districts are required to educate students with disabilities in regular classrooms with non-disabled peers, in the school they would attend if not disabled, to the maximum extent appropriate, supported with the aids and services required to make this possible. This does not mean every student must be in a general education classroom. The objective is to place students in as natural of a learning environment as possible in their home community. The members of the IEP team - considering a variety of issues – make this decision and the LRE for a student may change over time.

Participation of students with autism in the general education environment is often called mainstreaming or inclusion. Inclusion does not mean placing a student with autism in general education just like a typical learner; a variety of supports are provided to create a successful environment and experience for everyone involved. Careful planning and training are essential to provide the right modifications and accommodations. Supports might include a specially trained classroom or one-on-one paraprofessional, altering testing environments or expectations, adapting curriculum, visual supports, or adaptive equipment, etc. The special education department should support general education staff and others in the school community who interact with students with autism.

Philosophies about inclusion vary among school districts, staff, and parents of students with and without special needs. IDEA provides for a team approach to planning and placement decisions so that the objectives of all members of the team can be considered.

Not all parents will feel that a mainstream environment will meet the needs of their student with autism, nor will all students be ready for full inclusion, all the time. Anxiety and sensory issues related to inclusion may mean that the student should start with small and successful increments and build to longer periods of increasing participation in the general education environment.

The less restrictive a student's setting, the greater the opportunities for a child with autism to interact with the school population outside the special education environment – this means support staff, general education and specific area teachers, office staff, custodians and most importantly, peers, who are not necessarily knowledgeable about autism. Autism Speaks has created this Tool Kit to provide better understanding, perspective, and strategies so that every member of the school community can feel empowered and benefit.

Special Education Services: IEPs and 504 Plans

Special education services pick up where early intervention services for young children leave off, at age 3, and continue through age 21 for students who qualify. The school district provides these services through the special education department for free to the student, based on an assessment and planning process that includes a team of experts and intervention providers and the child's parents.

An **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** is administered to children who are determined eligible for special education services. It is a legal document to ensure participation in the general education curriculum as established in the IDEA. The IEP describes a student's strengths and weaknesses, sets measurable goals and objectives for the student, and details the supports and accommodations that will be used to provide specialized instruction. For more information, check out ***Autism Speaks Guide to Individualized Education Programs (IEP)***.

Students who do not qualify for special education services, but still have a disability that requires support, like autism, can qualify for a **504 Plan**. This document provides for accommodations for those with a disability, like autism and its co-occurring conditions, under the Rehabilitation Act. The 504 operates similarly to IEPs and must be followed by school districts. They focus on how a student is learning and designed to help them with various special needs during their school day so they can learn along with their peers.

Disclosure

A student's autism diagnosis is protected by various privacy laws and as such is confidential. The decision to disclose a diagnosis is the right of the autistic student and their parents only. Even if a parent or autistic student shares their

diagnosis with school administrators, the school nurse and teachers, it is to be treated as confidential. It is never acceptable and is a violation of confidentiality for any of these parties to share a student's diagnosis with anyone else at the school without the parents/caregiver's explicit permission. Even if you indirectly hear a student is autistic or perhaps overhear they or their parent/caregiver have shared their diagnosis with someone, you must still treat the diagnosis as confidential.

Discipline

Autistic students who are evaluated and found in need of special education and related services have, by definition, problems in learning and skill development. Some autistic students may have specific difficulty demonstrating socially appropriate behaviors, by nature of their disability.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) established specific rules which control how a student receiving special education services can be disciplined whenever they violate a school or district's code of student conduct. These rules ensure that a student is not disciplined for things they are incapable of complying with and that a student is not punished because of a disability.

Additionally, unlike their non-disabled peers, the procedural safeguards of IDEA were designed to assure that these students were not arbitrarily removed from their parent-approved program without consent and were guaranteed a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) within the least restrictive environment (LRE) even if their behavior violates a discipline rule or code of conduct.

IDEA also ensures that children with disabilities whose behavior blocks learning have those behaviors addressed within their IEP.

While these rules apply to those students with an IEP, students with a 504 or a known autism diagnosis, cannot be discriminated against when being disciplined.

Bullying and Harassment of Students with Disabilities

Victims of bullying are at increased risk of developing mental health problems including depression and anxiety, as well as physical health issues such as headaches, stomachaches, and sleep problems. Some shut down. Others have outbursts of aggression without a clear trigger. Research has found that adolescents on the autism spectrum who were bulled were twice as likely as peers to develop suicidal tendencies. For tools and resources visit ***Autism Speaks Bullying Prevention*** page.

Top Ten Facts Parents, Educators and Students Need to Know

1. **Students with disabilities are much more likely to be bullied than their non-disabled peers.** Evidence shows over 60% of children and young adults with autism experience bullying. Among them, high school students are most likely to be bullied, according to a ***recent study in JAMA Pediatrics***. School-aged children on the autism spectrum who do not need special health care and those from disadvantaged neighborhoods were also identified in the study as more likely to be bullied than other autistic children.

2. **Bullying affects a student's ability to learn.**
   Many students with disabilities are already addressing challenges in the academic environment. When they are bullied, it can directly impact their education.

   Bullying is not a harmless rite of childhood that everyone experiences. Research shows that bullying can negatively impact a child's access to education and lead to:

   - School avoidance and higher rates of absenteeism
   - Decrease in grades
   - Inability to concentrate
   - Loss of interest in academic achievement
   - Increase in dropout rates

3. **Bullying based on a student's disability may be considered harassment.**
   The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) have stated that bullying may also be considered harassment when it is based on a student's race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or religion.

Harassing behaviors may include:

- Unwelcome conduct such as verbal abuse, name-calling, epithets, or slurs
- Graphic or written statements
- Threats
- Physical assault
- Other conduct that may be physically threatening, harmful or humiliating

4. **Disability harassment is a civil rights issue and governed by federal law.**
Parents have legal rights when their child with a disability is the target of bullying or disability harassment. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (often referred to as 'Section 504') and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II) are the federal laws that apply if the harassment denies a student with a disability an equal opportunity to education. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces Section 504 and Title II of the ADA. Students with a 504 plan or an Individualized Education Program (IEP) would qualify for these protections.

   According to a ***2000 Dear Colleague letter from the Office for Civil Rights***, "States and school districts also have a responsibility under Section 504, Title II, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which is enforced by OSERS [the Office for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services], to ensure that a free appropriate public education (FAPE) is made available to eligible students with disabilities. Disability harassment may result in a denial of FAPE under these statutes."

   The letter further outlines how bullying in the form of disability harassment may prevent a student with an IEP from receiving an appropriate education: "The IDEA was enacted to ensure that recipients of IDEA funds make available to students with disabilities the appropriate special education and related services that enable them to access and benefit from public education. The specific services to be provided to a student with a disability are set forth in the student's individualized education program (IEP), which is developed by a team that includes the student's parents, teachers and, where appropriate, the student. Harassment of a student based on disability may decrease the student's ability to benefit from their education and amount to a denial of FAPE."

5. **Students with disabilities are also covered by state law when they are the target of bullying.**
Many school districts also have individual policies that address how to respond to bullying situations. Contact your local district to request a written copy of the district policy on bullying.

6. **The adult response is important.**
Parents, educators, and other adults are the most important advocates that a student with disabilities can have. It is important that adults know the best way to talk with someone in a bullying situation.

   Some children can talk with an adult about personal matters and may be willing to discuss bullying. Others may be reluctant to speak about the situation. There could be several reasons for this. The student bullying them may have told them not to tell or they might fear that if they do tell someone, the bullying will not stop or may become worse.

   When preparing to talk to children about bullying, adults (parents and educators) should consider how they will handle the child's questions and emotions and what their own responses will be. Adults should be prepared to listen without judgment, providing the child with a safe place to work out their feelings and determine their next steps.

   It is never the responsibility of the child to fix a bullying situation. If children could do that, they would not be seeking the help of an adult in the first place.

7. **Students with disabilities have resources that are specifically designed for their situation.**
IEP – Students with disabilities eligible for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), will have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

   The IEP can be a helpful tool in a bullying prevention plan. Remember, every child receiving special education is entitled to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE), and bullying can become an obstacle to that education.

   For more information, go to our section on Individualized Education Program (IEP) and Bullying.

   Template Letters – Parents should contact school staff each time their child tells them they have been bullied. PACER has created these letters that parents may use as a guide for writing a letter to their child's school. These letters contain standard language and "fill-in-the-blank" spaces so that the letter can be customized for each child's situation.

   These sample letter(s) can serve two purposes:

   - First, the letter will alert school administration of the bullying and your desire for interventions.
   - Second, the letter can serve as your written record when referring to events. The record (letter) should be factual and absent of opinions or emotional statements.

   The two letters –" Student with an IEP, Notifying School About Bullying" and "Student with a 504, Notifying School About Bullying" – are for parents who have a child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504. The bullying law of the individual state applies to all students as noted in the law. When bullying is based on the child's disability, federal law can also apply under Section 504, Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

8. **The Power of Bystanders – more than 50% of bullying situations stop when a peer intervenes.**
Most students do not like to see bullying but they may not know what to do when it happens. Peer advocacy – students speaking out on behalf of others – is a unique approach that empowers students to protect those targeted by bullying.

   Peer advocacy works for two reasons: First, students are more likely than adults to see what is happening with their peers and peer influence is powerful. Second, a student telling someone to stop bullying has much more impact than an adult giving the same advice.

9. **Self-advocacy is an important tool in addressing bullying.**
Students need to be taught and involved in the steps taken to address bullying situations. Self-advocacy is knowing how to:

   - Speak up for yourself
   - Describe your strengths, disability, needs and wishes
   - Take responsibility for yourself
   - Learn about your rights
   - Obtain help, or know who to ask, if you have a question

   The person who has been bullied should be involved in deciding how to respond to the bullying. This involvement can provide students with a sense of control over their situation and help them realize that someone is willing to listen, take action, and reassure them that their opinions and ideas are important.

10. **You are not alone**
When students have been bullied, they often believe they are the only person this is happening to, and that no one else cares. In fact, they are not alone.

    There are individuals, communities, and organizations that do care. It is not up to one person to end the bullying and it is never

the responsibility of the child to change what is happening to them. No one deserves to be bullied. All people should be treated with dignity and respect, no matter what. Everyone has a responsibility – and a role to play – as schools, parents, students, and the community work together for positive change.

Creating a Bully-Free School Community

Schools play a vital role in setting the tone of tolerance. It is important for districts and individual schools to have their bullying policy available and accessible to all. It should define bullying, how to report bullying, disciplinary action and the appeal process.

- Include a prominent link to the school's bullying policy on your website
- Review the highlights of the policy at back-to-school nights with families
- Review the policy with students during the first week of school
- Bullying happens year-round so anti-bullying conversation must continue throughout the year

The policy should be shared with anyone the schools contracts with who comes in contact with students including bus drivers, specialists/therapists providing designated instructional services, substitute teachers and others.

Consider having students, teachers, administrators, families, and vendors sign "contracts" or agreements that they have read the bullying policy and they pledge to adhere to this policy. Celebrate when students show acts of kindness, philanthropy or other social good. This is not about discipline and punishment; good anti-bullying practices include reward and recognition for doing the right thing.

Educating Students with Autism

Therapies Used for Students with Autism

Many students will be eligible for the following services, usually termed Related Services on the IEP. Since difficulties in these areas affect so much of a student's life and function, coordination with these service providers and the rest of the team is critical to build and generalize targeted skills across settings. While these services are often provided as pull-out therapies, they may be more effective provided in more natural settings as both therapy for the student with autism and training opportunities for the school community (e.g. conversational speech goals might be targeted during a student's lunch period, when daily support staff and peers could be trained in techniques to be used on a daily basis to achieve objectives much faster and more naturally.)

Autistic students often require support in the home and community, so coordination of care and comprehensive wrap around services are often needed.

Occupational Therapy (OT)

A Certified Occupational Therapist (OT) brings together cognitive, physical, and motor skills to enable the individual to gain independence and participate more fully in life. For a student with autism, the focus may be on appropriate play, fine motor and basic social and life skills such as handwriting, independent dressing, feeding, grooming and use of the toilet. The OT can recommend strategies for learning key tasks to practice in various settings.

Physical Therapy (PT)

A Certified Physical Therapist (PT) focuses on problems with movement that cause functional limitations. Students with autism frequently have challenges with motor skills such as sitting, walking, running and jumping, and PT can also address poor muscle tone, balance, and coordination. An evaluation establishes the abilities and developmental level of the child, and activities or support are designed to target areas of need.

Sensory Integration Therapy (SI)

SI therapy addresses disruptions in the way an individual's brain processes sensory input, developing strategies to help process these senses in a more productive way. A sensory integration-trained OT or PT begins with an evaluation, and then uses research-based strategies to plan an individualized program for the child, matching sensory stimulation with physical movement to improve how the brain processes and organizes sensory information.

Speech-Language Therapy (SLT)

Certified Speech-Language Pathologists (SLP) use a variety of techniques to address a range of challenges for children with autism. SLT is designed to address the mechanics of speech and the meaning and social value of language. For students unable to speak, SLT includes training in other forms of communication, or oral exercises to promote better control of the mouth. For those who seem to talk incessantly about a certain topic, SLT might work on expanding the conversational repertoire, or reading social cues and adjusting conversation to the needs of the listener. An SLT program begins with an evaluation by an SLP, and therapy may be conducted one-on-one, in a small group or in classroom/natural settings.

Assistive Technologies Used for Students with Autism

Assistive Technology (AT) is any item, piece of equipment, or product system that is used by a person with a disability to perform specific tasks, improve functional capabilities and become more independent. Assistive technology for students with autism is constantly evolving and can redefine what is possible for students with a wide range of cognitive, physical, or sensory disabilities.

Smart phones and Apple iDevices (iPad, iTouch, iPhone) have become increasingly popular because of the wide variety of applications ('apps') available to support a wide variety of needs. It is important to look carefully at the student's needs before putting devices and apps into use. Different apps will be used for different purposes, including communication, literacy, development, modeling, motivation, and organization.

According to Vicki Clark MS, CCC-SLP, many students with autism will use an Apple iDevice to "find something they can control on which to focus their attention and drown out all of the confusing input around them."

"Beyond simply a distraction or calming device, the iPad has application in teaching skills, just like the computer has in the past. There are apps for teaching reading, apps for teaching social skills, apps for teaching vocabulary and apps for communication. Careful selection can give children a doorway to improved comprehension, expression, and skill development."

For students with severe communication difficulties, a specialized speech generating device or a device with a speech-generating app may be highly effective.

According to Clark, "Specific needs of the child need to be the main deciding factor on purchasing any technology. When deciding on technology options, teams must consider the individual needs of the child (including sensory, physical, social, and communicative issues) partner characteristics and needs, and the environmental demands."

General Education Classroom

While some autistic students receive special education full day in school, increasingly, more are enrolled in general education classrooms in school. This is called inclusion or mainstreaming.

The good news: inclusion has universal benefits. It has been known to improve educational outcomes for all students, overall attitudes towards diversity and even school attendance rates.

In order to see this success though, every teacher and support staff who works with an autistic student must work together to provide effective support and interventions for these students. It may be necessary to start with small but successful periods of inclusion and build on these opportunities as the student with autism gains competence and confidence in varying settings.

Activities that may be challenging

Knowing the characteristics of autism and their unique identity of each autistic student will allow for appropriate planning on their behalf. As you get to know the student, adjust your expectations. But some common activities that are often challenging for students with autism may include:

- Multi-step directions and activities
- Following verbal directions
- Organization skills
- For younger students, circle time, since it means sitting, listening to auditory information and verbal output
- For older students, classroom lectures that require sitting, listening to auditory information for lengthy periods of time
- Center time for younger students or independent work for older students, since this involves academic tasks, sometimes-unclear assumptions, following directions
- Free play for younger students, because it involves social skills, cooperative play, and verbal skills with extraordinarily little structure
- Group instruction

Strategies for success

- Always assume competence.
- Be calm and positive. Model appropriate behavior for the student with autism, as well as for other students.
- Use an "About Me" information sheet to get to know relevant facts about each particular student. A template is provided in the Appendix if you do not have one. Share it with the student's school team.
- Teach understanding and acceptance of all students. The Peer Support section of this tool kit includes suggested books and programs to use with the entire class to build a supportive classroom. But before you engage peers to be a buddy to an autistic student it is important to consider that not all peers are up for being paired with an autistic student. Consider asking peers you think would work well, or even better, send a questionnaire home to all students to identify who would like to be a student buddy to those who may need extra help. Remember: you are not allowed to disclose a student's diagnosis to anyone.
- Allow times for autistic students to work alone. But be aware that autistic students can become isolated within the classroom (interaction only occurring between an aide and student) and work with the students and the paraprofessional to support social exchange among peers.
- Students with autism are not always socially savvy; if a student is being bullied quietly, they are likely to react or respond impulsively. Try to understand the reason for the child's reaction. Consider the student's communication difficulties and make every attempt to fully understand the situation before reaching judgment regarding fault or behavior.
- Establish clear routines and habits to support regular activities and transitions. Alert the student of changes in routine, staffing, etc., in advance, whenever possible.
- Consider seating – allow the autistic student or their parent/caregiver input into where they sit. They may not always want to be in the first row.
- Pay 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.)
- Consider sensory issues that may affect the student in your class (for example, flickering or bright lights, central air or heating noises, class bells, etc).
- Provide written rules or pictures of expectations of behavior in the classroom, including 'unwritten' conventions if necessary. Work with the student's team to incorporate social narratives to help a student understand a rule or expectation. Learners with autism often increase compliance if they understand why a rule exists (for example, 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).
- Use descriptive praise to build desired behaviors (for example, 'I like the way you put your trash in the trash can!')
- Give positive directions; minimize the use of 'don't' and 'stop.' 'Please sit in your seat' can be more effective than 'Don't stand up.' This lets the student know exactly what you would like them to do.
- Consider needs/supports for class presentations (for example, cue cards, visual support, 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 modify curriculum, supports such as visuals, communication access, organizational tools, and directly teach study skills (note taking, time management, etc.)
- Ensure that activities like 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. Use social narratives. Be creative based on the student's interest in involving them, such as offering the student an opportunity to be "producer" with a run-down of a school play or giving them a map to follow the route the school bus will take to a field trip.

Curriculum considerations

For a student participating in an inclusive setting, the more they can participate in the classroom's activities in real time, the better they can access the curriculum.

HELPFUL REMINDER

Autism is not a learning disability, though it can affect learning.

Autism does not automatically equate to high IQ or superior mathematical or computational skills.

- 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.
- If necessary, concentrate on teaching less content, but teach to mastery and where appropriate, fluency.
- Make sure the student and support staff have classroom materials ahead of time, if possible.
- 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
- Support 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.
- When it comes to homework, establish a method for recording assignments, present defined expectations, consider whether 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.

- Supply study guides ahead of tests.
- Let the student and paraprofessional know in advance when you plan to give a quiz.

Reading

Some autistic students may have difficulty comprehending reading material, predicting events and reading between the lines/inferring from the text.

Some students with autism are adept at encoding and word calling but may have significant issues with comprehension. They may be diagnosed with hyperlexia, which is characterized by advanced reading skills beyond chronological age but with low language functionality and may be accompanied by an obsession with letters and numbers.

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.

Provide specific structure to questions when expecting an answer for comprehension. Use multiple choice, cloze sentences (a portion of text with certain words removed) with a word bank, or starter responses. Whereas it might be exceedingly 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 an easy way of making a task simpler for the student, while still expecting independence.

Writing

Recognize that writing involves expressive language skills, word retrieval, organization of thoughts and fine motor skills, all of which can be challenges for some students with autism. Strategies to support each of these areas may be needed.

Use visuals to prompt language – pictures, word banks, etc.

Begin with cloze sentences (a portion of text with certain words removed) or sentence starters.

Actively teach brainstorming, developing descriptive vocabulary, etc.

Use template organization tools for all writing assignments – webs, outlines, etc. The student will need specific instruction on how to use these tools, 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 a 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

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

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

Science

As in other subjects, if a student with autism has a particular interest they 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

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 may be difficult. Recognizing that this area often represents great variability in skill levels means that instruction is likely to need great individualization. For instance, a student who can perform double-digit multiplication in their head may have great difficulty with the concepts of negative numbers or measurement. Word problems may be difficult. Use the student's areas of strength to build their self-confidence and motivation to work on areas of challenge.

- Break math down into specific parts, using visuals and manipulatives.
- For students with autism who learn the patterns involved in a skill, rather than the concept, 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, use errorless teaching strategies that ensure correct development of a skill from the start, as corrective teaching is less effective and unlearning bad habits can be difficult for students with autism.

Supporting Learning in the Student with Autism

Supporting Communication

Communication encompasses a broad range of challenges for individuals with autism, from intake and processing of information, verbal, or representational output, to reading and writing skills. Noticing non-verbal cues, body language and subtle intent, intonation and interpretation are also difficult for individuals with autism.

Since all students with autism, by definition of their diagnosis, have communication and social deficits, the services of a trained speech pathologist can be an integral part of their program and planning team. For children without language, the speech pathologist should assist in formulating plans and support alternate modes of communication, such as sign language or augmentative devices. For students with emerging languages, building on receptive and expressive language skills will be ongoing, and for those with high verbal skills working on the more subtle aspects of pragmatics and conversational reciprocity will be the focus. Speech pathologists can be instrumental in driving the social and language components of interaction since these are often so intertwined. However, the development of communication skills in a student with autism cannot be the sole responsibility of the speech pathologist. Communication regarding wants and needs, as well as social interactions, occurs throughout the day and across settings, and the entire school team will be involved.

While some students are auditory learners, many tend to be visual learners, meaning they understand or retain what they see more effectively than what they hear. Visual supports are often helpful since they provide extra processing time.

Supporting Receptive Language Skills

Receptive Language is the ability to understand what is said or written.

- Make sure you have the student's attention before you deliver an instruction or ask a question.
- Consider the student's processing challenges and timing (for example, begin an instruction with the student's name – this increases the likelihood that they may be attending by the time you deliver the direction).
- Avoid complex verbal directions, information, and discussion. Keep instructions short or give information in chunks.
- Give positive directions to allow for incomplete language processing.
- Minimize the use of 'don't' and 'stop.' (For example, 'Please stay on the sidewalk' can be much more effective than 'Do not walk on the grass' for a student who might not hear the 'don't' – or for one who is not sure where the acceptable place to walk might be.) This lets the student know exactly what you want them to do.
- Allow 'wait time' (be prepared to wait for a response, whether it is an action or answer). Avoid immediately repeating an instruction or inquiry. Sometimes it is helpful to think of a student with auditory processing, hitting the command again does not make it go any faster, but rather sends it back to the beginning to start the process all over again!
- Model and shape correct responses to build understanding (for example, for a younger child, to teach the meaning of 'stop': run on the playground holding hands with the student, say 'stop;' stop yourself and the student; repeat until you can fade the handholding and then fade the modeling)
- Supplement verbal information with pictures, visual schedules, gestures, visual examples, written directions.
- Do not reprimand a student for "not listening or responding" as it only serves to highlight their challenges

Supporting Expressive Language

Expressive Language is spoken language and any communicative output such as picture exchange, written language, etc.

- Take responsibility for finding a way to access the student's need for communication. Many people with autism have word retrieval issues – even if they know an answer, they may not be able to come up with the words. Offer visual supports, cue cards, multiple choice options, etc.
- Use visual support to prompt language or give choices. (For example, if you are teaching a child to ask for help, always have a cue card available, and prompt its use whenever it is time for them to request help. This can be used by the student instead of spoken language, or as a support for developing language and teaching when it might be appropriate to use this phrase.
- Teach and use scripts - words, pictures, etc. for communication needs or exchanges (for example, 'I like... What do you like?' 'I like.... ') Use cue cards and fade over time as the student develops an understanding of how to use the phrase or the pattern of the exchange.
- Teach the student to communicate or say 'I don't know' to reduce the anxiety associated with not being able to answer a question. Later teach the student how to ask for additional information (Who? What? Where? When? etc.)
- Add visual supports to the environment as needed (for example, label 'IN' and 'OUT' boxes).
- Teach students to look for and use visual supports that already exist in the environment: calendars, signs, door numbers, name placards, drawer labels, the display on a cash register and body language.

- Use a communication board, PECs, pictures, or sign language to support or provide communication options for students with low verbal output.
- If your student has been provided with an augmentative or alternative communication device, learn how to use it too. These devices can range considerably in terms of sophistication, with some offering either written or speech output. Ask the students' special education staff or tech support for programming specific to their needs and help guide them to communication options that will be helpful.
- Sing! Musical processing occurs separately from language processing, and singing can be used to promote both receptive and expressive skills (for example, for younger children, 'The fork goes on the left, the fork goes on the left, hi ho the dairy-o, the fork goes on the left!') as well as motivation.
- Provide verbal prompts or models with care, knowing that these can sometimes cause pronoun confusion and challenges due to perspective taking (for example, from the child's perspective, when a teacher says, "I want a cookie" does that mean that the teacher wants a cookie or is prompting them to say, 'I want a cookie'?)
- Be aware of echolalia, in which a student repeats phrases they have heard before. Sometimes this is self-stimulatory behavior, but many individuals with autism also use functional echolalia to comment, inform or request.
- Always look for a student's communicative intent (for example, if a child often reverses pronouns or employs functional echolalia, then "Does your head hurt?" might be their way of telling you that their head hurts).
- For a student who is inclined to use echolalia, try to model language (and visual supports and social narratives) using language forms that would be appropriate when the student uses it so that pronoun reversals do not occur (for example, when creating a visual for a child with frequent headaches, one might use a picture of a person holding their head and the words "My head hurts.")
- Address the language of emotions – the communication of thoughts, feelings, and emotional states for all individuals with autism. The challenges they face may cause ongoing anxiety and stress. Provide an outlet for their emotions. Otherwise, they may communicate their feelings through behavior or shutting down. Helping the student put a label on an emotion can sometimes help modulate the intensity of it. They may be calmed by seeing that you recognize what they are trying to convey. (For example, "I can see that you are angry.") Use cartoons and visual support to build emotional fluency.
- Whenever possible, teach self-advocacy and negotiation skills.
- Many students with autism have a favorite topic or specific area of interest that may interfere with schoolwork or social interaction. To shape the student's expectations and to minimize the impact of this obsession:
    1. Provide scheduled opportunities to discuss this topic.
    2. If appropriate, use a visual schedule.
    3. Establish boundaries (when it is, or is not, appropriate to discuss this topic).
    4. Set a timer to establish duration.
    5. Support strategies for expanding to other topics
    6. Reinforce the student for talking about other subjects or the absence of the topic.

Improving Social Interaction and Development

Supporting social interaction is an important part of the student's educational plan. Students with autism often want to interact with others but cannot engage appropriately or may be overwhelmed by the process. Some students are aware of their social deficits and will avoid interactions even though they desperately want to connect with others. Others will engage in attention seeking behavior to connect with others until they build the skills they need to interact.

Social development represents a range of skills, including timing and attention, sensory integration, and communication, that can be built and layered to improve social competence. Building competence will result in further interest and interaction.

Sometimes, the mere unpredictability and noise of the presence of others can be disconcerting. Working through the sensory issues is the first place to begin, such as with a young child still learning to develop parallel play. A student's social ability builds on skills of imitation and reciprocity. Even a child with significant receptive and expressive language challenges can work on social referencing and paying attention to the behaviors of those around them. Without understanding the words of the teacher's directive, they can learn that when the class stands to salute the flag, they stand and salute too!

Social challenges in autism are bidirectional. This means that they may manifest as deficits (a lack of social initiation) or excesses. In both instances, the need for support and teaching is real. Appropriate social behavior requires social understanding. Some people with autism appear highly social, initiating social interaction but lacking reciprocity, or appear to be one-sided. People with high functioning autism often suffer the pain of rejection and loneliness because they lack the necessary skills to reciprocate.

Considerations in Addressing Social Skills

- Extend a feeling of welcome to your classroom, lunchroom, or gym and model for the other students that the student with autism is a valued part of the group.
- Get to know the student and meet them where they currently are in terms of both social skills and interests and be ready to work from there. Reciprocity, the give and take of an interaction, is a critical social skill necessary for developing a relationship. Typical individuals build strong relationships on reciprocity and socially demand it. Relationships are not based only on one-sided giving. You come to expect a friend to call you back, return a favor, etc. To create true reciprocity, it is important to engage a student in their terms and interests, not just expect them to engage in yours.
- Appropriate social behavior requires social understanding; be aware of the need to build foundations and scaffold skills in appropriate developmental sequence, expecting growth through support, practice, and direct teaching.
- Be aware that free play, recess, and other unstructured times are the most challenging times for children with autism; think about how to impose structure on activities; this also applies to older students, though with needs for age-appropriate supports and structure.
- Focus on social development in areas where the student shows interest and competence – not where language, fine motor or other challenges will create an overwhelming experience.
- A student with autism is likely to have anxiety surrounding social situations, which can result in avoidance or inappropriate behaviors. Building competence may reduce this anxiety.
- Students with autism often have a challenging time maintaining eye contact. Insisting on eye contact can cause additional stress. It is often best to begin

with requiring the student to direct their body toward the talking partner. After significant practice in social situations and increased comfort level, eye contact may develop naturally or can be targeted more directly.

- Social challenges, while very real in each instance, will be quite different for individuals along the autism spectrum. A student with limited verbal ability or word retrieval issues might have trouble contributing to a conversation. An extremely verbal and single-minded student might have trouble allowing a conversational partner to get a word in. It is generally not effective to pair students with disparate needs in social skills classes or speech groups, as it becomes even more challenging for the needs of either of them to be met and progress is impeded.
- Students with autism, especially more verbal students who perform well academically and do not have consistent adult support, can be the target of teasing and bullying. They often do not "pick up" on nonverbal cues such as tone of voice or the hidden intention of a request or comment. They often go along with teasing and/or bullying because they do not identify that it has a negative intent. The desire to make friends, and their difficulty doing so, means they often encounter peers with dishonest intentions. Be on the lookout for this and respond quickly if teasing and bullying become an issue.
- Many people with autism are very logical and will play according to the rules always. If the rule is that basketballs are not allowed on the playground during recess, a student may become agitated when a special activity for PE includes basketballs on the playground. Similarly, they may not understand unusual circumstances in game play such as penalty shots, and their insistence on following the rules as they have learned them may become problematic.
- Flexible thinking may challenge some students with autism. For example, throwing a ball at someone while playing dodge ball is usually not a wise idea: you are asking the child to understand that the ball can be thrown at other children, but not adults, and only during this game – confusing.

Strategies for Supporting Social Skill Development

- Reinforce what the student does well socially – use behavior-specific praise (and concrete reinforcement if needed) to shape pro-social behavior.
- Model social interaction, taking turns and reciprocity.
- Teach context clues and referencing those around you (For example, 'if everyone else is standing, you should consider standing too.").
- Break social skills into small component parts and teach these skills through supported interactions. Use visuals as appropriate.
- Celebrate strengths and use these to your advantage. Many students with autism have a good sense of humor, a love of or affinity for music, strong rote memorization skills or a heightened sense of color or visual perspective. Use these to motivate interest in social interactions or give a student a chance to shine and feel competent and interesting.
- Consider identifying peers who model strong social skills and seeing if they would be a buddy. But before you do, remember that not all peers are up for being paired with an autistic student. Consider asking peers you think would work well, or even better, send a questionnaire home to all students to identify who would like to be a student buddy to those who may need extra help. Remember: you are not allowed to disclose a student's diagnosis to anyone. Strive to keep peer interactions as natural as possible.

- Consider creating small lunch groups, with structured activities or topic boxes. (The group to pulls a topic out of a box and discusses things related to this topic, such as 'The most recent movie I saw was…' This can be helpful for students who tend to talk about the same things all the time since it provides supports and motivation and the benefit of a visual reminder of what the topic is.)
- Focus on social learning during activities that are not otherwise challenging for the child. For example, conversational turn-taking may not occur if a child with poor fine motor skills is being asked to converse while cutting.
- Support peers and students with structured social situations. Define expectations of behavior in advance. For example, first teach the necessary skill, such as how to play games, in isolation, and then introduce it in a social setting with peers.
- Provide structured activities during recess. If there is a group of students playing cards each lunchtime, consider teaching the card game to the student with autism who likes to play cards.
- During group activities define the student's role and responsibilities within the group. Assign a role or help them mediate with peers as to what they should do. For example, 'Sallie is the note taker today.' Rotate roles to build flexibility and broaden skills.
- Establish learning teams or circles of friends to build a supportive community.
- Teach empathy and reciprocity. To engage in a social interaction, a person needs to be able to take another's perspective and adjust the interaction accordingly. While their challenges may distort their expressions of empathy, people with autism often do have capacity for empathy. This can be taught by making a student aware - and providing appropriate vocabulary - through commentary and awareness of feelings, emotional states, recognition of others' facial expressions and non-verbal cues.
- Use social narratives and social cartooning as tools in describing and defining social rules and expectations.
- Develop listening and attending skills and teach ways to show others that the person is listening.
- Teach a highly verbal student to recognize how, when, and how much to talk about themselves or their interests. Directly teach the skills relating to what topics to talk about with others, being aware of a conversational partner's likes and dislikes and reading from their body language and facial expressions.
- Teach social boundaries—things you should not talk about (or whom you might talk to about sensitive subjects) and maintaining personal space (an arm's length is often used as a measurable distance for conversation.)
- For older students, it is important to learn about the changes that take place in their bodies and appropriate hygiene as they grow, and communication supports and visuals should be used to help explain and teach. They will need to be taught when and with whom it is appropriate to discuss these changes.

Ideas for Preventing Behavior

- Autism does not cause behaviors that present as challenging to the teacher or the class. Behaviors are a method of communication. They can be a response to a biological cause, such as pain or discomfort, or due to a social or sensory cause. Try to understand the communicative intent of the behavior and teach the student appropriate ways to communicate and give them positive reinforcement when they are successful.
- Establish a classroom behavior plan for all students to promote expected behaviors.
- Provide behavior specific feedback and ample praise and reinforcement.

- Catch your students being good and reward them! For example, 'It was wonderful how nicely you walked in the hall and stayed in line. Give me a high five!'
- Stick to a routine, try to remain organized and support transitions between subjects or changes in the day's schedule.
- Communicate expectations, use daily and short-term schedules, warn of changes to routines or personnel, prepare the student for unexpected events such as fire drills, field trips or field day, substitutes, etc.
- Offer choices and provide the student some control – within reason. For example, 'Which one should we work on first, math or reading?' or 'Do you want to do 10 math problems, or 15 math problems?' Even if the student does not have a true choice, they can feel that they have some input and are not directed throughout every step of the day.
- Consider sensory needs and interventions.
- Respect the student's personal space and teach them to recognize and respect the personal space of others.
- Provide a home base or safe place where the student feels safe and can regroup, calm down, or escape overwhelming situations or sensory overload such as a separate room, a tent or corner within a classroom, or a particular teacher's or administrator's classroom or office. Proactively teach the student how and when to use this strategy, using visual supports or cue cards as needed.
- Practice flexibility and self-monitoring. Start this when the student is calm and helps to provide a framework for what 'calm and ready to participate' actually is.
- Utilize breaks as a way to return to a calm state or as a reward for good work.
- Provide communication options and seek to give the student an opportunity to express emotions, confusion, or their perspective.
- Teach contingencies and waiting strategies such as
    1. Countdown (5, 4, 3, 2, 1)
    2. First, Then
    3. A "WAIT" cue card that can be implemented in a variety of settings
- Teach and provide the student with a list of strategies for calming when anxious, stressed, or angry.

  When I am stressed, I can:
    - Take deep breaths
    - Count to ten
    - Repeat a positive message
    - Squeeze a ball
    - Ask for help
    - Ask to take a break
    - Ask permission to go to room 10
- Be aware of, and work to avoid, known triggers and antecedents that may result in frustration, overload, anxiety, or maladaptive behaviors. Make a list and share it, so the student's entire team is aware of these triggers.
- Know the student's learning style and ensure modifications/ accommodations are sufficient and appropriate to increase competence and motivation and minimize frustration.
- Use video modeling to show desired behaviors, or to compare or evaluate with the student their behavior in a targeted situation.
- Evaluate behaviors that need to be changed, considering the factors in place before the behavior occurred, the details of the behavior itself, and the events that followed—talk to others to gain their perspective, and develop an understanding of the function of the behavior (what purpose did it serve?) so that a replacement behavior or strategy might be developed. Enlist the support of behavior specialists in analyzing behaviors that need addressing.

Often the most obvious piece of behavior management is the positive behavior support plan, where many of these suggested strategies are identified in specific for the student; the analysis of behavior is described, and the steps to preventing undesirable behavior and promoting positive behavior and development of the individual are outlined. For a student with behaviors that impede learning (the student or that of those around them), IDEA requires a positive behavior support plan developed by the team as part of an IEP. A trained behavior analyst should be involved in evaluating the student's behavior and developing the support plan. Training those who are responsible for implementation and the ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of the plan are two areas that can be easily overlooked in a busy school environment, but these are essential to the plan's success. Recognizing that needs and circumstances change, it is important that the plan be reevaluated and revised as needed.

Positive Behavior Support

According to the Association of Positive Behavior Support, Positive Behavior Support (PBS) is a set of research-based strategies used to increase quality of life and decrease problem behavior by teaching new skills and making changes in a person's environment. Positive behavior support combines:

Valued outcomes considered effective when interventions result in increases in an individual's success and personal satisfaction and enhancement of positive social interactions across work, academic, recreational and community settings.

Behavioral and biomedical science: Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) research demonstrates the importance of analyzing the interaction between behavior and environment and recognizing that behavior is purposeful and can be influenced by environmental factors that can be changed. Biomedical science shows that information relating to an individual's psychiatric state and knowledge of other biological factors might help professionals understand the interaction between physiological and environmental factors that influence behavior.

Validated procedures that use best practices and ongoing evaluation, using data collected to evaluate outcomes (program evaluation measures, qualitative research, surveys, rating scales, interviews, correlational analyses, direct observation, and self-report information).

Systems change to enhance quality of life and reduce problem behaviors, recognizing that effective implementation of a plan will require that issues of resource allocation, staff development, team building and collaboration, and the appropriateness to the implementation team be considered and addressed in the development of the plan.

For more information, the Association of Positive Behavior Support ***offers*** fact sheets on PBS Practices, PBS examples and case studies, and suggested readings.

Supporting Organizational Skills

Between the executive function issues (short term memory, organizing, sequencing, etc.) and the language and social challenges of autism, keeping pace with the world around becomes extremely challenging. If a student is having a challenging time processing sensory information, they may be distracted from organizing their thoughts and work.

Strict routines provide some order to the chaos a student with autism experiences. Predictability will reduce anxiety. Unexpected changes to routines can cause significant distress and behaviors.

Organizers and schedules can help reduce anxiety. Just as a busy teacher or businessperson might use a planner or smart phone to organize important dates and times, and a To DO list to stay on track, a visual schedule helps establish routines and keep the student focused, productive, and informed of what is coming next.

Provide a schedule of daily activities. Depending on the needs of the student, this can be photos, symbols, or written information. Provide

information on what is happening, in what order, and any changes to the regular routine (for example, a substitute teacher, assembly, field trip or fire drill).

Some students need more detail, such as the sequences of activities within a period. For example:

Period 2 Reading:

1. Reading group, pages 22-25
2. Comprehension questions
3. Silent reading at my desk

Keep in mind, the simplest visual schedule format–readily available in any situation with paper and writing instrument:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

- Create 'to do' lists and checklists for completing tasks or assignments.
- Streamline and teach to mastery, creating supports that can be generalized across activities. (For example, Get worksheet. Take out a pencil. Sign your name on paper. Write date. Read directions.)
- A student will need to be taught to reference their schedule, checking off activities as they are completed, and eventually using it to build independence for managing time and activities.

Organizing Materials, Time and Activities

- Use binder organizers, color-coded folders by subject or teacher, etc.
- Use labeled desk organizers (divide the desk into areas, work to complete, textbooks, pencils/pens etc.) and classroom supports (for example, label the 'homework in' bin).
- Manage time and deadlines using tools like time organizers, visual calendars, tablets (such as iPads), smart phones, computers, countdown timers (www.Timetimer.com) or watches with alarms. Break long assignments into chunks and assign time limits for completing each chunk.
- Schedule a regular, perhaps weekly time to clean and organize the workspace and update planners.
- Create organization for group activities and provide help or strategies for identifying the student's role within the group and their responsibilities.
- Create visual schedules for specific tasks and routines.
- Use schedules to prepare for transitions and teach flexibility and problem solving.
- Warn the student of changes in routine or upcoming transitions (e.g., 'in five minutes we need to clean up the paints and go to reading groups').
- Use social narratives to prepare for novel events – field trips, fire drills, assemblies etc.
- Organize problem solving, teaching step-by-step strategies to organize thoughts for problem solving, sequencing, etc.
- Work on flexibility and handling changes in exceedingly small steps, using visual supports and rewards, so that the student learns to control their anxiety because of these previous successes.

Supporting Sensory Needs

Sensory challenges can affect the student's ability to take in information, respond to requests, participate in social situations, write, participate in sports and maintain a calm and ready to work state. Research is still exploring the impact and factors associated with sensory challenges in autism. Some research anecdotal observations, and personal accounts from people with autism have provided important insights.

Either through internal imbalances, or in response to environmental sensations, the

sensory and emotional regulation of a person with autism can become overwhelming and result in anxiety and distress. Working to maintain a 'modulated state' is an effective strategy for maximizing their ability to learn, maintain focus and reduce reactive behavior.

A trained occupational or physical therapist can provide help with sensory modulation (appropriate responses in relation to incoming sensations) and treatment for sensory issues using evidence-based practices. If a student is suspected of having sensory integration issues, trained personnel should evaluate the person's needs.

The student's school team can be trained to use fun, play-based activities that support the student's needs and can be integrated throughout their program.

- Be aware of possible sensory issues and alter the environment where possible (for example, minimizing exposure to loud noises, using low odor dry erase markers, selective seating arrangements) to reduce their impact on a child's function.
- A sound sensitive student might find a gym teacher's whistle assaulting and the echoes of a busy locker room disturbing - pairing the student with a teacher not inclined to use a whistle and allowing them to dress when the locker room is empty, might greatly improve the student's tolerance of, and interest in, Physical Education class.
- Some students find standing close to others difficult, so this would need to be addressed when deciding where to place a student in line when moving around the school or sitting in the cafeteria or classroom.
- Students with autism may have difficulty looking at you and listening simultaneously (taking in information from auditory and visual modalities at the same time). From a social modeling aspect, it is important to gain eye contact before speaking but expect that a student might avert their eyes but still be listening.
- Highly decorated classrooms can be visually over-stimulating and distracting for some students.
- Some students may need to transition earlier than other students or may require a few minutes to unwind after walking in a noisy hallway.
- Typical classroom occasions such as singing the happy birthday song or participating in less structured, noisy activities such as lunch, assemblies and indoor PE classes can put a child with sensory issues into distress mode. It might be helpful to allow the student an "out" in these instances, such as being the person responsible for getting napkins during a birthday celebration (allowing the child to walk to the cafeteria while the rest of the class sings) or being a behind the scenes 'production manager' for different assemblies.
- Use the sensory integration techniques recommended by the student's therapist, recognizing that certain sensory input is simulating, while other input can be calming. Be sure to understand which activities should be used at what times.
- The trained therapist should help to create a program to teach the student to recognize their emotional and sensory arousal levels and needs, and over time build self-monitoring and self-delivery of the appropriate sensory input or strategies for modulation.
- Use visual support in teaching the student how to recognize their arousal state as well as their emotions. Provide options about what they might do to return to a 'ready to work' state.

There is much that can be done to help alter the environment and provide support that will make the world a less overwhelming place for a student with autism.

Peer Support

For the Teacher: Teaching Peers About Autism

Autism education can occur in a generalized manner, in which students learn about acceptance and inclusion not related to a particular student at school. It can also be much more specific to the needs of that student and their family.

First, communicate with parents. It is especially important to communicate with the parents or guardian of the student with autism before any student autism education is done. The teacher or school psychologist leading the class discussion should reach out to the parents or guardian of the child with autism to understand what they are comfortable with in terms of disclosure. Some families may be comfortable with a general inclusion workshop and acknowledgment of their child's strengths and challenges to the class, but not with sharing the autism diagnosis. Other families are more open about their child's diagnosis and are willing to be active participants in the education around autism spectrum disorder. These are personal decisions that each family must make, and schools should honor. These decisions can also change over time as the needs of the student with autism may change.

It is also important to keep in mind that some families may not have told their children about their diagnosis yet. Some children may know that they have autism but may not want to share their diagnosis with their classmates. Again, these are individual decisions. The other consideration to discuss in advance is if a student with autism will be present during the inclusion workshops. Some families want their children to be active participants, and others might prefer it when the student is out of the classroom.

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 the school year or during 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 inclusion and acceptance may be all that is addressed. Out of respect for the student, a more specific introduction can also be done when they are 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, movies, etc.), while also sharing some of the challenges and differences the students might notice or need to be aware of, such as sensory needs.

Then, before addressing peers, it is also important to reach out to their families. Many parents will not have had experience with autism and may not understand or have the tools they need to appropriately support their children in fostering relationships with children who seem different. Involving the overall school community will build awareness, sensitivity, and benefit everyone involved.

Families of peers can be informed through assemblies or Parent Teacher Organizations (sometimes called Home & School Organizations). In some cases, it may be necessary to inform the peers' families more directly within a classroom or grade level.

For the Class: General Information About Autistic Classmates

Whether you already know a student with autism or are just getting to know one, you will find this information helpful. If you make the effort to include, communicate, understand, and respect, you will both be sure to get something out of your friendship.

Include.

Take the initiative to include a student that has disclosed their autism diagnosis. They may really want to be included and may not know how to ask. Be specific about what you want them to do. For instance, instead of saying "Do you want to eat lunch together?" ask "Do you want to sit at this table and eat lunch?"

Try to find common interests – It will be much easier to talk about or share something you both like to do (movies, sports, music, books, TV shows, etc.). But if you share few, try to ask about their interests. You can learn something new.

Do not ignore the person, even if you think they do not notice you.

Communicate.

Communicate at a reasonable speed and volume. Speak literally – do not use confusing figures of speech (They may truthfully tell you, "The sky" if you ask, "What's up?")

Give feedback – If your friend with autism is doing something inappropriate, it is OK to tell the person nicely. Just be sure to also tell them what the right thing to do is because they may not know.

Take time to say 'hi' whenever you see them. Even when you are in a hurry and pass them in the hall, just saying 'hi' is nice.

Be persistent and patient – Remember that your classmate with autism may take more time to respond than other people. It does not necessarily mean they are not interested.

Understand.

Your classmate may have sensory sensitivities. They may be extremely uncomfortable in certain situations or places (crowds, noisy areas, etc.). Ask if they are OK. Sometimes they may need a break.

Find out what their special interests or abilities are and then try to find ways to let them use them.

Ask questions – Ask a teacher or aide if you are confused about something they are doing. There is a reason kids do things. If you figure it out, you might be able to help.

If your classmate with autism is 'freaking out,' it is because they are trying to communicate something, not because they are just being weird. Something might really be bothering the person, or they might be afraid or frustrated and unable to communicate about it. Let them have their space and ask a teacher or another adult for help.

Respect.

Accept their differences and respect their strengths just as you would for any friend.

Do not be afraid. Autism spectrum disorder is not scary. Some say it is a natural occurrence in humans.

Stand up for the person – If you see someone teasing or bullying a friend with autism, take a stand and tell the person that it is not right. Never tease, even if you think you are joking around. Sometimes they may not understand the teasing. If other kids tease the person, pull them aside and tell them to stop. If you are concerned they are being bullied, tell a teacher or an aide.

Be helpful, but do not be too helpful. If you are too helpful, it may make the person feel more different. Let them try to do it first by themselves, then help if needed. Ask them to do things with you, but do not just explain it to them; show them what to do so they can imitate you.

Say something to your classmate when they do good things. You can cheer, give 'high-fives,' or just tell them 'Great work.' They like to be complimented, just like you do.

It is OK to get frustrated with your classmate sometimes or to want to play alone or with somebody else. If they will not leave you alone after you have asked nicely, tell a teacher or another adult who can help you.

Resources for Elementary School Children

General Inclusion Training

These books are designed to teach general acceptance and appreciation of differences between individuals and their peers and classmates. Especially when a family wishes to maintain their privacy, sometimes general inclusion training is enough to teach students to support and include their peers with autism.

Trevor, Trevor
by Diane Twachtman Cullen

The story of Trevor, a primary school aged child whose problems with social relationships suggest a form of autism. Unfortunately, like so many children with social interaction problems, it is not Trevor's strengths that the classmates notice, but rather Trevor's differences.

Change comes through the efforts of a caring teacher Metaphor, as it is explained in the preface, is a type of storytelling pioneered by Milton H. Erickson that concentrates on indirect or symbolic communication in order to transfer the message or meaning of the story in a lasting and powerful manner.

Wings of Epoh
by Gerda Weissman Klein

Wings of Epoh is a story that teaches acceptance, tolerance, and empathy. What unfolds is the gift of friendship, and the joy in helping a person who is misunderstood. *The Wings of Epoh* is available as both a book and a film.

Autism Specific Education

These books address autism specifically so that peers can learn what autism is and are better able to understand their classmate's strengths and challenges. They can be used when the family involved is comfortable with disclosing their child's diagnosis with their classmates.

The Autism Acceptance Book
by Ellen Sabin

The Autism Acceptance Book teaches children about autism, further develops their understanding for the people around them, and encourages them to embrace people's differences with respect, compassion, and kindness. For ages 6 and up.

The Sixth Sense II
by Carol Gray

Provides a lesson plan for promoting understanding and supportive social climates for children with autism spectrum disorders. "Students (peers) will be better equipped to include a classmate with unique behaviors when provided with accurate social information. Using their five senses as a frame of reference, this lesson plan introduces students to their sixth (or social) sense via activities and discussions."

My Friend with Autism: A Coloring Book for Peers and Siblings
by Beverly Bishop

Written for classmates of autistic students and the classmates' parents, this kid-friendly book explains in positive ways that children with autism are good at some things, not so good at others – just like everyone else! The narrator (a peer) notes that a friend's senses work "really well" – they can hear sounds no one else can hear; their eyes work so well bright lights can hurt them. In all cases, the differences are described in a kind, understanding manner. There are charming illustrations for readers to color. "Notes for Adults" offer parents more detailed information about the "kid's pages."

How to Be a Friend to Someone with Autism

adapted, Peter Faustino, PhD

Take the initiative to include the person – your friend may really want to be included and may not know how to ask. Be specific about what you want them to do.

Find common interests – it will be much easier to talk about or share something you both like to do (movies, sports, music, books, etc.).

Be persistent and patient – remember that your friend with autism may take more time to respond than other people. It does not necessarily mean they are not interested.

Communicate clearly – speak at a reasonable speed and volume. It might be helpful to use short sentences. Use gestures, pictures, and facial expressions to help communicate.

Speak literally – do not use confusing figures of speech (They may truthfully tell you, "The sky" if you ask, "What's up?")

Stand up for the person – if you see someone teasing or bullying a friend with autism, take a stand and tell the person that it is not cool.

Remember sensory sensitivity – your friend may be extremely uncomfortable in certain situations or places (crowds, noisy areas, etc.). Ask if they are OK. Sometimes your friend may need a break.

Give feedback – if your friend with autism is doing something inappropriate, it is OK to tell the person nicely. Just be sure to also tell them what the right thing to do is because they may not know.

Do not be afraid – your friend is just a kid like you who needs a little help. Accept their differences and respect their strengths just as you would for any friend.

Programs that Promote Inclusion and Support

Perfect Pals

Perfect Pals is a program started by the Autism Speaks Nantucket Resource Center in collaboration with the Nantucket School District to provide students with and without disabilities ways to participate in after-school recreational activities.

Resources for Middle and High School Students

Literature

What's Up With Nick?
From the Organization for Autism Research

A story about Nick, a new kid in school with autism. This accordion booklet includes sections "Meeting a Kid with Autism," "Hanging Out With Kids That Have Autism," "Things to Remember About Autism" and more!

A Buffet of Sensory Interventions: Solutions for Middle and High School Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders
by Susan Culp

This book offers a smorgasbord of sensory-based interventions for use by educators, occupational therapists, and parents. This practical and well researched tool is unique by focusing on middle and high school students, whose sensory needs are often overlooked. In suggesting interventions for this age group, the author emphasizes the importance of fostering independence, self-advocacy, and self-regulation to for teens with autism spectrum disorders to take ownership of their sensory needs as they transition into adulthood.

How to Talk to an Autistic Kid
by Daniel Stefanski (an autistic kid)

Kids with autism may have a tough time communicating, which can be frustrating for autistic kids and for their peers. In this intimate yet practical book, author Daniel Stefanski, a fourteen-year-old boy with autism, helps readers understand why autistic kids act the way they do and offers specific suggestions on how to have a good relationship with them. Written by an autistic kid for non-autistic kids, it provides personal stories, knowledgeable explanations, and supportive advice–all in Daniel's unique and charming voice and accompanied by lively illustrations.

Social Skills Picture Book for High School and Beyond
by Jed Baker

Winner of an iParenting Media Award, this picture book appeals to the visual strengths of students on the autism spectrum, with color photos of students demonstrating various social skills in the correct (and sometimes incorrect) way. The skills depicted are meant to be read, role-played, corrected, when necessary, role played some more, and finally, to be practiced by the student in real-life social situations.

Preparing for Life: The Complete Guide for Transitioning to Adulthood for Those with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome
by Jed Baker

Award-winning author and counselor Dr. Jed Baker draws from their experience working with young adults on the spectrum to put together a thorough resource for students with ASD preparing for life after high school. This comprehensive handbook offers "life skills training" on subjects that young adults need to know about, such as nonverbal cues, body language, dealing with anger, frustration, and anxiety, as well as building and maintaining friendships and intimate relationships.

Programs to Support Peer Relationships for Middle and High School

Circle of Friends

The Circle of Friends program consists of a trained group of peer mentors who serve as good social role models and interact with a specific student consistently. Activities can include teaching scripts and how to 'chat' (using topic lists or boxes), noncompetitive games, book clubs, extracurricular activities and more.

Student Clubs for Autism Speaks (SCAS)

Student Clubs for Autism Speaks create 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.

Best Buddies

Best Buddies® is a nonprofit organization dedicated to establishing a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Best Buddies' eight formal programs – Best Buddies Middle Schools, High Schools, Colleges, Citizens, e-Buddies, Jobs, Ambassadors, and Promoters – positively impact nearly, 700,000 individuals (about half the population of Hawaii) with and without disabilities worldwide.

The Peer Buddy Program

Peer buddy programs are designed to increase access to general education curriculum and inclusion in school activities by students with disabilities. General education students provide social and academic support to their classmates with disabilities by (a) helping them acquire skills needed to succeed in the general education environment and (b) adapting the environment to be more welcoming and accommodating to individual differences and needs.

FRIEND Program

This inclusive social skills curriculum from SARRC (Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center) provides opportunities for students on the autism spectrum to improve social communication skills in a natural setting, supported by peers, parents, educators and therapists. An easy-to-use manual describes how to develop and implement a FRIEND group for students in grades K-12 during lunch and recess. Innovative materials including the children's book *Wings of Epoh*, DVD's, an educator activity guide, and informational tips, can be used for peer inclusion activities to promote awareness of ASD and social differences and appropriate strategies for facilitating social interactions for school age students.

Handouts for Specific Members of the School Community

The following section contains handouts designed for specific members of the school community. They are meant as training tools and supply important information about autism and working with autistic students, specific to each school community role. These will help ensure every member of the school community is knowledgeable and empowered when they interact not just with autistic students but with every student. It is recommended that these be handed out with the **Autism Fact Sheet** in the ***Appendix***.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, PRINCIPALS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM MEMBERS

An inclusive-minded, informed administration sets the stage for a successful inclusive school. When school administrators and principals have a positive attitude about their students with special needs, their attitudes establish expectations and the tone for the entire school staff and students. This tone can have a profound effect on the potential outcome for the student and on the entire student body developing lifelong understanding and acceptance of people with special needs.

Knowing the benefits of inclusion to the students with exceptional needs as well as the typical student population is helpful in developing this perspective. Keep this information in perspective, as the family's wishes and the student's needs might start for five minutes a day and build from there with increasing competence and confidence.

For inclusion to be successful, being informed and prepared is essential for a positive experience for everyone involved. Administrative staff will need to 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. Untrained or ineffective staff support can cause increased anxiety and difficulty for a student, impeding their success. 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. This coordinator should be aware of the characteristics of autism and the greater risk of co-occurring emotional and behavioral disorders in students with autism that might benefit from surveillance and targeted treatment. Some 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.

Other educational challenges, such as dyslexia, vision problems, and auditory processing disorders can occur in students with autism, without the usual cues suggesting assessment (for example, 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 this lack of cues. Effective assessments and accurate diagnoses will ensure appropriate intervention planning.

Since school administrators are often called in to address difficult situations, it 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 student's needs and embracing the mindset that behavior is communication are essential when intervention is needed.

Considerations Related to Staffing, Planning and Training

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. The Appendix and sections from this tool kit will be helpful.

Support the exchange of information and promote collaboration among departments and staff to support each student across settings. When the team collaborates to share success and trouble shoot problems, everyone benefits.

Include 1:1 or classroom paraprofessionals in trainings, IEP meetings, related therapies (speech, OT, etc.) sessions and positive behavior support planning and evaluation; they often spend more time with a student with autism, across settings, than any other staff in the school. They can provide valuable knowledge about the student and help ensure effective implementation of programs.

Promote opportunities for regular team meetings and open communication.

Be proactive - support the IEP team in developing positive behavior plans emphasizing support and interventions necessary to avoid or minimize difficulties. See the Resources and Appendix sections of this kit for information on Positive Behavior Plans.

Encourage the school staff to think 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 staff (and peers) could continue over the rest of the week.

Meet frequently with the student's IEP team to see if the positive behavior plan is working and that it is being implemented across all environments. Support your staff's efforts in using Classroom Checklist, Reinforcement Strategies and Data Collection.

Considerations Related to the Individual Student

Prepare for transitions earlier, before they happen. Invite the student to view a new classroom or school prior to the first day so that they have time to take in the new surroundings and staff, if possible.

Get personal. Friendly greetings and a sense of acceptance can help to make a student feel comfortable in the school. Encourage the use of the information sheet in the Resources section of this Tool Kit so the student's family or someone who knows the student well can provide helpful information. Use it to learn relevant facts about each student's likes, challenges, needs, etc.

Learn something about each student to form a personal connection and celebrate successes with behavior specific praise (for example, "I like how you are walking in the hall so quietly!")

Be mindful of a student's communication challenges; ask the student's special education staff to give you guidelines for communication. Understand that you may need to give the student additional time to respond to a question or they may need to use an alternative communication device or communication strategy such as picture exchange.

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 much as possible.

Allow opportunities for staff to practice skills outside of the confusion of certain situations so that the student can develop a skill without all the confounding sensory and social issues (for example, 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, with the goal of eventually being able to generalize these skills to the regular time schedule when possible).

When planning fire drills, etc., know that they can be extremely anxiety provoking for an autistic student. Warning students and staff in advance will go a long way in helping them manage the noise and change the routine the fire drill triggers.

Considerations Relating to Students with Autism and Their Typical Peers

Be aware of the vulnerability of students with autism and their propensity to be victims of bullying – proactively build a school culture where bullying is not acceptable through awareness building, peer sensitivity, strategies, and procedures.

Students with autism are not always socially savvy; if a student is being bullied quietly, they are likely to react or respond impulsively. Try to understand what caused their reaction.

Consider the student's communication difficulties and make every attempt to fully understand the situation before reaching judgment regarding fault or behavior. Recognize that the stress of a difficult situation may make it even harder for the autistic student to express themselves. Their desire for peer attention may make them reluctant to report or confirm bullying behavior.

Ensure that students with autism are part of the school community and informed of school events and opportunities - this is often over-looked 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 family if announcements are made during school regarding important school information; students with autism may not go home and let their family know of announcements that they have heard in school.

Promote opportunities for social interaction and development – find ways to include students with autism in school productions, extracurricular activities, and clubs.

Consider peer groups for social skills training, and peer buddies to support and shield a vulnerable student.

Provide peer support and training.

Considerations Relating to the Autistic Student's Family

Be considerate of the family's needs and expectations. Be sure to include them in all meetings and discussions involving the student. If you are just meeting with the student, inform the parents ahead of time, if possible. Take notes during this meeting and share them with the parent. They have every right to know every interaction any staff member schedules a meeting with them outside of the ordinary course of classroom work.

Be respectful to family members when meeting. If everyone is using a formal title, such as Mrs. or Mr., or their first names, follow that lead. Do not refer to them as "mom" or "dad" unless you want to be called "staff" or "principal."

Considerations Relating to Behavior Concerns

In many schools, when any student exhibits a behavior seen as aggressive, dangerous, or refractory, the principal or another administrator is called in. If this instance involves an autistic student, 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. More often an extreme behavior occurs when there is a pattern of inappropriate support and interventions, and the student builds up 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.
- When addressing the student, use limited verbal directions. Less can be more.

- Excessive talking and agitated adults can escalate a situation, overwhelm the student, and impede their ability to understand and comply with directions or communicate to their best ability. A few minutes of quiet followed by short, simple sentences can help everyone.
- Use established guidelines for communication and be prepared to wait for a response.
- Give choices to help engage the student and deescalate their feeling of no control. (For example, 'Do you want to talk about this in the nurse's office or in my office?').
- Written input/visual choices/cartooning/social narratives may help to investigate the student's perspective, feelings, and interpretation and to teach why their actions were unacceptable.

Sending the message to the student that the team is working to understand their perspective and trying to understand their difficult behavior (and then following up by instituting appropriate supports and preventive measures) may be more helpful to changing the student's behavior than a consequence such as suspension. Remember that the goal is to stop the behavior and prevent it from occurring in the future.

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 increase, rather than reduce, them).

Recognize and consider that interventions and strategies currently in use, even if well-intentioned, may be contributing to the development of the behavior.

Take care in interacting with the student's family. Remember that this happened at school, and while the child is their parent's 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 understanding the underlying cause of the behavior and developing a plan for promoting effective replacement behavior.

SCHOOL NURSES

The nurse's office should be a safe and supportive place for students with special needs. It is important to have every student fill out a health questionnaire but especially so for autistic students. Co-occurring conditions are often as unseen as autism but still require medical attention from the nurse. In addition, 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 to acupuncture.

If an autistic student requires daily intensive care, suffers from trauma related to their medical needs or medical providers, has unexpected behavior, frequently or occasionally, that requires medical attention, or has any issue requiring health management, including an inability or aversion to identifying pain, an Individualized Health Plan may be a good idea. ***Check out our guide to establishing one here***.

Be mindful of a student's communication challenges; ask for guidelines for communication from their special education staff, knowing that it might require wait time for a response to a question, use of an alternative communication device or strategy such as picture exchange might be necessary.

It is recommended to get to know the student prior to an emergency. Spend time in their day, invite them to visit the nurse's office, etc. so that injury or illness is not aggravated by fear of the unknown.

Understand the student's medical needs and converse with the family and/or physician about special interventions or medications.

Many children with autism are on medications or special diets; even if these are not required during the school day, it might be helpful to know what those medications are and what side effects are possible; be aware that the medical team/family may wish to keep other caregivers (teachers, aides) unaware of changes in medication in order to keep their observations of the effects of interventions unbiased.

Remember that behavior is communication – consider injury, pain, etc. if a child has a significant new behavior.

Strategies

Be calm and positive. Model appropriate behavior for the student with autism and other students by greeting them, etc.

Use the information about the student to get to know relevant facts about their 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 (for example, the aide might ask the student to open their mouth – and then you can look in).

Getting a child to take medication can be challenging – ask the student's family about strategies they have used successfully at home; other strategies that have been used successfully are visual schedules, social stories, or reward systems to promote compliance with taking medication.

Use a visual pain scale so that a student can give an accurate indication of the severity of the pain, and pictures so that they can point to where the pain is felt.

Use visual supports and examples where possible (for example, "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

All too often there are news reports about the misinterpretation of an autistic person's behavior resulting in the use of excessive force and physical harm. It is critical that security staff – and ideally the local first responders – are knowledgeable about autism.

A person with autism might:

- Have an impaired sense of danger
- Wander to bodies of water, traffic or other dangers
- Be overwhelmed by police presence
- Fear a person in uniform (ex. fire turnout gear) or exhibit curiosity and reach for objects/equipment (ex. shiny badge or handcuffs)
- React with "fight" or "flight"
- Not respond to "stop" or other commands
- Have delayed speech and language skills
- Not respond to their name or verbal commands
- Avoid eye contact
- Engage in repetitive behavior (ex. rocking, stimming, hand flapping, spinning)
- Have sensory perception issues
- Have epilepsy or seizure disorder

Understanding the issues with communication, anxiety, challenges and sensory issues, as well as lack of appropriate fear and a tendency for some individuals with autism to wander or run away (elope) is critical to successful and safe support.

When interacting with a student with autism:

- Be patient and give them space.
- Use simple and concrete sentences.
- Give plenty of time for them to process and respond.
- Be alert to signs of increased frustration and try to eliminate the source if possible as behavior may escalate.
- Avoid quick movements and loud noises.
- Do not touch them unless absolutely necessary.
- Use information from parents/caregivers, if available, on how to best respond.

Also, be aware of the social vulnerability of students with autism. They are frequently victims of bullying. Inform the school team if you observe situations that make you concerned. Understand too that students with autism are not always socially savvy. If a student is being bullied quietly, they are likely to react or respond impulsively. Try to understand what caused the response reaction. Consider the student's communication difficulties and make every attempt to fully understand the situation before reaching judgment regarding fault or behavior.

Model appropriate behavior for the student with autism and their peers by greeting them by name and engaging in appropriate conversation when possible. Establishing a relationship with a student may make it easier to help them and others in an emergency.

Be aware of communication and social concerns that might make communicating with a student with autism difficult. Be prepared to wait for a response, whether it is an action or verbal answer and bear in mind that anxiety may further impede the autistic student's ability to communicate in a stressful situation.

Give positive directions. Minimize the use of 'don't' and 'stop' when possible. 'Please stay on the sidewalk' can be more effective than 'do not walk on the grass' for a student who might not hear the 'don't' or for one who is not sure where the acceptable place to walk may be. This lets the students know exactly what you would like them to do.

If you are having difficulties with behavior or interacting with a student with autism, ask the school team for help.

PARAPROFESSIONALS

Whether they are assigned as a 1:1 aide or to a special needs' classroom, paraprofessionals are in a unique position to effect fabulous changes in the lives and success of their students. They can help set the tone for the student's place in the school community.

Little training regarding autism spectrum disorders has been given to prepare for this role. Since the primary responsibility of a paraprofessional is viewed as supporting the student, IEP meetings and other opportunities for learning about the abilities and needs of a student, and strategies that might be effective in supporting them, often occur without the paraprofessional's involvement.

Paraprofessionals should know the characteristics of autism and the assigned student. Know their learning style, preferences, needs and strengths. The information in this Tool Kit for all specific school community members will be helpful for paraprofessionals, as they often accompany the student in their interactions throughout the school. 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, the student is likely to become most dependent on a 1:1. As independence is always the ultimate goal, a successful paraprofessional will maintain the mindset of trying to work themselves out of a job and create a prompt and personnel-dependent student. Remember to strive towards raising expectations and promoting independence in the student at whatever level they can handle.

Strategies

Be calm, positive. Model appropriate behavior for the student with autism and other students by greeting them by name, saying goodbye, etc.

Be proactive about learning about the student.

Ask questions, request to take part in meetings and trainings, familiarize yourself with the individual's IEP document and know the strategies to be used, etc.

Become expert in understanding and supporting their communication challenges; solicit guidelines for communication from the individual's special education staff, knowing the 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 information about the students to learn relevant facts about each student's likes, challenges, 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.

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 section that follows.

Invisible Aide Strategy

By Sonia Dickson-Bracks

OVERVIEW

Purpose: To assess specific areas/issues related to independence, organization, social confidence, and self-advocacy; to initiate fading of one-to-one aide support.

Guidelines: Initially, the strategy should be implemented during one class period per day, starting with the easiest period. A Class Period = the moment the student steps out of the previous class until they leave the target class. The student and staff will de-brief on the strategy (review and discuss what occurred) during their individual daily session. Based on this evaluation, they will determine whether to repeat the same period the following day or target a different period. Once all periods have been assessed, plan and determine the next steps for further assessment or program development and implementation.

PLANNING THE STRATEGY

Together the student and staff determine which period would be the best to pretend the student is alone (not accompanied by the aide). This is based on comfort in the specific setting (classroom, teacher, students, and subject). The student and staff should also develop specific gestural cues in order to provide a "time out." *(See Exceptions to the Rules)*

Once the plan and period are determined, the staff will notify the teacher (in advance) of this plan. As an option toward promoting self-advocacy, the student and staff can decide if the student should notify the teacher.

RULES OF THE STRATEGY

In the beginning, both students and staff will make every effort to act/pretend as if the staff is not present. That is, the student will not seek assistance from the aide, nor will the aide offer assistance. The student may rely on natural support (peers, teacher) as appropriate to the setting. Neither will engage in conversation with one another. The staff try to stay out of the student's line of sight (i.e., stay behind the student while walking and when seated in the classroom). Exceptions should only occur when the pre-determined cues are used.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULES

("Time out" prompts & gestural cues)

"I need help": The student feels they need help and wants a "time out" (e.g., they make eye contact with the staff and touches their own nose).

"Are you okay? Do you need help?": The staff is observing signs of stress that are of significant concern (e.g., the individual touches the student on the shoulder and when student turns around, they rub their forehead);

"Are you sure you want help?": The student has initiated conversation or indicated they want help but did NOT use the pre-determined cue. This may be because the individual forgot about the plan or just out of habit. The staff in turn will provide a "reminder" cue that means "are you sure you want help? Remember they are still in the plan." (e.g., the individual rubs their hands together). At that point, the student should make a conscious decision to either use the "I need help cue" or acknowledge (nodding) that the individual forgot or does not need help. However, if they do not use cues but appear uncomfortable, the staff should provide assistance.

DOCUMENTATION

Staff will document observations throughout the plan. The completed form will be used during debriefing at the end of each day.

BUS DRIVERS/TRANSPORTATION SUPERVISORS

Many students with autism start and end their day on the bus. Their transportation circumstances can vary considerably. Routing issues are important, but accommodations for the child's sensory, behavioral, medical or organizational needs should also be considered. It may be necessary for a student with autism to be routed on a smaller bus and/or have an aide assigned to ride the bus with them. If the student is riding on a full bus, other support may be necessary.

Understanding autism, as well as the strengths and needs of a specific student with autism, is important for the transportation department when they are planning for the child, as well as the drivers and aides who may transport your child.

Things to think about:

Be aware of the characteristics of autism and the student's specific needs. It can be helpful in avoiding or managing different situations.

Students with autism may have judgment, sensory issues or habits that might cause unexpected behaviors – for example, a lack of respect for traffic may cause them to dart into the street, or a dog on the sidewalk might cause the person to refuse to get off the bus – know what to do to avoid or manage needs.

Be mindful that students with autism often have communication challenges; ask for guidelines for communication from the student's family or special education staff. It may be necessary to give them extra time to respond to a question or use an alternative communication device or strategy like pictures to communicate.

The student's need for routine may result in anxiety (and behavior) if changes are made to the bus route, there is a substitute driver, seat changes, etc. Reduce the student's anxiety by communicating with them 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.

Students with autism are not always socially savvy; if a student is being bullied quietly, they are likely to react or respond impulsively. Try to understand the reason for the child's reaction.

Consider the student's communication difficulties and make every attempt to fully understand a situation before reaching judgment regarding fault or behavior.

Transitions are difficult for some students – this may result in difficulties getting on or off the bus.

Many students with autism like predictability and have good long-term memory – it is even possible that a student might be able to assist a new or substitute driver with the route.

Strategies for Success

Adjust the route – shorten or use preferential pickup/drop off situations (for example, consider picking up and dropping off at a calmer entrance side of the school, earlier or later than the rush of students, etc).

Consider whether an aide is needed to support the student on the bus either on a temporary or ongoing basis.

Be calm and positive. Model appropriate behavior for the student with autism and others by greeting them, saying goodbye, etc.

Reinforce the behaviors you wish to see with behavior-specific praise (e.g., "I like the way you went straight to your seat and buckled up!")

Use the information about the student to get to know relevant facts about their likes, challenges, needs, etc. Ask the school team for specific information regarding safety and impulsivity.

Visual schedules can be helpful for helping the student establish a routine and managing behavior.

The 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 student, the school staff, and parents so they can provide additional support (for example, if there is no eating on the bus, the student's family needs to know not to send the child out the door with a bagel).

Work with the school team to suggest social narratives or rule cards that might help a student understand a rule or expectation (for example, why sitting too close is annoying to another rider, why a bus may be late, or what traffic is). For a student who might have trouble understanding subtle social cues, help the school team provide 'unwritten rules for the bus' and input on what the social conventions are on a particular route (for example, seniors sit in the back).

Give positive directions; minimize the use of 'don't' and 'stop.' 'Please sit in your seat' can be more effective than 'Don't stand up.' This lets the student know exactly what you would like them to do.

Allow a student who may be overwhelmed by noise on the bus to use earplugs or music or headphones.

Allow the student to use hands on sensory items, such as a squeeze toy.

Consider assigning peer buddies to support and shield a vulnerable student from bullying. School staff may be helpful in finding a way to pair students.

For a student experiencing problematic behavior, work with the school team to develop a positive behavior support plan specific to behavior on the bus.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Activities that are often challenging for students with autism may include:

- Multi-step directions and activities
- Following verbal directions
- Organization skills and following the schedule

Be aware of motor, timing, language, and attention issues that might affect a student's performance, interest, and make appropriate accommodations.

Echoing locker rooms, whistles, and students running and shouting might be overwhelming to your student with autism.

Recognize that while a student may not be able to keep up with the pace of learning and activity of the whole class, they still might be able 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 they have not mastered the ability to participate in a 5-on-5 game.

Solicit the assistance of special education staff to provide training in appropriate locker room behavior, social conventions regarding privacy, etc. using social narratives, etc.

SPECIALISTS: MUSIC, ART AND COMPUTERS/TECHNOLOGY

Activities that are often challenging for students with autism may include:

- Multi-step directions and activities
- Following verbal directions
- Organization skills and following the schedule

Music

Many people with autism have musical strengths, which can be celebrated, used to reinforce, 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 brain area than language, some individuals with limited language can sing, and songs 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, difficult. It has been noted that if a student with autism initiates the choral (such as the Pledge of Allegiance) they can be successful, whereas the timing required for joining in can impede this ability.

Art

Strong visual skills, a heightened sense of visual perception or a unique perspective can often result in significant artistic ability in some autistic people. 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.). Some may have motor skill issues and have a hard time cutting or even tracing. Pre-cut objects or dotted line pictures may be necessary.

Computers and Technology

Even a very young child with autism can show great affinity for technology, being able to immediately find the 'on' button on any TV, computer or tablet the individual encounters. Visual acuity and varied ways of storing/accessing information and creating thought processes often make autistic people 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 their communication challenges may prevent them 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 of learning being targeted.

LUNCH AND RECESS AIDES

Lunch is a critical time for some students with autism to have experienced staff support - particularly those who are trained in supporting social interactions and helping a child become more independent. Recess and lunch are typically the least structured times of a student's day, and therefore, 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 are occurring.

Be aware of the characteristics of autism and the student's specific needs. It can be helpful in avoiding or managing difficult 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.

If you have not received one, ask whether there is an information sheet available for the students with autism you will be supervising. It is important to understand the individual student's likes, challenges, needs and abilities.

Be aware of communication, social and behavioral challenges students with autism may have. Ask their special education team for help with communication challenges.

It may be necessary to wait for a response to a question, use an alternative communication device or a communication strategy such as picture exchange.

Support the student's need to develop daily living skills and promote as much ability and independence as possible (for example, let them get their napkin, teach them to enter the 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 school and small responsibilities can help them to feel like a contributing member of the community – celebrating successes!

Be calm and positive. Model appropriate behavior for the student with autism and other students by greeting the person by name and engaging in appropriate conversation. Peers are more likely to engage students with autism if they know how the student communicates.

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 scheduled times – start the lunch line routine five minutes before others arrive, ask the OT to teach techniques for learning to swing independently, etc. – as the student becomes more successful, build skills toward independence.

If necessary, 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 support, 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. The following is an example of a schedule that could be created with or without photos.

1. Clearing My Lunch
2. Put my plate, silverware, and trash on my tray
3. Walk carefully with the tray to cleanup area
4. Toss trash (only!) into trashcan
5. Put my silverware in the gray tub
6. Place my plates on the counter
7. Stack my tray in the cubby
8. Give myself a sticker

Visual prompts and cues can be used to help a child make choices or know how to initiate or respond (for example, 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 a game at a lunch table, etc. Use the child's existing skills and interests to motivate them to participate, since the social demands are enough for them 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. Minimize use of 'don't' and 'stop.' For example, 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 is not sure where the acceptable place to sit might be. This lets the student know exactly what you would like them to do.

Give 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) to support and shield a vulnerable student – it may be helpful to have support from other members of the school team in finding a way to pair students in the absence of volunteers. Aim to engage more than one 'lunch buddy' to allow for absences.

Be aware of the vulnerability of students with autism and the propensity for them to be victims of bullying behaviors.

Students with autism are not always socially savvy; if a student is being bullied quietly, they are likely to react or respond impulsively. Try to understand the reason for the child's reaction.

Consider the student's communication difficulties and make every attempt to fully understand the situation before reaching judgment.

Work with the school team to create social narratives to help a student understand a rule or expectation (for example, 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 support for 'Unwritten rules for the cafeteria or recess' and input on social conventions.

Help peers support the student with autism, in a respectful way, in adhering to social conventions by modeling and/or directly instructing them.

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. Ask the team for help troubleshooting or implementing the plans.

ATHLETIC COACHES

Many autistic students can participate in school team sports and are a great asset to their teams. The amount of support required to make this happen will vary from student to student. Some people with autism have great skills in learning rules and keeping track of statistics and may make great scorekeepers or coach's assistants. Some may be good at individual sports such as track, cross country, or swimming, as they do not require the student to keep track of a ball and other team members on the field while processing auditory and visual information from various sources at the same time. Others may be able to participate in team sports.

Consider the possibility of enrolling a student's family member to support the student if an aide is not provided. They are often thrilled to have their student involved and are eager to help. A fellow team member might be paired with the student to provide "buddy" support. A family member might be willing to "shadow" the student on the cross-country course or supervise the student during "down time" at a sporting event.

The support required during practices and sporting events will range from practicing organizing equipment and the steps involved in preparing for an event and preparing for bus trips to unfamiliar places for away events. With planning, and the support of the student's family and school team, these challenges can be overcome.

Being part of an athletic team is a meaningful way for the student with autism to "belong." It might also be a time where there are deficits in communication and social ability. The team coach will set the tone for how peers treat the student athlete with autism.

Strategies

Be aware of the characteristics of autism and the student's specific needs. It can be helpful in avoiding or managing difficult situations.

If you have not received one, ask whether there is an information sheet available for the students with autism you will be supervising. It is important to understand the individual student's likes, challenges, needs and abilities.

Be aware of communication, social and behavioral issues students with autism may have.

Ask the special education team for help with communication challenges.

It may be necessary to wait for a response to a question, use an alternative communication device or a communication strategy such as picture exchange.

Support the student's need to develop daily living skills and promote as much ability and independence as possible (for example, let them get sports equipment, teach them the steps to warm up before an event and cool down afterward, etc.).

Be tuned into the strategies modeled by the student's trained support staff and ask for their help with areas of concern.

Be calm and positive. Model appropriate behavior for the autistic athlete as well as their teammates by greeting them by name and engaging in appropriate conversation. Peers are more likely to engage students with autism if they know how the student communicates.

Create a quiet spot, if necessary, on the team bus, up front near adults for the student with autism.

Friendly greetings, acceptance and patience can help to make the student feel comfortable on the team and small responsibilities can help them to feel like a contributing member of the team – celebrate successes!

Ask familiar staff to practice or help trouble-shoot skills outside of the chaos of practice times – the autistic athlete can start getting ready for practice five minutes before others arrive, ask the OT to teach techniques for learning to kick a ball, throw, catch, take off from starting blocks, etc. – as the student becomes more successful, build skills toward independence.

Visual schedules can be helpful in establishing and perpetuating routines, ensuring compliance, and managing behavior. A paraprofessional or family member may be helpful in preparing visual schedules if necessary.

Use descriptive praise to build desired behaviors (e.g., "I like the way you put the ball back where it belongs")

Be aware of the vulnerability of students with autism and the propensity for them to be victims of bullying behaviors, especially in areas with limited supervision.

Students with autism may not be socially savvy; therefore, if a student is being bullied quietly, they are more likely to react or respond impulsively. Try to understand the reason for their reaction.

Consider the athlete with autism's communi-cation difficulties and make every attempt to fully understand the situation before reaching judgment regarding fault or behavior.

Work with the school team to provide written or visual supports for 'unwritten' rules for the locker room, team bus or bleachers." Enroll teammates to help.

Help teammates support the student with autism, in a respectful way, in adhering to social conventions by modeling and/or directly instructing them.

OFFICE STAFF

A school's administrative staff often represents a consistent and welcoming community within the school.

Administrative staff can provide an excellent opportunity for students with autism to practice social interactions and perform small tasks and jobs that make them feel like a valued member of the school community.

Be aware of the characteristics of autism and the student's specific needs. It can be helpful in avoiding or managing upsetting situations – knowing the communication, social and behavioral needs, and abilities of each student.

Be aware of communication challenges. Ask the special education staff for guidelines for communication, knowing that you may need to wait for a response to a question you ask the student or use an alternative communication device or strategy such as picture exchange.

Take note of the strategies modeled by the student's trained support staff.

Friendly greetings, acceptance and patience can help make the student feel comfortable in the school. Giving the student errands or small responsibilities in the office can help them feel like a contributing member of the community – celebrating successes!

Once a routine has been broken down into steps and effectively taught, most students with autism will consistently and reliably perform - and then become a dependable assistant.

Strategies

Be calm and positive. Model appropriate behavior for the student with autism and other students by greeting them by name and engaging in appropriate conversation when possible.

Use the information sheet to learn relevant facts about each 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.

The student's school team may be helpful in providing social narratives to help a student understand a rule or expectation (for example, "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 used to help a child make choices or know how to initiate or respond.

Use descriptive praise to build desired behaviors (for example, "It was great that you put the attendance sheet in the mailbox!")

Give positive directions. Minimize the use of 'don't' and 'stop.' 'Please walk' can be more effective than 'don't run' for a student who might not hear the 'don't' or for one who may interpret the direction literally or as too abstract and is not sure whether they are meant to stand still or walk. This lets the student know exactly what you would like them to do.

Remember to create strategies to include all students in all school correspondence. Many students who do not have homeroom like the other classes miss school picture day, year-books, 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.

Be aware of the social vulnerability of students with autism. They are frequently victims of bullying. Inform the school team if you observe situations that make you concerned.

CUSTODIAL STAFF

Things to think about

Be aware of the characteristics of autism and the student's specific needs. It can be helpful in avoiding or managing challenging situations.

Know who the students with special needs are.

Be aware of the communication, social and behavioral concerns students with autism may have. Some children may have impaired judgment or be at risk of running away; alert school staff if you see something that makes you concerned.

Be alert that the smell of cleaning supplies or the sound of a vacuum cleaner might cause a student with autism to be overwhelmed because they may process scents or noises differently from their peers. Ask the school team to help you know what to do to help alleviate the concern and manage the needs of a particular student.

Be aware of the social vulnerability of students with autism. They are frequently victims of bullying. Inform other staff if you observe situations like bullying or isolation that make you concerned.

Strategies for Success

Be calm and positive. Model appropriate behavior for the student with autism and other students by greeting them by name.

Be aware of communication and social concerns that might make communicating with a student with autism difficult. Be prepared to wait for a response, whether it is an action or verbal answer.

Give positive directions. Minimize the use of 'don't' and 'stop.' 'Please stay on the sidewalk' can be more effective than 'do not walk on the grass' for a student who might not hear the 'don't' or for one who is not sure where the acceptable place to walk may be. This lets the student know exactly what you would like them to do.

Use the information about the student to get to know relevant facts about their likes, challenges, needs, etc. Ask the school team for specific information about safety and impulsivity.

If you are having difficulties with behavior or in interacting with a student with autism, ask the school team for help.

autism speaks®

SCHOOL COMMUNITY TOOL KIT

Appendix

"ABOUT ME" PROFILE FORM

Student's full name: _____

Student prefers to be called: _____

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 get better at 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?

_____

Person completing form: _____

Relationship to student: _____

Email address of family or caregiver contact: _____

Phone number of family or caregiver contact: _____

What is the best way to contact the student's family or caregiver?

_____

What days or times are convenient for you to meet with the school team?

_____

Are there any issues that you would like to discuss or hear more information about?

_____

_____

AUTISM FACT SHEET

- Autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication.
- Asperger syndrome, or Asperger's, is a previously used diagnosis on the autism spectrum. In 2013, it was folded into the broader autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (DSM-5), now the DSM-5-TR. Although Asperger syndrome has been retired from use by medical professionals, some who received the diagnosis prior to 2013 still use the term. Autistic disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) were also previous autism diagnosis categories now folded into the diagnosis of ASD.
- There is not one type of autism, but many. No two autistic students are alike.
- About 1 in 36 children and 1 in 45 adults in the United States is diagnosed with autism.
- On average, autism is diagnosed around age 5 in the U.S., with signs appearing by age 2 or 3. Based on current diagnostic guidelines there are three levels of autism based on the amount of support a person might need: level 1, level 2, and level 3.
- Anybody can be autistic, regardless of sex, age, race or ethnicity. However, research from the CDC says that boys get diagnosed with autism four times more often than girls.
- Autism is a disability covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under this law, autistic students are entitled to experience the "least restrictive environment" where they have the greatest possible opportunity to interact and learn with their peers without disabilities and to participate in the general education curriculum.
- Autism is not a learning disability, though it can affect learning.
- Autism does not automatically equate to high IQ or superior mathematical or computational skills.
- Stimming – or self-stimulatory behavior – is most associated with autism but is seen throughout the general population and part of typical development. Examples include rocking back and forth, hand flapping, spinning and even pencil tapping and hair twirling. Stimming is typically done to help regulate and manage emotions.
- Autism does not cause behaviors that present as challenging to the teacher or the class. Behaviors are a method of communication. They can be a response to a biological cause, such as pain or discomfort, or due to a social or sensory cause.
- Anxiety is common for autistic students, but not all anxiety is the same. Autism-related anxiety is different from general anxiety. While autistic people can present with both forms, management can be vastly different, and different from non-autistic anxiety management.
- A student's autism diagnosis is protected by various privacy laws. The decision to disclose a diagnosis is the right of the autistic student and their parents only. If a parent or autistic student shares their diagnosis to school administrators and teachers, it is to be treated as confidential. It is never acceptable to share a student's diagnosis with anyone, especially not a class or student's peers.