

Teaching Students with Autism

Students on the Autism Spectrum have a wide variety of characteristics. Whereas no two people on the spectrum are alike, this gives a general overview of working with these students. Asperger Syndrome (AS) is a common diagnosis for students on the far end of the spectrum. It is sometimes referred to as “high-functioning autism.” It is a developmental disorder that is characterized by deficits in social skills, communication, and unusual repetitive behaviors. The core features appears to be the individual’s inability to understand the thoughts, feelings and motivations of other people and to use this understanding to regulate his/her own behaviors.

Some AS students may have a sophisticated and impressive vocabulary and excellent rote memory but may have difficulty with high-level thinking and comprehension skills. They can give the impression that they understand, when in reality they may be repeating what they have heard or read. Many individuals with Asperger Syndrome are visual learners. Pictures and graphs may be helpful to them.

The following characteristics are typical in an individual with Asperger Syndrome. Due to the diversity and complexity of this disability, you may not see all of these characteristics in a given student. It is important to understand these characteristics, because they can result in behaviors that are easy to misinterpret. Often behaviors that seem odd or unusual or even rude are in fact unintentional symptoms of Asperger Syndrome.

- Frequent errors in interpreting others’ body language, intentions or facial expressions.
- Difficulty understanding the motives and perceptions of others
- Problems asking for help
- Motor clumsiness, unusual body movements and/or repetitive behavior
- Difficulty with the big picture, perseverate on the details (can’t see the forest for the trees)
- Difficulties with transitions and changes in schedule
- Wants things “just so”
- Problems with organization (including initiating, planning, carrying out, and finishing tasks)
- Deficits in abstract thinking (concrete, focuses on irrelevant details, difficulty generalizing)
- Unusual sensitivity to touch, sounds, and visual details, may experience sensory overload

Functional Impact

- Communication and Social Skills
- Difficulty in initiating and sustaining connected relationships
- Poor or unusual eye contact
- Problems understanding social rules (such as personal space)
- Impairment of two-way interaction (May seem to talk “at you” rather than “with you”)
- Conversation and questions may be tangential or repetitive
- Restricted interests that may be unusual and sometimes become a rigid topic for social conversation

- Unusual speech intonation, volume, rhythm, and/or rate
- Literal understanding of language (difficulty interpreting words with double meaning, confused by metaphors and sarcasm)

Writing Projects/Assignments

Information in papers may be redundant, returning to the same topic focus repeatedly. The student may be able to state facts and details, but be greatly challenged by papers requiring:

- Taking another's point of view
- Synthesizing information to arrive at a larger concept
- Comparing and contrasting to arrive at the "big picture"
- Using analogies, similes, or metaphors

Teaching Tips

- Don't use absolute words such as "always" or "never" unless that is exactly what you mean.
- Supplement oral with written instructions when revising assignments, dates, etc.
- Use clear and detailed directives when referring to revisions that need to be made
- Listing or numbering changes on the paper will provide guidelines for the student when working
- If modeling writing rules, write them on a separate sheet for future reference
- Keep directions simple and declarative
- Ask student to repeat directions in their own words to check comprehension
- Clearly define course requirements, the dates of exams and when assignments are due. Provide advance notice of any changes.
- Teach to generalize and consolidate information
- Go for gist, meaning, and patterns. Don't get bogged down in details.
- Use scripts and teach strategies selectively
- Make sure all expectations are direct and explicit. Don't require students to "read between the lines" to glean your intentions.
- Don't expect the student to automatically generalize instructions.
- Provide direct feedback to the student when you observe areas of academic difficulty.
- Encourage use of resources designed to help students with study skills, particularly organizational skills.
- Avoid idioms, double meaning, and sarcasm, unless you plan to explain your usage.
- If the student has poor handwriting, allow use of a computer if easier for the student
- Use the student's preoccupying interest to help focus/motivate the student. Suggest ways to integrate this interest into the course, such as related paper topics.
- Make sure the setting for taking tests into consideration any sensitivity to sound, light, touch, etc.
- Use clear directives and establish rules if student invades your space or imposes on your time, or if a student's classroom comments or conversational volume becomes inappropriate