

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

This is general information for your knowledge and understanding of how to support students with ASD. It is important to remember that ASD affects all people differently. Speak with the student and family to understand how ASD affects the student and their learning and environmental needs. It is not Tutor Doctor's role to suggest ASD is present in a student, diagnose ASD, suggest a course of action with the school, or to suggest treatment for ASD.

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a spectrum of closely related disorders that share symptoms. They are considered developmental disorders and presents as difficulty with verbal and non-verbal communication and social interaction. People with ASD display a wide variety of abilities, intelligence, and behaviors. As a result, the diagnosis of Autism is considered to be on a spectrum from low to high functioning. Every person with ASD is unique and will be affected differently by their diagnosis. Some people with ASD may be unable to speak or perform basic self-care and others are completely independent, work, and raise families.

As of 2013 **Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD)** have been relabeled as Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, if a student identifies as having Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder (or Syndrome), PDD-NOS, or CDD, it is very important that you refer to their diagnosis using their preferred term.

What does Autism Spectrum Disorder impact?

It is vital to remember that Autism Spectrum Disorder impacts everyone differently. A person with ASD could have a wide variety of symptoms or only a few. It is possible for ASD to affect:

- **Social Communication:**
 - Understanding of nonverbal communication from others such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions
 - Using facial expressions or body language that does not match what they are saying or seem to be feeling
 - Understanding of social norms and cues
 - Lack of interest in others and/or treating others as though they are inanimate objects
 - Understanding what is considered appropriate speech
 - Understanding what is considered appropriate physical distance from others (often stand too close)
 - Eye contact
 - Recognizing the intentions of others
 - Feeling overwhelmed in social situations
 - Unlikely to seek out social interaction
 - May have a resistance to being touched
 - May ignore people speaking to them
- **Emotion:**
 - Recognizing emotion in self and others
 - Emotional expression
 - Emotional regulation
 - Disruptive or aggressive behavior when overstimulated or stressed

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- Overly fearful of harmless objects/situations
- Not fearful of dangerous situations or objects
- **Speech and Language:**
 - Delay in learning to speak or inability to speak
 - Odd tone of voice, rhythm, and/or pitch
 - Difficulty communicating what they want or need
 - Difficulty engaging in conversation
 - Difficulty understanding humor, irony, and sarcasm
 - Literal understanding of what others say
 - Confusion between the words “I” and “you”
- **Behavior:**
 - Clumsiness or odd ways of moving
 - Staring at lights or spinning objects
 - Need for routine that does not vary
 - Difficulty/resistance to change
 - Fascination with repetitive motions of objects- only spinning the wheels on a toy instead of playing with the whole toy
 - Ritualistic behavior- lining up objects, knocking a set number of times, etc.
 - Obsessive attachment to unusual objects
- **Perseveration:** Repetitive behaviors
 - Repetitive body movements- rocking, spinning, flapping of the hands, etc.
 - Repetitive words or phrases
- **Sensory Sensitivity:**
 - **Hypersensitivity**- become overwhelmed or react negatively to sounds, lighting, textures, and/or touch
 - May react by covering ears or making repetitive noises to drown out the sound
 - May cringe or pull away from touches or certain textures
 - May make repetitive movements to try to deal with the overstimulation, such as rocking
 - May run away to escape the sensory stimuli
 - **Hyposensitivity**- does not seem to react to pain, extreme temperatures, etc.
- **Preoccupations:** Narrow and/or extreme interest in specific topics such as dinosaurs, maps, numbers, symbols, a video game, etc.
- Difficulty with abstract thought

Strategies for Supporting Students Who Have Autism Spectrum Disorder:

It is vital to remember that Autism Spectrum Disorder impacts everyone differently. Speak with the student and family to understand the student’s learning and environmental needs. You may find some of the strategies below helpful for supporting the student and delivering effective sessions.

- Understand the student’s cues and take a calming break if they are becoming overwhelmed.
- Be aware of what you say. Students with ASD often have trouble understanding tone of voice and sarcasm and take instructions literally.

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- Understand that changes in behavior may indicate the student is feeling anxious. This could be triggered by a minor change in routine, sensory stimulation, something that was said, etc.
- Keep language simple and concrete.
- Avoid sarcasm and idioms- e.g. “Put your thinking cap on.”
- Give the student ample time to respond (a minimum of five to ten seconds is a good rule of thumb) and repeat the question if the student doesn’t answer.
- Encourage eye contact, but do not force it.
- Give specific instruction outlining the beginning and end of the task.
- Be consistent.
- Set a tutoring session routine to help the student feel comfortable. Follow a logical sequence.
- Create and use checklists or visual schedules for your session so the student knows what to expect and what is expected of them.
- Give warnings before changing activity and avoid abrupt changes. For example, let the student know that in five minutes you will be moving onto a multiplication activity or that you will read a book together.
- Give reasons for changes.
- Remind them of social rules such as turn-taking and social distance when needed.
- Give choices in activity and keep them clear and narrow- e.g. “which book would you like to read?” and give two or three choices instead of the open-ended question, “what should we read now?”
- Limit choices to two or three options to avoid overwhelming or confusing the student.
- Reword your question or statement if the student doesn’t respond. Asking them what you just said can help you see if they understood you.
- Chunking- break large tasks and assignments into steps.
- Reduce visual and auditory distractions and stimulation. Students with ASD can become overwhelmed by too much sensory input.
- Use a computer for written work.
- Use visual learning strategies (see the Learning Styles Guide for ideas).
- Give reinforcements for a job well done. Reinforcements should be immediate, specific, and motivating.
- Encourage the student to ask for help if they need it.