



## The number of students identified with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) has dramatically increased in the past several years.

ASD is considered to be a pervasive developmental disorder. Because it is a spectrum disorder, students with autism may have a wide range of cognitive ability levels, ranging from those who are gifted to those who have severe intellectual deficits. You can use these 10 tips to help students with ASD succeed in general education classes.

- 1 Communication is critical.** A student with ASD often has impaired communication skills. Be sure that the student has an effective and efficient method for both expressive and receptive communication. Once a communication system has been identified for a student, use it consistently.
- 2 Maintain a high degree of structure.** Many students with ASD have a problem understanding what to do in unstructured time. Develop and follow a structured schedule of daily routines. Make the environment as predictable as possible.
- 3 Incorporate the use of visuals whenever possible.** Many students with ASD learn best when information is presented visually. Consider using items such as a visual schedule for the day, a visual checklist of work tasks, and a visual schedule or calendar of occasional activities, such as special events. Having visual aids can clarify expectations and relieve the stress that comes with not knowing what comes next.
- 4 Prepare for changes in advance.** Change is a typical part of most school days—changing classes, changing teachers, changing subjects and activities, and changing schedules due to things such as fire drills. These common types of transitions often present a problem for a student with ASD. When you know about a change in some aspect of the school day, it is helpful to prepare students with ASD by telling them, incorporating it into the visual schedule, and reminding them prior to the transition time.
- 5 Consider the environment—Part 1.** Environmental components can be an important consideration for some students with ASD. Often students with ASD rely on consistency to help make sense of the world around them. Just as change in the daily schedule may cause discomfort for some students with ASD, change in the physical environment of the classroom may also create challenges for some students. Structure the classroom to delineate specific areas (individual work, group work, activity area, storage areas, etc.). If an area of the room is going to be used for a new or different purpose, prepare the student before the change occurs.
- 6 Consider the environment—Part 2.** Some students with ASD are overly responsive to sensory stimulation; others may demonstrate an under responsiveness. Watch for sensory issues in the environment, such as room decorations, noises, scents, and lighting, and adjust as needed.
- 7 Teach interaction skills.** Many students with ASD find social interaction very challenging. Skills such as taking turns, waiting in line, and joining or leaving a group may be difficult for the student with ASD. Teach children how to participate in games, activities, and other social situations. The use of a peer buddy may be helpful in the development and practice of these skills.
- 8 Teach skills in their natural settings.** Some students with ASD might not transfer table manners taught in the classroom to the cafeteria. Game participation skills taught in physical education class may not carry over to the playground. Whenever possible, teach skills in the environment where students will use them.
- 9 Structure for success.** Some students with ASD may have a need to perform a task or an activity to perfection. Some students may refuse to demonstrate a skill until they know that they can do it right. Structure learning activities to allow for students' success. It may also be necessary to teach students that it is OK to be less than perfect.
- 10 Remember that each student is unique.** The term ASD provides some basic information about a student. Students identified with ASD are likely to have some level of communication deficit, social skill deficit, and a restricted range of interests and activities. However, it is important to remember that every child with ASD is unique, and the degree and manner in which the condition affects a student will vary. Read the student's individualized education plan, talk with parents and previous teachers, and get to know the student as an individual.

*This issue was written by Kathi Wilhite, visiting assistant professor in special education at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina.*



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