

Teaching Students on the on the Autism Spectrum

Below are some best practices for working students on the Autism Spectrum. Please keep in mind that every student is unique and not all recommendations will work for all students.

Terminology:

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) refer to the continuum of symptoms and specific diagnoses that are identified by impairment in thinking, feeling, language and the ability to relate to others. The ASD diagnoses most commonly seen in higher education are high functioning autism and Asperger syndrome (National Institute on Mental Health, 2009).

General Characteristics

- Frequent errors in interpreting others' body language, intentions, eye-to-eye contact or facial expressions
- Difficulty understanding the motives and perceptions of others
- 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
- 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
- Repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, and activities

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)
- May be bluntly honest

Strengths of Students on the Autism Spectrum

- Average, or above average, intelligence
- Excellent rote memory
- Very detail-oriented
- Often savant-like knowledge in certain areas
- Works well with concrete, rather than abstract or ambiguous, information
- Extensive vocabulary
- Incredible gifts/talents in certain areas (arts, math, sciences, etc.)
- Unique ability to perceive things in new ways, out of the box thinking

Instructional Suggestions

- Do not use absolute words such as "always" or "never" unless that is exactly what you mean. Avoid idioms, double meaning, and sarcasm, unless you plan to explain
- Supplement oral with written instructions when revising assignments, dates, etc.
- Use clear directives and establish rules if ... a student invades your space or imposes on your time the student's classroom comments or conversational volume become inappropriate
- Student may be able to state facts and details, but be greatly challenged by papers requiring:
 1. taking another's point of view
 2. synthesizing information to arrive at a larger concept
 3. comparing and contrasting to arrive at the "big picture"
 4. using analogies, similes, or metaphors
- 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 student when working
- Ask students 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
- Make sure all expectations are direct and explicit. Do not require students to "read between the lines". Keep directions simple and declarative
- 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
- If the student has poor handwriting, allow use of a computer/electronic device
- Make sure the setting for tests takes into consideration any sensitivity to sound, light, touch, etc.