

The article below offers tips and strategies on teaching students with autism.

## **Considerations in Teaching More Advanced Students with Autism, Asperger Syndrome and Other Pervasive Developmental Disorders**

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In this guide, the three terms used above will be referenced as "AS" or "the spectrum."

### **Talents:**

Many students on the spectrum demonstrate **exceptional abilities** in a vast array of skills and talents. These can include but are not limited to: \* Exceptional memory \* Mathematical skills \* Calendar projections \* Computers \* Music \* Exceptionally early and advanced reading skills ("hyperlexia") \* Poetry \* Writing stories and general writing skills \* Spelling, punctuation and grammar \* Imitations of people or animals \* Painting, sculpture and other forms of visual arts \* Chemistry \* Physics.

Sometimes the interests and/or talents of the individual may become **quite specific and somewhat obsessive**. Some examples are: \* cats, dogs, whales, llamas and other animals or plants \* history (especially a certain period in history) \* 1950's stop lights \* 1940's airplanes \* a subway system in a particular city \* maps \* cattle branding squeeze machines \* Thomas the Tank Engine \* The Little Mermaid \* Lego toys \* dinosaurs \* sports.

Other students may not evidence exceptional skills in easily observed skills. Many are highly skilled in some areas and poorly skilled in others. Another group may have areas of exceptional skill they cannot or do not display to an instructor. Whenever these talents or interests seem obsessive, use them to widen the students learning adventures into other subjects.

Before teaching communication skills to individuals on the spectrum, be sure that YOUR abilities to communicate with them on their terms are properly developed. If you want them to speak and communicate and behave in neurotypical ways, be sure you give your best effort to **understand their communication and behavior** and keep that in mind when interacting with them. This doesn't mean, for example, that you should flap when they flap. Rather you should try to understand what causes them to flap or what feeling the flapping expresses: joy, excitement, frustration, boredom... If they repeat phrases, are they expressing concern, frustration, confusion, or an attempt at humor? When you communicate with them, speak "normally", but don't use more words than necessary. Be clear. Emphasize what is most important in what you are saying.

While these considerations are meant to facilitate your interactions and successes with the AS student, **ALL students are unique individuals**. Each will have varying sets of talents and challenges.

## **Areas of Challenge:**

(1) Many people with AS have **trouble with organizational skills**, regardless of their intelligence and/or age. Even a “straight A” student with autism who has a photographic memory can be incapable of remembering to bring a pencil to class or of remembering a deadline for an assignment. In such cases, aid should be provided in the least restrictive way possible. Strategies could include having the student put a picture of a pencil on the cover of his notebook or reminders at the end of the day of assignments to be completed at home. Always praise the student when he remembers something he has previously forgotten. Never make disparaging comments or “harp” at him when he fails. A lecture on the subject will not only NOT help, it will often make the problem worse. S/he may begin to believe he can’t remember to do or bring these things. **Two practical suggestions** to help a student stay organized: Have him keep an **agenda/day planner** where s/he writes all daily homework assignments. (The teachers/assistants can also use this book to write short notes home.) Have him keep all of his loose papers in a “**trapper**” or an **accordion file** with separated compartments (labeled for each class, a section for papers to come home, papers to return to school and blank paper, etc.) so all papers can be seen organized one place.

(2) Students on the spectrum are either hyper-organized or seem to have few or any organizational skills. A large number of students with AS seem to have either the **neatest or the messiest desks** or lockers in the school. The one with the neatest desk or locker is probably very insistent on sameness and may be very upset if someone disturbs the order he has created. This student is already highly organized... if not in the system you prefer, please respect that the student’s organizational system is in his or her terms. The one with the messiest desk will need your help in frequent cleanups of the desk or locker so that he can find things. Simply remember that s/he is not making a conscious choice to be messy, s/he is most likely incapable of this organizational task without specific training. Train him or her in organizational skills using small, specific steps.

(3) People on the spectrum can have **problems with abstract and conceptual thinking**. Some may eventually acquire a few or even many abstract skills, but others never will. Avoid abstract ideas when possible. When abstract concepts must be used, use visual cues, such as gestures, or written words to augment the abstract idea.

(4) **Many individuals on the spectrum show tremendous creativity and talent in such creative fields as music and art.** While some may demonstrate a somewhat repetitive creativity, it is still uniquely generated by them and their intellect. Reading the profound poetry and experiencing the astounding artwork of many individuals on the spectrum, not to mention the incredible singing and acting talents of others, will convince you of their creative abilities. **This does not indicate their capabilities in other academic or social areas, nor skills of daily living.**

(5) **An increase in unusual or difficult behaviors probably indicates an increase in stress.** Sometimes stress is caused by feeling a loss of control. When this occurs, establishing a “safe place” or “safe person” may come in handy, because many times the stress will only be alleviated when the student physically removes himself from the stressful event or situation. If this occurs, a program should be set up to assist the student in reentering and/or staying in the stressful situation.

(6) **Don't take misbehaviors personally.** The person with AS is not a manipulative, scheming person who is trying to make life difficult. Usually misbehavior is the result of efforts to survive experiences which may be confusing, disorienting, or frightening. People with AS are, by virtue of their handicap, egocentric and have extreme difficulty reading the reactions of others. Although they may use odd means to try to change their environment to make it tolerable, they are incapable of being manipulative.

(7) Most people on the spectrum **use and interpret speech literally.** Until you know the capabilities of the individual, you should avoid:

- Idioms (save your breath, jump the gun, second thoughts, etc.)
- Double meanings (most jokes have double meanings)
- Sarcasm, such as saying, "Great!" after he has just spilled a bottle of ketchup on the table.
- Nicknames
- "Cute" names such as Pal, Buddy, Wise Guy, etc.

8) **Be as concrete as possible** in all your interactions with these students. Remember that facial expression and other social cues may not work. Avoid asking questions such as, "Why did you do that?" Instead, say, "I didn't like the way you slammed your book on the desk when I said it was time for gym. Please put your book down on the desk quietly and get up to leave for gym." In answering essay questions that require a synthesis of information, AS individuals rarely know when they have said enough, or if they are properly addressing the core of the question.

(9) If the student doesn't seem to be able to learn a task, break it down into smaller steps or present the task in several different ways (e.g. visually, verbally, physically).

(10) **Avoid verbal overload.** Be clear. Use shorter sentences if you perceive that the student isn't fully understanding you. Although s/he probably has no hearing problem and may be paying attention, s/he may have a problem understanding your main point and identifying the important information.

(11) **Prepare the student for all environmental and/or routine changes,** such as assembly, substitute teacher, rescheduling, etc. Use his written or verbal schedule to prepare him for change.

(12) Positive behavioral supports can work, but if it is inflexibly used, it can encourage robot-like behavior, provide only a short-term behavior change, or result in more aggression. **Use positive and chronologically age-appropriate behavior procedures.**

(13) **Consistent treatment** and expectations from **everyone** is vital.

(14) Be aware that normal **levels of auditory and visual input can be perceived by the student as too much or too little.** For example, the hum of fluorescent lighting is extremely distracting for some people with AS. Consider environmental changes such as removing

some of the “visual clutter” from the room or seating changes if the student seems distracted or upset by his classroom environment. Perhaps a seat in the front row would work, as this limits his vision of some of the visual clutter.

(15) The overload and understimulation problems may occur in other senses, including **tactile and olfactory stimuli**. Avoid wearing strong perfumes and the touching of hands, etc. unless you know the student is not challenged by this.

(16) **If the student isn’t looking directly at you, do not assume s/he is not listening or is daydreaming.** Some students on the spectrum have more reliable peripheral than frontal vision. When you speak, they tend to look at your mouth rather than your eyes. Your mouth is where the sound comes from. They seldom understand any communication you may want to give them with your eyes.

(17) If your student on the spectrum uses **repetitive verbal arguments** and/or repetitive verbal questions, try requesting that he write down the question or argumentative statement. Then write down your reply. As the writing continues, the person with autism usually begins to calm down and stop the repetitive activity. If that doesn’t work, write down his repetitive verbal question or argument, and then ask him to formulate and write down a logical reply or a reply he thinks you would make. This distracts him from the escalating verbal aspect of the argument or question and sometimes gives him a more socially acceptable way of expressing his frustration or anxiety. If the student does not read or write, try role playing the repetitive verbal question or argument, with you taking their part and them answering you. **Continually responding in a logical manner or arguing back seldom stops this behavior. The subject of their argument or question is not always the subject that has upset them.** The argument or question more often communicates a feeling of loss of control or uncertainty about someone or something in the environment. Individuals with autism often have trouble “getting” your points. If the repetitive verbal argument or question persists, consider the possibility that s/he is very concerned about the topic and does not know how to rephrase the question or comment to get the information s/he needs.

(18) In an effort to connect with your conversation, a student on the spectrum may seemingly “go off on a tangent”, talking about a topic that seems to have no connection to the classroom discussion. Because of his **difficulty in generalizing information and concepts**, he has perhaps focused on a single word or concept that was used in the discussion and began to talk about that word or concept in the context that he has experienced it before. (For example, in a discussion of Bowling Green, Kentucky, a student may start talking about his bowling scores, or an experience at the bowling alley.) Since it could be very difficult to discern what that past context could have been, simply **redirect** the student to the current discussion. Don’t assume he is just daydreaming.

(19) Since these individuals experience various communication difficulties, **don’t rely on the student with AS to relay important messages** to their parents about school events, assignments, school rules, etc. unless you try it on an experimental basis with follow-up, or **unless you are already certain that the student has mastered this skill**. Even sending home a note for his parent may not work. The student may not remember to deliver the note or may lose it before reaching home. Phone calls or e-mails to the parent work best until this skill can be developed. Frequent and accurate communication between the teacher and parent (or primary care-giver) is very important.

(20) If your class involves **pairing off** or choosing partners, either draw numbers or use some other arbitrary means of pairing. Or ask an especially kind student if he or she would agree to choose the individual on the spectrum as a partner. This should be arranged before the pairing is done. The student with AS is most often the one left with no partner. This is unfortunate, as **these students could benefit most from having a partner.**

(21) Be aware that students with spectrum challenges are very socially naïve. This makes them perfect targets for bullying. **Make sure that your school uses or establishes effective policies on bullying (zero tolerance) and uses active bullying prevention plans.**

(22) **Do not limit your expectations for the future of any student.** Individuals with AS can and have achieved things far above the expectations of family, friends and teachers. Just be aware that their struggles to achieve even the smallest goals may be far greater than you may assume.

This information is provided by  
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