

# Autism Spectrum Disorders



**Autism or autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are complex, lifelong neurological disorders that affect the functioning of the brain. Individuals with ASD have developmental disabilities that can impact how they understand what they see, hear and otherwise sense, which in turn can result in difficulties with communication, behaviour and relationships with other people. ASD can range from mild to severe and may be accompanied by other disorders, such as learning disabilities, anxiety, attention difficulties or unusual responses to sensory stimuli.**

## Implications for Planning and Awareness

- Meet with the student and parents early in the school year to discuss how the school can support this student's needs related to ASD. This could include finding out about:
  - the student's strengths, interests and areas of need
  - the student's specific symptoms
  - successful strategies used at home or in the community that could be used at school.
- Collaborate with the parents and student to consider if, and how, they would like to share specific information on ASD with peers. If they wish to do this, consultation with health care providers, such as school or community health nurses, may be helpful.
- Learn as much as you can about how this condition may affect learning and social and emotional well-being. Reading, asking questions and talking to qualified professionals will build your understanding and help you make decisions to support the student's success at school.
- Collaborate with the school and/or jurisdictional team to identify and coordinate any needed consultation and supports.
- Develop a system for sharing information with relevant staff members about the student's condition and successful strategies.

Your awareness needs to begin with conversations with the student's parents.



## Implications for Instruction

- Ensure the student has some way of telling you what he or she wants or needs. In collaboration with parents and speech-language pathologists, determine if augmentative or alternate communication supports need to be explored.
- Provide information in visual forms, including written words, pictures, symbols or photos. Investigate software packages for graphic symbols.
- Use pictures to illustrate important classroom information, such as schedules, appropriate behaviour and location of materials.
- If the student experiences echolalia (repetition of the speech of others), provide appropriate words that can be used instead.
- Ensure that each task you give the student has a clear beginning and end, clear instructions, ample time for completion and a model or illustration to follow.
- Break large tasks into small, discrete steps and teach and reinforce each step. Create a set of sequenced pictures illustrating the steps, if needed.
- Structure tasks at an appropriate level for the student (e.g., where he or she can be successful 80 to 90% of the time).
- Help the student become more independent by:
  - giving choices, as much as possible
  - teaching skills in different settings to ensure understanding and generalization across environments
  - teaching functional life skills (e.g., dressing, grooming), if necessary.
- Provide hands-on activities rather than paper and pencil tasks.
- Use the student's areas of interests to teach new skills (e.g., if the student loves trains, get him or her to count trains to develop number skills).
- Redirect attention if the student becomes overly focused on an area of interest.
- Use a consistent, agreed-upon response to manage disruptive behaviours. Arrange for more in-depth evaluation of behaviour, if needed.
- Label and organize personal belongings, classroom materials and the physical environment so that the student knows where things go and where activities occur.
- Reduce distracting stimuli (e.g., wall decorations, hum of florescent lights).
- Cover or put away activities when they are not available to the student (e.g., computer). Present only the materials necessary for a task and remove any other items from the student's work area.
- Consider changes to the environment or specific tools to assist with the student's sensory needs.

## Implications for Social and Emotional Well-being

- Engage the student and parents in planning for transitions between grade levels and different schools.
- Provide clear expectations, consistency, structure and routine for the entire class. Rules should be specific, direct, written down and applied consistently.
- Provide a schedule of daily and monthly activities to help with communication and to reduce anxiety. Keep to the same schedule, as much as possible.
- Warn the student about changes (e.g., to the daily schedule, transitions from one activity or room to another) before they occur as changes often can upset the student with ASD.
- Be aware of student–peer relationships and provide support and guidance, when necessary. Some students may be unaware or misunderstand incidental information and social nuances.
- Use social stories to help explain and encourage appropriate behaviours in specific situations.

Parents know their children well and can offer insights on how to support their social and emotional well-being. There is strength in collaborating on strategies that could be used at home, at school and in the community.



- Explicitly teach and practise social skills, such as how to read body language and expressions. Use direct instruction paired with social stories, modelling and role-play.
- Identify ways to increase positive behaviours, such as using material reinforcers (e.g., snack, preferred activity).
- Provide increased supervision during free time (e.g., like play time, recess).
- Provide a separate space for breaks or regular physical movement breaks outside of the classroom, if needed.

**As you consider the implications for this disability, think about the following questions:**

1. Do I need further conversations with the parents to better understand this student's strengths and needs?  Yes  No
2. Do I need targeted professional learning?  Yes  No  
If yes, what specific topics and strategies would I explore?
3. Is consultation with jurisdictional staff required?  Yes  No  
If yes, what issues and questions would we explore?
4. Is consultation with external service providers required (e.g., Regional Educational Consulting Services, Student Health Partnership, Alberta Children's Hospital, Glenrose Hospital)?  Yes  No  
If yes, what issues and questions would we explore?
5. Are further assessments required to assist with planning for this student?  Yes  No  
If yes, what questions do I need answered?
6. Is service to the student from an external provider required?  Yes  No  
If yes, what outcomes would be anticipated?

**Links for further information:**

Alberta Education. *Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. <http://education.alberta.ca/media/511995/autism.pdf>

Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation. *When Something's Wrong: Ideas for Teachers: Autism*. [http://cprf.ca/publication/pdf/teacher\\_03\\_eng.pdf](http://cprf.ca/publication/pdf/teacher_03_eng.pdf)

Organization for Autism Research. *Life Journey through Autism: An Educator's Guide*. [http://www.researchautism.org/resources/OAR\\_EducatorsGuide.pdf](http://www.researchautism.org/resources/OAR_EducatorsGuide.pdf)

**Please note:**

These websites are for information only and the user is responsible for evaluating the content and appropriate uses of the information.

