

## Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

### **What do these students look like at the intermediate and high school levels?**

- verbal skills can range from non-verbal to highly verbal
- in highly verbal students, the language output can be "odd" in content and use (monologue rather than dialogue, talk about limited number of highly favourite topics, perseverative comments or questions)
- language comprehension is impaired (difficulty following instructions in group setting, difficulty following and participating in group discussions)
- lack knowledge of social "rules" (may appear immature, may say socially inappropriate things, may engage in socially inappropriate behaviours, may avoid interaction with peers, highly vulnerable to bullying)
- behaviour that looks like defiance, non-compliance, manipulation or aggression is rarely intentionally "bad" (usually result of lack of understanding of the situation, stress, inability to communicate)
- may see "odd" repetitive behaviours like finger-flicking, rocking, facial grimaces (these may increase in times of stress)
- may hear "out-of-context" words and phrases ("echolalia") – what the student means by these repeated words/phrases may or may not have any relationship to the apparent meaning of the language used
- may see odd reactions to sensory stimulation (noisy classroom, fluorescent lights, touch)

While students on the ASD spectrum share certain characteristics, they are also quite different from each other. Take the time to know your student as an individual. You will have information from the previous school. Parents are a critical part of the school team, and programs will work most effectively when there is detailed daily communication between home and school, and when parents and the school team meet regularly to discuss progress and challenges.

### **What challenges are most likely?**

1. **Organization:** Students with ASD have a difficult time organizing themselves. At the intermediate and high school level, you have lockers and rotary schedules, and there is an expectation that typically developing students will be able to arrive at class on time prepared to do their work. Without extra support, this is not a realistic expectation for even the most highly verbal intelligent ASD student. Resource staff can help by direct teaching of the organizational skills necessary to order a locker, keep track of assignments, and maintain and effectively use a school agenda. The 5-Star zippered binders are good for keeping notes, assignments and papers in order (once they're zipped, papers can't fall out) – the student may need adult help (especially initially) to make sure that critical school notices and assignments don't go astray. A detailed visual schedule and a watch will help the student to get to the correct class at the correct time. Consider locker location (near classroom, quiet, uncrowded) – you can have several to choose from and allow the student to make the final choice – your assumptions about what the student needs to be comfortable may or may not be correct

(same goes for seating in the classroom). Also, a traditional combination lock may be too complicated for ASD students to use – there are “one number” combination locks available in some schools, so the student just has to turn the dial to that number and it will open.

2. **Classroom Teachers:** Where possible, structure the student’s day so that they have a minimum of new teachers to get used to. Some intermediate schools follow a structure where classes are with one teacher for half the day and all of their “core” subjects (reading, writing, math) – this is preferable to switching teachers and classes every 40 minutes. You will have to look for creative solutions at the high school level (student may do better with semestered system where they only have 4 teachers in one day, you may need to include “spares” in the student’s schedule to lessen the number of teachers and subjects, one teacher may be available to teach 2 separate subjects). Where possible, keep the resource people (resource teacher, educational assistant) constant from one school year to the next (having a known support person available will reduce the stress of having to deal with new teaching staff).
3. **Transitions:** Class changes with noisy hallways will provide daily stress. Consider having the student leave class 5 minutes early to be able to negotiate the hallways and visit lockers when there are fewer students around. Changes to regular daily schedules (like assemblies, sports and activity days) will also cause stress and distress. A good rule of thumb is "no surprises". Make sure the ASD student has visual and written information about a change well before it happens.
4. **Lunch:** This time of day is generally noisy and less structured, with high social expectations. While students with ASD often want social contact with peers, the social context of a lunchroom setting may be totally overwhelming. Solutions to this will be individual. Can you find a smaller quieter setting for the student to eat lunch? Maybe with a few sympathetic peers? You may need to plan for extra supervision and support, so that the student will have adult backup if the situation becomes overwhelming.
5. **Noncompliance:** Students with ASD may frequently and unpredictably refuse to comply with the school routine and school work. Please don't take this personally - it does not come from the same source as the non-compliance of other pre-teens and teenagers. There is always a reason for the noncompliant behaviour (stress, lack of comprehension, inability to do the work, previous events), and solving the "noncompliance" depends on your ability to look behind the behaviour to see what the real problem is.
6. **Physical Education Class:** This is typically the most difficult class of the day for a student with ASD. Group instruction in a noisy echoing gym, coupled with a looser physical structure (students moving around rather than sitting in desks) make it difficult for the ASD student to focus and follow the activities. Group games and team sports are generally difficult for the ASD student to understand and enjoy (fast-moving, may not understand rules, other students may be too loud and too close). Try social stories to introduce games and activities before they happen, pre-teach skills, have individual adult support or a peer-buddy to help the student to focus during the group activities. Also, you may see some distress over the requirement to change from street clothes into gym clothes and

- back again (another transition). Consider modifying this requirement for the ASD student (eg. let them wear their street clothes and simply change into proper shoes, allow them to observe the other students and decide when they're ready to try changing into gym clothes, have them change before or after the other students so that they avoid the crowded noisy confusion of everyone changing at once).
7. **Aggression:** Again, this problematic behaviour usually reflects lack of comprehension and stress, rather than a wish to hurt others. While you need to protect other students in your classroom, you also need to discover the true source of the student's distress, so that you can find an effective solution.
  8. **Risk of Flight:** When the ASD student is out of his/her depth, flight from the difficult situation is a definite risk. These are socially naïve individuals who often lack even the most basic of social survival and safety skills. Be aware of this, and have a school plan for this eventuality.
  9. **Consequences:** Use social stories and direct teaching at the beginning of the school year to explain the school rules, and to role-play various common discipline scenarios. Develop a "danger" plan with each student, so that they know what to do if they are frightened or a situation seems out of control to them. Help students to identify several "safe" people at school (adults) who will be able to help them if they are in distress – also designate “safe places” where the student can go to escape a difficult situation and calm down (if student is required to stay in a situation they can't manage, you will see negative behaviour). Consider exempting these students from situations like group detentions (where the ASD student has not done anything wrong) - this type of situation is almost impossible for them to understand (frequently these students have a very strong sense of right and wrong, justice and crime and punishment - for them to be punished for something that they didn't do is incomprehensible). Also, be prepared for situations where the student has broken school rules, but not intentionally (eg. student whose stress response includes shouting swear words, student copying the bad behaviour of others around them without comprehension of the implications of the behaviour). Whoever manages the discipline for the school must be aware of the particular profile of the ASD student (communication skills, usual stress responses, commonly misunderstood dynamics and situations), and staff should delay sorting through the actual events until the student is calm (cognitive and communication skills generally deteriorate drastically under stress). Having a “safe” person available who can help the ASD student to express/explain their side of the story (including their perceptions and misperceptions) is critical. The usual “talk it through” strategy used in intermediate and high school settings will not work well with a stressed ASD student, even if the student is normally highly verbal.
  10. **Homework:** Students with ASD find school stressful and draining. They need their time at home to de-stress and unwind. Talk to parents about an acceptable level of homework, and consider the option of not giving these students homework at all. If there are special projects that need to be done, consider making time within the school day to allow the students to work on these projects (maybe in the resource room at lunch or during gym class).

11. **Academic Work:** Many ASD students will need accommodations and modifications in order to be successful in a high-school classroom. This is where classroom teachers will need to work closely with resource staff, educational assistants and the parents to determine what part of the intermediate and high school curriculum is appropriate, and what modifications will be necessary to help the child learn with meaning. Many of the ASD students will have trouble with fine motor skills and will need to have a smaller load of hand-written work. Some students will do better with laptop computers (preloaded with information backing up the teacher's lesson; word processing program to allow student to write and edit their work more easily). Making a copy of the teacher's notes available to the ASD student, so they can follow along as the teacher talks and highlight important information, will lessen stress and help the students to take in the information more easily (you should not require these students to take notes as they listen to the teacher speak, or to transcribe notes from the blackboard or overhead). Please note that some students (especially those with a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome) may be highly sensitive to anything they feel might mark them out as "different" in a classroom situation. For these students, you will need to be creative in the way(s) that you offer support in the classroom situation. Consider having a group of students use the alternate learning supports (these may be other students who would benefit from the supports, or they could be "kind" peers who are willing to visibly use the supports to make the ASD student comfortable).

Individuals with ASD are complicated but interesting people. If you approach these students with an open mind and the will to "roll with" the situation, I think you will find that your own teaching skills will be honed and sharpened. I know that I have become much better at my job because these individuals always demand the best that I can give. Keep your sense of humour, and enjoy taking a look at the world from a truly unique perspective. As much as I have taught the children on my caseload, in the end, they have taught me more.