

## **Autism Spectrum Disorders(ASD)/Asperger's Disorder**

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are a group of developmental disorders that are characterized by difficulties in the areas of social skills, communication, and unusual repetitive behaviors. The core feature appears to be the individual's inability to understand the thoughts, feelings and motivations of other people and to use this understanding to regulate his or her own behaviors.

**General Characteristics:** The following characteristics are typical in an individual with an ASD. Due to the diversity and complexity of this disability, you may not see all of these characteristics in a given student. These characteristics can result in behaviors that are easy to misinterpret, as discussed below. Often behaviors that seem odd or unusual, or even rude, are in fact unintentional symptoms of ASD.

- Frequent errors in interpreting others' body language, intentions or facial expressions
- Difficulty understanding the motives and perceptions of others
- Problems asking for help
- 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)
- Unusually strong narrow interests
- Difficulties with transitions and changes in schedule
- Wants things "just so"
- 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

### ***In the Classroom***

**Strengths:** Students diagnosed with an ASD bring unique strengths and perspectives to the classroom. You may observe any of the following characteristics:

- Above average or superior intellect
- Friendly
- Supportive of others
- Follow rules/guidelines when set
- Excellent memory
- Sharp attention to detail
- Punctual
- Reliable
- Superior knowledge and outstanding memory in specific areas

**Functional Impact:** Students diagnosed with an ASD may face challenges in the following areas:

***Communication and Social Skills***

- Understanding non-verbal forms of communication
- Initiating and sustaining connected relationships (but usually desires connection)
- Limited eye contact/conversation skills
- Unusual speech intonation, volume, rhythm, and/or rate
- Understanding unstated rules or expectations (such as personal space)
- Impairment of two-way interaction (appears to talk “at you” rather than “with you”)
- Conversation with questions may be tangential or repetitive
- Restricted interests that may be unusual and can sometimes become a rigid topic for social conversation
- Literal understanding of language (difficulty interpreting words with double meaning, confused by metaphors and sarcasm)
- Unaware of how their behavior affects others

***Writing***

- Information in papers may be redundant, returning to the same topic focus repeatedly
- Student may be able to state facts and details, but be greatly challenged by papers requiring:
  - taking another’s point of view
  - synthesizing information to arrive at a larger concept
  - comparing and contrasting to arrive at “the big picture”
  - using analogies, similes, or metaphors

***Learning Style:*** Students may have sophisticated and impressive vocabulary and excellent rote memory but may have difficulty with high-level thinking and comprehension skills. They can give the impression that they understand, when in reality they may be repeating what they have heard or read.

**General classroom behavior:** In general, while students diagnosed with ASD are often valuable assets in the classroom, some potentially challenging and easily misunderstood behaviors – which can usually be attributed to the functional impact of the condition – may be noted.

***Students may:***

- Be resistant to change
- Have difficulty expressing needs or asking for help
- Attempt to monopolize a conversation
- Make little or no eye contact
- Have repetitive verbal behavior
- Become tangential in answering questions
- Display a very literal thinking style
- Exhibit distracting behavior in long classes

- Be hypersensitive to sounds
- Engage in self-stimulating behavior (rocking, tapping, playing with “stress toys”)
- Not like to interact
- Prefer to be alone
- Be argumentative
- Behave in a disruptive manner

### **Tools for Interaction and Instruction**

The following suggested tips may be helpful in working with students.

#### ***Personal Interactions and Boundary Setting***

- Establish trust to decrease conflict
- Be clear about times and reasons for office visits
- Be willing to re-explain information as concretely as possible
- 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
- If the student is disruptive to others, arrange to meet privately; let the student know what behavior is disrupting others, and help them understand why
- Give reasons for your requests to help the student understand your point of view
- Avoid arguing if the student gets “stuck” on the topic; instead, stick to your reasoning and let them know that the conversation is done

Example: (Student arrives at your office at 1:40). “We have 20 minutes to work together. At 2:00, I’m going to ask you to take my suggestions home and start making changes to your paper. Come to my office tomorrow afternoon at 3:00 and show me what you’ve done.”

#### ***Classroom Interactions***

- Avoid the use absolute words such as “always” or “never” unless that is exactly what you mean
- Supplement oral with written instructions when revising assignments, dates, etc.
- May need to set limits on participation, i.e. allow student to answer three questions per class period
- Limit use of metaphors, as they are often misunderstood
- Discuss any safety concerns, such as evacuation procedures, ahead of time
- Be aware that students with ASD may be distracted by others making noise, or they may be disruptive to others unintentionally
- Group work:
  - when working in groups, student may need to be monitored by the professor in order to avoid getting off task or taking over group activity
  - avoid having students self-select into groups
  - wherever possible, it may be helpful to offer an alternative approach where the student can select to work on an individual basis

- if conflict arises, explain to student what effect they had on others, why the conflict arose, and how to behave appropriately in a group setting
- If a student's head is down on the desk, consider the possibility that they may be experiencing sensory overload rather than sleeping

### **Writing**

- 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
- If modeling writing rules, write them on a separate sheet for future reference
- Keep directions simple and declarative
- Ask students to repeat directions in their own words to check comprehension

### **General Instructional Tips**

- Clearly define course requirements, the dates of exams and when assignments are due. Provide advance notice of any changes.
- Teach to generalize and to consolidate information.
- Many individuals with ASD are visual learners. Pictures and graphs may be helpful to them.
- Redirect tangential responses to bring student to the point.
- Go for gist, meaning, and patterns. Don't get bogged down in details.
- Use scripts and teach strategies selectively.
- Make sure all expectations are direct and explicit. Don't require students to "read between the lines" to glean your intentions. Don't expect the student to automatically generalize instructions. 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.
- Avoid idioms, double meaning, and sarcasm, unless you plan to explain your usage.
- If the student has poor handwriting, allow use of a computer if easier for the student.
- Use the student's preoccupying interest to help focus/motivate the student.
- Suggest ways to integrate this interest into the course, such as related paper topics
- Make sure the setting for tests takes into consideration any sensitivity to sound, light, touch, etc.

**Ask for Help:** Please contact DSS at 573-341-6655 or [dss@mst.edu](mailto:dss@mst.edu), for assistance with any questions you may have.

Adapted from: Wolf, L., Thierfeld Brown, J., and Bork, G.R.K. (2009). *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel*. Overland Park, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.