

Autism's Top 14 Areas of Concern

Fourteen Characteristics That You Need To Consider While Teaching Students on the Autism Spectrum

If you're being a conscientious teacher, you're most likely reading your student's IEP's (Individualized Education Program). And, if you're reading your student's IEP's, you've probably noticed a few students on your class roster who have been identified as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Some guidance offices and special education teachers may be still be using the old titles: Autism, Pervasive Development Disorder (PDD) and Asperger's Syndrome.

Professionals working in the areas of mental health have come to realize that there is a great diversity among students with these previous labels, in regard to their needs, and that students with Autistic symptoms actually fall on a spectrum when comparing their skills, needs and characteristics. There are, however, many traits that students diagnosed with ASD have in common.

Last spring, I had a chance to attend a workshop presented by Cathy Grayson, M.A., educational consultant and co-author of *Parenting Your Asperger Child: Individualized Solutions For Teaching Your Child Practical Skills*. Ms. Grayson focused on 14 areas of functionality that children with ASD struggle with, and that for which, we as teachers, can plan and create strategies. These 14 characteristics are listed below with some insights to help guide teachers in their planning for students with ASD.

The Top 14 Characteristics You Need to Think About

1. Anxiety

- Identify the reasons behind an ASD student's behavior; behavior is communication. What is the student trying to tell you?
- Move in small steps.
- Never assume skills.
- Give choices when possible.
- Provide daily structure and routine and be consistent (for example: calling out).
- Coach/Model "how to ask for help." Remind anxious ASD student that it's ok to ask for help.
- Make accommodations-extra time on task, shorten assignment, or break assignment down into smaller tasks.

2. Shifting Attention/Change/Transitions

- Prior preparation-pre-teach. Prepare the ASD student with classroom procedures beforehand (i.e. before the 2nd class).
- Visual schedules. Have a visual on the board/interactive board/other to cue change in class activities.
- Give clear warnings when an activity is about to change.

3. Attention to Task

- May not look like they are attending, but they are.
- Visuals will improve the ASD student's attention to a task.
- Giving the student a job will help them with being on task.
- Do not hold identified ASD student to a higher standard than other students.
- Help them get started on a task initiation.
- Have a consistent cue (verbal/audio/visual) that helps establish or bring student back on task.
- Have a balance of classroom activities (different modalities).

4. Flexibility-Getting Stuck/Getting Unstuck

- Coach problem solving. They many times need help knowing "what do I do next?"
- Teach generalization of skills (learning from mistakes).
- Assist student with decision making skills-judging pro's and con's.
- Teach tolerance for differing opinions/likes, etc...
- Move in small steps.
- Teach a replacement for not knowing what to do (i.e. ask questions, learn from peers, what to do next).
- Remind student that activities are planned not guaranteed.

5. Emotional Regulation

- Consult student's special education teacher for various calming/coping strategies that may work with an ASD student needing assistance in this area.
- Know thy students. Use these strategies proactively before they are needed.

6. Black and White Thinking/All or None Thinking

- Many ASD students will only want to see concepts from one lens. You may have to work around their inflexible way of accepting concepts, or find a way to introduce a new way of doing something.

7. Social Thinking-Friendships

- To help ASD students in this area, help them identify and reinterpret misperceptions. Help them develop observational skills, reading of social cues, body language if the opportunity appears.
- Be especially mindful of anxiety in this area and how it may influence performance.
- May have to coach ASD student in group activities in regard to social skills and cues.
- Mis-steps come from not knowing what to do, social rules/hidden social curriculum.

8. Perspective Taking

- May have to encourage an ASD student to take an interest in other students around them.
- Help the ASD student understand play skills/sense of play-game when class is engaged in a play activity.

9. Thought Filters

- Impulse control is a big characteristic for many ASD students.
- Remind them to use “in your head” thoughts rather than blurting out what they are thinking at any given time.
- Coach alternate phrases/responses impulsive patterns they may exhibit.

10. Conversational Skills

- Help ASD students know the alternatives for not knowing what to do or say (i.e. ask the teacher/aide/peer a question, observe/look at what other students are doing).
- Talk with child’s learning aide or special education Teacher about the child’s social thinking curriculum (if there is one in place). Also, what vocabulary for helping with conversational skills concepts can you share with the special education teachers.

11. Comprehension (Language/Reading)

- Difficulty comes from linear processing, lack of experience and literalness. Difficulty looking outside of the box, thinking outside of the grid of information that they are given. Will have difficulty understanding figurative language.
- Be very clear, concise, concrete, specific and detailed in your language.
- Check for understanding.
- State the obvious.

12. Written Expression

- ASD students may experience memory difficulties. Will need to do much review work in some cases before proceeding in a lesson.
- Move in small steps. Break bigger assignments down into smaller assignments.

13. Areas of Special Interest

- Some ASD students will fixate on certain areas of interest which take them off-task or create other problem behaviors.
- Talk to special education teachers and/or student’s learning aide to determine what replacement behaviors can be reinforced in your classroom to help the student become more functional. A replacement behavior replaces the student’s area of special interest with a behavior that serves the same function as the problem behavior (to the student), but is more functional to the classroom (i.e. squeezing a quiet rubber ball as opposed to tapping a pencil wildly).

14. Motor Skills (Fine Gross)

- Will need to make accommodations (use of computer, dictation, shorten activity or allow extra time). Be in good communication with the ASD student’s learning aide and/or special education teacher.

As the PMEA Special Learners Chair, I’m very much interested in increasing the awareness and dialogue regarding special needs students in our music classrooms. If you are a *Facebook* user, you can be part of our *PMEA Special Learners Forum*. After logging in to your existing Facebook account, simply go to www.pmea.net, scroll over **PMEA Specialty Areas** and select the PMEA Special Learners page link. I’m looking forward to hearing from you.



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Reference:

Cathy Grayson, M.A., *Educational Consultant. The Top 14 Characteristics You Need To Think About. Presentation April, 2010.*