Our Mission

The American Federation of Teachers is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.
Supporting Students with Autism
Contents

1 Introduction
   1 Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnosis—the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
   1 Special Education Eligibility—Autism

2 Effective Education for Students with Autism
   2 Evidence-Based Practices
   2 Social Skills/Social and Emotional Learning
   3 Addressing Challenging Behavior
   4 Collaborating with Paraprofessionals
   6 Teens and Young Adults with Autism

9 Working with Families
  10 Building a Relationship with Parents and Families
  11 Life Beyond School

12 Resources
  12 Recommended Reading
  13 Additional Resources
Introduction

U.S. Department of Education 2015-16 school year data indicate that there are more than 620,000 children ages 3-21 attending school under the educational eligibility classification of autism.* Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that as many as one in 68 children has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Autism is one of the educational eligibility categories for special education. Individualized educational program (IEP) teams can deem children eligible for special education services under the category of autism. This prevalence rate has been increasing over the years, and the current rate implies most educators will be responsible for supporting the needs of students with ASD at some point during their career. With improved understanding of the unique characteristics of individuals with ASD, educators can improve the educational experience and academic success of students with autism.


**Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnosis—the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual**

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychological Association, provides a common language and standard criteria for the classification of mental disorders. The most recent edition, the DSM-5, was published in 2013. In this edition, the diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was established. To receive the diagnosis of ASD, individuals must exhibit persistent deficits in social communication and social interactions and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities. Prior to 2013, additional diagnostic categories existed including: Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified, and Rett’s Disorder. If individuals received their diagnosis prior to 2013, these diagnoses may have been provided. Individuals with ASD can present with a wide range of abilities. Some individuals with ASD will need substantial support throughout their lives to meet daily needs, while others will not.

**Special Education Eligibility—Autism**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has categories of disabilities that allow children to qualify for special education services and supports. Autism is one of the educational eligibility categories for special education. Individualized educational program (IEP) teams can deem children eligible for special education services under the category of autism. Eligibility for special education is not based solely on the evidence of a disability (e.g., ASD) but also requires that a student needs special services to benefit from education.
Effective Education for Students with Autism

When working with students with autism, an effective educational program will capitalize on the individual student’s interests, offer a predictable schedule, teach tasks as a series of simple steps, actively engage the student’s attention in highly structured activities, and provide regular reinforcement of behavior.

Evidence-Based Practices
Educators have an obligation to deliver effective intervention to students with autism. There has been significant research establishing what interventions, when delivered with fidelity, promote the best opportunity for optimal outcomes. The interventions that researchers have shown to be effective are called evidence-based practices, or EBPs. The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder (NPDC) was funded by the Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs to determine and promote the use of evidence-based practices for children and youth. The NPDC has developed free professional development and implementation resources for the dozens of evidence-based practices for education students with autism. To appropriately meet the needs of students, teachers and administrators must be knowledgeable about evidence-based approaches.

Social Skills/Social and Emotional Learning
It is reasonable to assume that many students with autism will have goals and objectives in their educational program to address social skills. With effective intervention, students with autism can increase their success in social and emotional learning. Social and emotional learning for all students is gaining increased focus in today’s schools, with the understanding that
all students can benefit from an increased emphasis on instruction in these areas.

Direct instruction in social skills development should be done in the same way that other educational needs are addressed. Students with autism require specific instruction to improve their social skills development. Specific curriculums to teach social skills have been developed (e.g., Skillstreaming). These curriculums can be a great starting point for instruction in social skills. Students with autism also need opportunities to learn and practice social skills in a natural environment. Generalization of social skills from a structured learning setting must be practiced and performed in a natural setting.

Students with autism do want to develop relationships with their peers. Educating both the student with autism and their typical peers is necessary. When typical students receive accurate and straightforward information about autism and, more important, when they receive information about specific strategies to use, they can interact more frequently and more effectively (Kamps, Thiemann-Borque, Heitzman-Powell, et al., 2015).

**Addressing Challenging Behavior**

Two of the core challenges for students with autism are communication and socialization. These communication and social deficits, at times, can result in students with autism responding to situations inappropriately. Behaviors exhibited by students with autism may include loud vocalizations, leaving the instructional area, self-injury, aggression or other inappropriate behaviors. The important thing to note is that this behavior is exhibited because of communication and social deficits. With a high-quality, systematically implemented positive behavior support plan, students with autism—even those with the most challenging behavior—can achieve a reduction in inappropriate behavior and success in an educational environment.

To effectively address challenging behavior, the educational team must understand “why” a behavior is occurring.

A functional behavior assessment can be completed to assist in determining why a behavior is occurring. The assessment should include:

- Clear description of the problem behavior(s);
- Activities, times and situations that predict when behaviors will and will not occur (i.e., setting events);
- Consequences that maintain the problem behaviors (i.e., functions);
- Summary statements or hypotheses; and
- Direct observation data to support the hypotheses.
Upon completion of a functional behavior assessment, a positive behavior support plan can be developed and should include:

- Modifications in the environment that reduce the likelihood of the problem behavior;
- Teaching plans for developing adaptive behaviors and replacement skills;
- Natural and minimally intrusive consequences to promote positive behavior and deter problem behaviors; and
- A crisis plan (if needed).

Specific training, including coaching and modeling of the implementation of the positive behavior support plan, should be provided to all team members responsible for implementing the plan.

Collaborating with Paraprofessionals

The primary role of a paraprofessional is to assist the teacher in providing a meaningful education for a child with autism. A paraprofessional can assist the student in achieving their educational goals through direct instruction and indirect support in the classroom. A paraprofessional can help mediate communication, socialization and behavioral challenges and encourage the student to have success in the educational environment.

It is important to highlight that paraprofessionals should be working in concert with the educational team. Clear roles should be defined for all team members. Clear instructional plans and schedules developed by the educator/other professionals and the paraprofessional should outline expectations for all team members.

A high-quality, well-implemented behavior support plan can be highly effective in promoting positive behavioral growth.
Collaboration will provide everyone the opportunity for success.

Providing Instruction
Students with autism will have an individualized educational program as defined by local special education agencies. Addressing the goals and objectives in the IEP as well as assisting students to participate in the general education curriculum can be one of the responsibilities of the paraprofessional. Written instructional plans for implementation of the IEP objectives should be developed to ensure high-quality instruction and should be shared with the paraprofessional. Instructional plans for the objectives should include:

▶ Materials needed for instruction;
▶ Prompting strategies to promote learning;
▶ Performance that is expected of the student; and
▶ Method to collect data on the student’s performance.

Each objective on an IEP must be addressed. It is helpful if each objective has some form of educational plan to address the area of need. Some teams prefer to have members design instructional plans based on their expertise (e.g., speech pathologist writes instructional plans for expressive language objectives, special education teacher writes program for literacy objectives); some teams prefer to develop the instructional plans collaboratively.

Within a general education setting, a student with autism may be expected to participate in the typical instruction of the classroom. In this setting a paraprofessional should focus on ensuring that the student with autism understands the content and assignment and has the support needed to participate. A paraprofessional may need to provide additional information to a student to ensure comprehension. Students with autism are typically visual learners. Support in the general education setting might include writing a list of steps that need to be completed or using a highlighter to visually emphasize the key points discussed orally by the teacher. Translating the content relayed orally to visual information can promote success for an individual with autism.

A paraprofessional can also be helpful in encouraging peer interaction and promoting success with peer relationships. Paraprofessionals in the classroom must walk a fine line between working in proximity to the student for whom they are providing support to ensure success, while encouraging the student with autism to interact with their peers.
Teens and Young Adults with Autism
Postsecondary Transition

All teens and young adults need focused attention to ensure transition into adulthood is successful. Research from the “National Longitudinal Transition Study–2” has provided some convincing evidence that students with autism are not achieving the desired levels of success upon exiting school (Roux, Shattuck, Rast, Rava & Anderson, 2015). More than one-third of young adults with autism were disconnected during their early 20s, meaning they never got a job or continued education after high school, and they had far higher rates of disconnection than their peers with other disabilities. Less than 8 percent of young adults with a learning disability, emotional disturbance or speech-language impairment were disconnected, compared with 37 percent for those with autism. Effective intervention and transition planning can positively affect these outcomes.

Every educator strives to deliver a meaningful education that results in students entering adulthood prepared to live, learn, work and play as productive members of society.

Puberty and Sexuality

Teens with autism may need more explicit instruction and intervention to understand puberty and sexuality. Parents should be encouraged to begin teaching their children about puberty early, to prepare them for the perfectly natural body changes that will occur well before they reach puberty (Koegel, Fredeen, Koegel & Lin, 2012). Comprehensive sex education must also be delivered. Instructional focus on some basic safety skills should be considered both necessary and appropriate for students with autism. These skills would include, but not be limited to, closing and locking bathroom or stall doors, understanding personal privacy and who can and who cannot help you in the bathroom or with personal care skills, body part identification using adult terminology, using public restrooms independently, the restriction of nudity to personal bathroom or bedroom, and the issue of personal space for oneself and for others.

Teens with autism may not implicitly understand what types of information and bodily activities should be kept private. The subtle nuances of dating and intimacy are difficult for most teens to understand; students with autism have social and communication deficits that complicate this even further. Students with autism will need specific and explicit instruction on what is appropriate when navigating the world of dating and intimacy. Working with families and care providers is imperative to ensure the needs of students with autism are met, and that the preferences of families and care providers regarding this topic are considered.
Law Enforcement
There have been multiple incidents, many with less than ideal outcomes, of individuals with autism interacting with law enforcement professionals.

Most law enforcement officers have not had specific training in how to effectively support an individual with autism. Individuals with autism may be acting in an atypical fashion and their social and communication deficits increase the possibility of confusion in the interaction between them and the law enforcement professionals. Dennis Debbaudt, an expert on autism training for law enforcement personnel, recommends teaching the following skills to people with autism to improve any interaction that may occur with law enforcement:

1. Do not attempt to flee.
2. Do not make sudden movements.
3. Remain calm.
4. Tell the officer you have autism. If nonverbal, use alternative communication tools, such as a generic or person-specific autism information card.
5. Obtain permission or signal intentions before reaching into a coat or pants pocket, or reaching into a car glove box.
6. Consider wearing an alert bracelet or necklace that is easy to see—one that lets the reader know you have an information card, if you lose the ability to speak when under stress.
7. Ask the officer to contact a family member, advocate or friend who can help you through the interview process if you are a victim or are reporting a crime.
8. Carry the phone number of an advocacy organization or personal advocate, relative or friend.

Teaching these skills can help to increase the safety of everyone involved when individuals with autism interact with law enforcement professionals.
Collaboration between parents/care providers and the educational system is pivotal for success. Parents are the lifelong advocates and social partners of their children. With parental involvement, everyone benefits and students can achieve their highest potential.

A phone call or home visit prior to the start of the school year may assist with forming the relationship with families. Throughout the year, tell parents and care providers about a child’s successes and areas that need improvement. Every parent wants to hear about their child succeeding. Be sure to have frequent communication about accomplishments.

Parents are the experts on their child and can provide a wealth of information. It is important to build a trusting relationship with families.
Honoring a parent/family member’s extensive knowledge about their child is one way to begin a positive relationship with families.

**Building a Relationship with Parents and Families**

The Organization for Autism Research has developed an array of questions you may want to consider asking families prior to the school year:

- What are your child’s strengths?
- What works best for your child in terms of rewards or motivation?
- Does your child have any balance, coordination, or physical challenges that impede his or her ability to participate in gym class?
- How does your child best communicate with others?
  - Spoken language
  - Written language
  - Sign language
  - Communication device
  - Combination of the above
- Does your child use echolalia (repeating the last words heard without regard for meaning)?
- Do changes in routine or transitions to new activities affect your child’s behavior? If yes, what type of classroom accommodations can I make to help your child adapt to change and transitions?
- Does your child have any sensory issues that could be an issue in class or at school? If yes, what type of sensitivity does your child have?
  - Visual
  - Auditory
  - Smell
  - Touch
  - Taste
  - Other
- What behaviors related to autism am I most likely to see at school?
  - Are there triggers for these behaviors?
  - In your experience, what are the best ways to cope with these challenges and get your child back on track?
- What is the best approach for us to use to communicate with one another about your child’s progress and challenges?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know about your child?
Life Beyond School

Educators are often a go-to resource for families and care providers. Families often need support for their child beyond the school day and support in planning for the full lifespan of their child. Educators can assist families of students with autism in accessing additional social services and connecting with a community of support beyond school.

Families and care providers may ask educators about accessing additional support for their school-age child. Every state has a system of support for individuals with developmental disabilities. Extended care, respite support, family training, and a host of other supports may be available through a social service system. Not every student with autism will qualify for these services, but it is appropriate to ensure families are aware of what might be available to them through government-funded social service programs.

Part of every student’s educational program is preparing for life beyond school. The transition may include attendance at an institution of higher learning, entering the workforce and/or moving out of the family home. The current adult outcomes from the “National Longitudinal Transition Study–2” indicate that adult outcomes for youth and young adults with autism are less than optimal. Working with families to develop and implement a high-quality postsecondary transition plan may improve these outcomes. The Organization for Autism Research recommends that educators and parents consider, discuss and develop the following in preparation of transition:

- Assessment of the young adult’s needs, interests and abilities;
- Statement of preferences for education, employment and adult living;
- Steps to be taken to support achievement of these goals;
- Specific methods and resources to meet these goals, including accommodations, services and/or skills related to the transition goals;
- Instruction on academic, vocational and living skills;
- Identification of community experiences and skills related to future goals;
- Exploration of service organizations or agencies to provide services and support; and
- Methods for evaluating success of transition activities (e.g., a video portfolio).
Resources

Recommended Reading


Debbaudt, Dennis. *Interacting with Law Enforcement,* Autismspeaks.org.


**Additional Resources**

Association for Science in Autism Treatment: www.asatonline.org/

Autism Society: www.autism-society.org/

Autism Speaks: www.autismspeaks.org/


National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders: http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/

The Organization for Autism Research: researchautism.org/