

# Teacher Toolbox



## Teacher Toolbox – September 2024

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### **Autism FAQ from Teachers:**

*"I've never had a student with Autism in my class. Where do I begin?"*

After a (hopefully restful) summer break, school is back in swing, and you have returned to your classroom filled with the hope of a spectacular school year. As the back-to-school glow subsides, you begin to notice the vast width and depth of your students' various needs and you may feel unequipped or even overwhelmed with the task that is before you. Some of your students have IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) and at least one of them has "AUTISM" listed as their area of exceptionality (with several others exhibit symptoms of ASD, but no diagnosis). Our old "friend" Anxiety (AKA: The "Inner Critic" - Fear's sneaky sibling who speaks negativity and lies in our mind) has arrived uninvited to hijack your emotions and shake your confidence. Your anxious Inner Critic voice screams, *"You can't possibly address the needs of ALL these students!"* No need to fear... the **Autism Toolbox** is here! Consider the following FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) that many new, somewhat experienced, and even "seasoned" educators often ask (or SHOULD BE ASKING). Before you know it, your "Inner Coach" voice will prevail, ejecting Anxiety from the driver seat, as you learn and apply tried and true tools to increase your confidence and student success!

#### **What is Autism?**

Autism is a neurological disorder and is also known as a spectrum disorder, meaning the symptoms can range from mild to severe. Common signs and symptoms include avoiding eye contact, dependency on routine, and difficulty expressing emotions. Autism is a developmental disorder that impacts the way a person perceives and communicates, often resulting in challenges with social interactions and processing information. It is also a spectrum disorder, which means it affects each person to a varying degree, ranging from mild to severe. Although there are some common characteristics, no two individuals with autism are exactly alike. It is important to understand how the characteristics of autism affect each student. The *Organization for Autism Research (OAR)* goes on to explain that "certain underlying psychological and medical bases of the disorder affect how students process information and behave in the classroom. Finally, it is important to note that these behaviors are neurologically based and do not represent willful disobedience or noncompliance."

#### **How can Autism make learning difficult?**

ASD can impact all areas of school life including some degree of challenges in the following areas:

- **Academic skills:** difficulty with making logical inferences, problem solving, comprehension, writing skills, concentration and organization/executive functioning
- **Communication and Social Interaction:** difficulties with comprehension, casual conversation skills, and understanding the subtleties of language (e.g. jokes, sarcasm, idioms, clichés).
- **Generalization:** difficulty transferring previously learned skills to new contexts
- **Sensory sensitivity:** extreme sensitivities to certain aspects of the classroom environment (e.g., the humming of a computer, the glow of fluorescent lighting, or the sound of turning of a page)
- **Transitions:** need for routine and set schedules
- **Interests:** restricted range of interests, limited to specific topics

## ***Where do I begin?***

*Educate yourself!* Learning about autism and about how it specifically affects your student is the first step to success. By reading this introductory article, you have already started this journey. Well done! Developing an understanding of ASD and how it impacts your students is critical. Your education about autism will evolve as your relationship with your students and their families develops and your knowledge about autism and skills in dealing with its impact on the classroom will also continue to grow. Maintaining an open attitude to learning and working closely with the parents and school team will help you (and your students) succeed in the long term. Continue your education through the resources listed below and via attending the many helpful, complimentary CES-TAP Virtual Workshops available throughout the school year (keep reading for more details)!

## ***Whom should I talk to?***

IEPs are created by a multidisciplinary team of education professionals, along with the child's parents, and are tailored to the needs of the individual student. The IEP is a blueprint for everything that will happen to a child in school for the next year. Special and general education teachers, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, social workers, school psychologists, and families form the IEP team and meet intermittently to discuss student progress on IEP goals. Frequent communication and close collaboration with ALL involved parties is crucial!

- ***The IEP team:*** Work together to read, interpret, implement, and tailor the IEP to the student's needs.
- ***Your student:*** Discuss with your student what they want to disclose and encourage self-advocacy.
- ***The parents:*** They are your first and best source of information about their child and autism as it manifests itself in that child's behavior and daily activities. Parents can help you anticipate certain problems, so practical accommodations can be made in advance.
- ***Your administration:*** Administrative support plays a big role in the student's academic success.
- ***Your class:*** Educate students about autism (and other needs) and explain why some students receive extra or different attention, based on their needs. Encourage students to promote expected social behaviors and encourage their peers.

## ***What changes need to be made in my classroom?***

Students with autism have unique learning styles. We can support these students by incorporating their strengths and needs when planning for instruction. This thoughtful preparation will help students with autism maximize their potential and make valuable contributions to class discussions and activities.

***Students with ASD are visual learners:*** Present information visually, so they may interpret its meaning.

***Students with ASD are literal learners:*** Expectations, instructions and feedback must be explicitly stated.

***Students with ASD need consistency & predictability:*** Provide well-structured, predictable classrooms and schedules, while also integrating the opportunity to develop flexible thinking, when possible.

Preparing an "autism-friendly" classroom often benefits all students and educators by creating calm and organized spaces that promote learning. For example, well-defined classroom areas that identify the purpose of that specific space help students to understand what is expected. Some ways to do this may include the following:

- Create individual work areas, free time areas, and open areas for discussion using curtains, bookcases, cabinets, and any other furniture that you have inherited/acquired.
- Keep classroom consistently organized and label where materials are located. Keep materials and schedules in one place in the classroom, to be located and referred to easily.

- Choose designated seat for student when needed (e.g., close to source of instruction or away from visual distractions such as a window or chatty classmates)
- Develop a visual schedule to break the student's day (or a specific task) down into smaller, more manageable chunks, which increases predictability/routine, which decreases anxiety and unexpected behavior. Teach the students how to use these schedules and change them regularly, to meet their needs.
- Lower/adapt sensory levels (e.g., sound, light, and smell) when possible.
- Identify a "home base" or "chill zone" area to escape classroom stimulation for a while

### ***I've heard that students with ASD are "loners" and can't make friends. Is that true?***

Perhaps the most common myth about individuals with autism is that they do not have the ability, motivation, or desire to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with others, including friendships with peers. There is no doubt that students with autism have social deficits and communication challenges that make it more difficult for them to establish friendships than typically developing students. However, with appropriate assistance, students with ASD can engage with peers and establish mutually enjoyable and lasting interpersonal relationships. It is critical for educators to expect students with ASD to make and maintain meaningful relationships with the adults and other students. Clearly stated social skills, behaviors, and objectives should be part of the IEP and assessed regularly for progress. Research shows that typically developing peers have more positive attitudes, increased understanding, and greater acceptance of students with autism when provided with clear, accurate, and straightforward information about the disorder. When educated about autism and specific strategies for how to effectively interact with students with autism, they are more likely to have frequent and positive social interactions with them.

### ***How can I learn more about autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and how to support students with a variety of diverse educational needs?***

Congratulations for beginning the amazing journey of learning more about autism! Continue your quest for more information regarding ASD via the numerous resources listed below. In addition, there are many professional development opportunities available at [www.ces.org](http://www.ces.org) regarding many vital education topics from a variety of experienced and passionate TAP consultants to support all facets of your education journey. Join us for the upcoming live-virtual workshop **"Autism Toolbox Series: Classroom Fixer Upper"** on 9/19/24 where we will explore ways to increase positive behavior and academic outcomes by: maximizing the physical space, dividing your classroom into functional areas, utilizing classroom furniture effectively, sensory strategy considerations, classroom setup "Quick Tips", and much more – to create a calm classroom that will benefit your students and YOU! Register to attend any of TAP's live virtual (and complimentary 😊) workshops here: <https://www.ces.org/september-2024-25-technical-assistance-program-updates-and-offerings/> and/or view on-demand recordings via the TAP Webinar Library here: [www.cestap.org](http://www.cestap.org).

***An educator who never stops learning will produce students who will follow suit and amaze you in countless ways!***



#### **Resources and References**

- <https://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/professionals/supporting-communication>
- <https://researchautism.org/>
- <https://researchautism.org/educators/teachers-corner/#1637599019657-f8c72b18-51a0>
- <https://researchautism.org/product/an-educators-guide-to-autism/>