

Teacher Toolbox



Teacher Toolbox – January 2025

By Margaret Wood, Speech-Language Pathologist and TAP Consultant mwood@ces.org

“Level 1” Autism Explained: *“Higher Functioning” Students Require Support Too!*

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects a child's ability to communicate and interact socially and is often evident within the first 3 years of life. The prevalence of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) has increased dramatically over the last two decades. As of 2020, about 1 in 36 children have been identified with autism according to estimates from the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network (<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/ss/ss7202a1.htm>).

The Organization for Autism Research (OAR) explains, *“The effect of this increase in autism prevalence on education is profound. Since the passage of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, more children with disabilities, including autism, are in the general education classroom. Chances are a child with autism is in your school, if not in your class.”* In addition to the overall prevalence of autism increasing, it is important to note that many students are misdiagnosed in preschool and elementary school with other areas of educational exceptionality (e.g., “Developmentally Delayed”, “Speech-Language Impaired”, “Gifted”, and/or “Other Health Impairment” for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or anxiety disorder), which often do not completely capture their needs in the educational setting. Other students go completely undiagnosed until secondary school or well into adulthood, since high intellect and strong academic skills tend to carry them throughout much of their educational careers, as their other challenges are overlooked. Many of these individuals previously met the criteria for “Asperger Syndrome”, which was often referred to as “High-Functioning Autism”. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) determined that Asperger Syndrome is no longer a separate subtype of pervasive developmental disorders, therefore there is currently only one medical diagnosis of ASD.

In the educational setting, there are 13 qualifying eligibility categories for special education services, one of which is autism. According to the IDEA's definition, autism is “a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.” As educators, we must remember that the criteria a child must meet to be eligible for special education under autism is not the same as the criteria for a medical diagnosis of autism.

The Organization for Autism Research publication, *Life Journey Through Autism: An Educator's Guide to ASD (Level 1 Supports)*, states, “Each student with ASD is different and, as such, presents his or her unique strengths and challenges. The chart below lists characteristics a student with ASD may exhibit that can impact the classroom experience. Remember that each student with ASD is unique and may display some, many, or none of these behaviors.”

Common Characteristics of Persons With ASD

Social Communication and Social Interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of understanding of social cues and social nuances • Literal interpretation of others' words • Difficulty engaging in reciprocal conversation • Tendency to speak bluntly without regard for the impact of words on others • Universal application of social rules to all situations • Focus on a single topic of interest that may not be of interest to others • Poor judge of personal space—may stand too close to other students • Abnormal voice inflection and eye contact • Inappropriate facial expressions or gestures • Difficulty interpreting others' nonverbal communication cues
Restricted/Repetitive Patterns of Behavior, Interests, or Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflexibility of behavior—same morning routines, rigid thinking patterns • Difficulty coping with schedule changes • Difficulty switching focus from one subject to the next • Problems with organization and planning • Excessive smelling or touching of objects

Autism characteristics exist on a continuum, ranging from minor to severe impairment. The levels of autism severity include the following:

Severity Levels for Autism Spectrum Disorder
Level 1—Requiring support
Level 2—Requiring substantial support
Level 3—Requiring very substantial support

The severity level that accompanies a diagnosis of ASD symptoms is the first indicator of a student's support needs. A student with a Level 1 severity level typically requires fewer and less intensive supports than students with a Level 2 or 3 severity. For example, students with Level 1 ASD may be able to speak fluently in full sentences, have an extensive vocabulary, and be high academic achievers. However, they may be less successful in reciprocal conversations with others due to their failure to understand context or the nuance of language, resulting in attempts to make friends that are perceived by peers as odd and are frequently unsuccessful. Many students with autism benefit from individualized services and supports provided through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). For a small number of students with autism, a 504 plan may be sufficient. It is crucial that we remember that the services and supports that a student with autism needs are not a "one-size-fits-all", but instead should always be determined on a case-by-case basis by the educational team (i.e., teachers, ancillary providers, parents, the student, etc.).

Common Classroom Challenges of Students With ASD

Interests limited to specific topics	Low frustration tolerance
Insistence on sameness/difficulty with changes in routine	Poor coping/emotion regulation strategies
Inability to make friends	Restricted range of interests
Difficulty with initiating and/or sustaining reciprocal conversations	Poor writing skills (fine-motor problems)
Pedantic speech	Poor concentration
Socially naïve and literal thinkers	Academic difficulties
Tend to be reclusive	Emotional vulnerability
Difficulty with learning in large groups	Poor organizational skills
Difficulties with abstract concepts	Appear "normal" to other people
Problem-solving abilities tend to be poor	Motor clumsiness
Vocabulary usually great; comprehension poor	Sensory issues

The characteristics of ASD translate into these common classroom challenges in learning, behavior, and socialization – for students with ALL levels of autism. These issues may pose significant difficulties for educators in terms of teaching, controlling behaviors, and maintaining a classroom environment that is conducive to learning for all students. The severity level (1 – 2 – 3), is meant to capture the extent to which the student experiences these difficulties and how much support is required for the student to function optimally.

As educators, we are responsible for the education, safety, and behavior management of all students. Therefore, we must have a working understanding of ASD and its associated characteristics and interfering behaviors, which are a significant piece to autism. It is critical to identify which behaviors may be related to students' skill deficits due to their exceptionality. Many autistic students have difficulty interpreting language and expressing their needs in socially expected ways, which may impact their ability to maintain attention, interact with peers, and/or complete assignments correctly and in a timely manner. These challenging behaviors may also impact the whole class and in addition, may be inadvertently reinforced by the reaction from peers and the educational staff.

As educators, our goal is to foster an inclusive environment that supports all learners, which requires education, understanding, and patience. Staff education is this critical first step that will provide you with the foundation needed to provide support to your students with autism and other needs. Start by encouraging your team to attend professional development opportunities that will help you all to grow your knowledge regarding autism spectrum disorder with practical ways to implement research-based strategies and increase positive educational and social outcomes for all students. Consider attending the **FREE** monthly educationally relevant topics provided by Cooperative Educational Services' Technical Assistance Program as well as the extensive webinar collection found at www.cesap.org, including the **Autism Toolbox Series**. I look forward to partnering with you in furthering your knowledge regarding autism spectrum disorders this year!

Be sure to register for the next complimentary live virtual AUTISM TOOLBOX SERIES TOPIC:

Challenging Behaviors Part 1 (on 1/9/25) & Challenging Behaviors Part 2 (on 1/23/25)

Go to <https://www.ces.org/> to register!

Part 1 Autism Toolbox Series
Challenging Behaviors Toolkit
Thursday, January 9, 2025
Margaret Wood, MA/CCC-SLP
Speech-Language Pathologist & TAP Consultant
mwood@ces.org

Part 2 Autism Toolbox Series
Challenging Behaviors Toolkit
Thursday, January 23, 2025
Margaret Wood, MA/CCC-SLP
Speech-Language Pathologist & TAP Consultant
mwood@ces.org

References and Resources

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/ss/ss7202a1.htm>

<https://researchautism.org/>

<https://undivided.io/resources/school-supports-and-iep-504-accommodations-for-autism-1340>