

Faculty Guide for Working with Students with ASD

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that is characterized by deficits in social skills, communication, and unusual repetitive behavior. Asperger Syndrome is sometimes referred to as “high-functioning autism.” 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.

The following characteristics are typical in an individual with ASD and/or Asperger Syndrome. Due to the diversity and complexity of this disability, you may not see all of these characteristics in a given student. It is important to understand these characteristics, because they can result in behaviors that are easy to misinterpret. Often behaviors that seem odd or unusual or even rude are in fact unintentional symptoms of ASD.

General Characteristics

- 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 trees)
- 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

Functional Impact

Communication and Social Skills

- Difficulty in initiating and sustaining connected relationships
- Poor or unusual eye contact
- Problems understanding social rules (such as personal space)
- Impairment of two-way interaction (May seem to talk “at you” rather than “with you”)
- Conversation and questions may be tangential or repetitive
- Restricted interest that may be unusual and sometimes become a rigid topic for social conversation
- Unusual speech intonation, volume, rhythm, and/or rate

- Literal understanding of language (difficulty interpreting words with double meaning, confused by metaphors and sarcasm)

Some Tips

- Don't 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.
- Contact Disability Resources (654-1266 or odr@umw.edu or agrimes2@umw.edu)
- 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 becomes inappropriate

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

Some Tips

- 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

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."

Some Considerations

Student 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. Many individuals with ASD/Aspergers Syndrome are visual learners. Pictures and graphs may be helpful to them.

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.
- 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.
- 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 test takes into consideration any sensitivity to sound, light, touch, etc.

Source: Wolf, L., Brown, J., & Bork, G. (2009). *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A guide for college personnel*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.