As educators, we often hear phrases such as: “All students can learn.” or “High standards and high success.” Meeting these expectations for neurotypical students is challenging, but this task can be even more daunting for learners who have complex needs, including those with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Educational professionals must ensure that students with ASD (as well as other learners) have access to the general education curriculum, are engaged in meaningful activities, and meet state standards. How do teachers translate these goals into meaningful classroom practices for students with ASD? What considerations go into planning an educational program that is responsive to the unique needs of a student with an ASD?

The answers to these questions include identifying clearly defined objectives and goals and selecting activities that take into account the student’s need for structure, reinforcement, modes of communication, socialization opportunities, and academic goals, as well as access to the general education curriculum. Although this sounds overwhelming, a well-organized plan can make these tasks manageable and effective.

Multidisciplinary teams, including parents, spend a significant amount of time on a student’s individual education programs (IEPs), identifying present level of performance as well as goals and objectives that will help students be successful in school. Even though student outcomes are delineated, it is often difficult to fully transfer them to a student’s daily program (Aspy & Grossman, 2007). For example, a
student’s IEP may indicate that she needs sensory input; yet educators, in particular general educators, often do not know what type of support should be provided and when it should occur. The same child may also need a choice board or a visual schedule to enhance performance. Such accommodations may not be listed on the IEP even though they are integral to the child’s success, leading to frustration for both the teacher and the child, limitations in accessing the general education curriculum, and/or severe behavior challenges.

When planning programs for children and youth, it is essential that all educational professionals understand how and when to implement instructional recommendations and supports. This is particularly important for students with ASD because they require consistency, preparation for events prior to their occurrence, and supports that match their learning style (i.e., typically visual) (Janzen, 2003; Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2006).

In addition, supports must be created so that they are compatible not only with a child’s needs, but also with the environment in which the child is expected to perform. This important consideration is all too often ignored. For example, if a child sits at a desk most of the time during a class, a visual support that is Velcroed® to the desk or to a notebook may be useful. If, on the other hand, the child moves frequently during class, she may need a visual support that moves with her or is accessible from all areas of the room.

To ensure that supports match the student’s environment and that educational professionals know when they are to be used across the school day, it is imperative that supports be planned by and communicated to all teachers who work with students with ASD.

Using the Comprehensive Autism Planning System

To date, few models have been designed to accomplish these tasks. Fewer yet are easily developed and implemented. The recently introduced Comprehensive Autism Planning System (CAPS; Henry & Myles, 2007), however, has been designed to accomplish those tasks while being easy to develop and implement. Specifically, CAPS is designed to provide an overview of a student’s daily schedule by time and activity as well as the supports that he needs during each period. Once a student’s IEP has been developed, all of the educational professionals who work with the student create the CAPS. Because it is developed by the whole educational team, CAPS allows professionals and parents to answer the all-important question for students with an ASD: What supports does the student need for each activity?

As shown in Figure 1, the CAPS is simply a list of a student’s tasks and activities, the times they occur, and a delineation of the supports needed to support student success. In addition, the CAPS includes space for making notations about data collection and how skills are to be generalized to other settings.

The CAPS consists of the following components developed from evidence-based practices for students
The official newsletter of the Organization for Autism Research (OAR)

with ASD:

- **Time**: This section indicates the time for each activity the student engages in throughout the day.

- **Activity**: Activities include all tasks and activities throughout the day in which the student requires support. Academic periods, reading and math, for example; nonacademic times, such as recess and lunch; and transitions between classes would all be considered activities.

- **Targeted Skills to Teach**: These may include IEP goals, state standards, and/or general skills that lead to school success.

- **Structure/Modifications**: These can encompass a wide variety of supports, including placement in the classroom, visual supports (e.g., choice boards, visual schedules), peer supports (e.g., Circle of Friends, peer buddies), and instructional strategies (e.g., priming, self-monitoring).

- **Reinforcement**: Student access to specific types of reinforcement as well as a reinforcement schedule are included in this section.

- **Sensory Strategies**: Sensory supports and strategies identified by an occupational therapist are listed here.

- **Communication/Social Skills**: Specific communication goals or activities as well as supports are delineated in this section. Goals or activities may include requesting help, taking turns in conversation, or protesting appropriately. Supports, which are also diverse, may encompass language boards, PECS (Picture Exchange Communication Systems; Frost & Bondy, 2002), or other augmentative communication systems.

- **Data Collection**: Data collection includes gathering information on the type of data as well as the behavior(s) to be documented during a specific activity. Typically, this section relates directly to IEP goals and objectives.

- **Generalization Plan**: Because individuals with ASD often have problems generalizing information across settings, this section of the CAPS was developed to ensure that generalization of skills is built into the child's program.

### Ginny's CAPS

The following brief case study shows how CAPS was implemented for Ginny, an 8-year-old student with ASD. Ginny is in the second grade and tested “below-average age.” Ginny uses PECS (Frost & Bondy, 2002) to communicate but shows limited generalization to school staff and none among peers. She receives her education in a kindergarten-first-grade resource room and is included in a general
education classroom during “specials” and early-morning calendar group. Ginny experienced some behavioral issues related to transitions, attention to task, and interacting appropriately with peers. Observations in Ginny’s classrooms confirmed behavioral issues identified as problematic and revealed an inconsistent use of supports. Ginny’s team met to create a CAPS to match Ginny’s daily schedule. A partial view of the CAPS is presented in Figure 2.

Like most students, Ginny’s day begins before her first academic class. She starts with breakfast at school. As shown on the CAPS, Ginny will be learning three skills during this time: making choices, using a language board, and using a schedule. The reinforcement is natural for use of choice and language boards—eating the food she chooses from the breakfast menu. While Ginny does not need sensory supports for this activity, she does require communication and social interventions. She has social questions on her language board and a visual support that illustrates table manners. Data collected include the choices she makes and the number of times she uses her language board.

Between 8:05 and 8:20, Ginny completes independent morning work. The CAPS details supports for this task. For example, for morning work, Ginny is to complete five math problems that will result in earning a break. A visual support is used to break down the task into its component parts, and sensory supports include a box that masks problems on the worksheet and a slant board that aids in writing. Data are collected by Ginny through self-monitoring on following class rules posted in the room and her teacher on completion of the five math problems. Self-monitoring was chosen for generalization and because Ginny has asked to monitor her behavior at different times throughout the day. Figure 3 presents Ginny’s CAPS and the materials that help her complete her daily tasks. This figure represents a mini-portfolio of Ginny’s day. This pictorial representation serves multiple purposes:

- It links the task to needed supports.
- This CAPS provides a visual model for substitute teachers, para-educators, and others who may work with Ginny throughout the day.
- It can help Ginny’s future teachers understand the supports that Ginny needed in each environment.

In this way, the CAPS, with its supporting visual representations, ensures current and future success for Ginny at school.

**Summary**

The CAPS is a multi-faceted program that allows educational professionals to know at a glance the goals for an activity and what students with ASD need to successfully engage in each activity. Completed by a team, CAPS can facilitate student independence across settings, activities, and people. This breakthrough tool supports compliance with the student IEPs and special education legislation while
reducing teachers’ workloads. Because of the CAPS structure, it has broad applicability for children and youth with autism spectrum disorders.


**Featured Picture(s):**

*Comprehensive Autism Planning System (CAPS)*

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<th>Child/Student</th>
<th>Strategy/Behavioral Intervention</th>
<th>Reinforcement</th>
<th>Social Skills</th>
<th>Communication/Speech Skills</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Generalization/Plan</th>
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2007/From Comprehensive Autism Planning System: Elementary–High School, Shawn A. Henry and Brenda Smith Myles
### Comprehensive Autism Planning System (CAPS)

**Child/Student:** Ginny

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<th>Activity</th>
<th>Targeted Skills to Teach</th>
<th>Structured/Modified Environments</th>
<th>Initiation/Teaching Strategies</th>
<th>Communication/Social Skills</th>
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*Note: Standard*