What is autism?

Autism is a neurological disorder that impacts a child’s abilities to:
- Engage in reciprocal social interactions with others
- Communicate with others in developmentally appropriate ways
- Participate in a range of activities and behaviors typical of the child’s age and stage of development

Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means the symptoms can range from mild to severe. Common signs and symptoms include:
- Avoiding eye contact
- Dependency on routine
- Difficulty expressing their emotions

How can autism make learning difficult?

- **Academic skills**: difficulty with problem solving, comprehension, writing skills, concentration and organization
- **Social skills**: difficulty relating to and having conversations with classmates
- **Generalization**: difficulty transferring previously learned skills to new contexts
- **Sensory sensitivity**: unusual response to lights, sounds, smells and/or touch
- **Transitions**: need for routine and set schedules
- **Interests**: restricted range of interests, limited to specific topics

What changes can I make?

Make your classroom autism-friendly

- Designate spaces for each activity and for students’ belongings to make transitions easier.
- If possible, provide an individual work space for the student.
- Consider sensory sensitivity:
  - **Light**: change brightness/color, offer sunglasses and/or hats
  - **Sound**: move student away from noise, use soft voices, offer earplugs
  - **Smell**: consider food, art supplies, lotion and perfumes
  - **Touch**: ask how student responds to being touched

Anticipate problematic behavior

- Establish a break area or safe space for when the student feels overwhelmed.
- Prompt appropriate interactions if necessary.
- Know your student’s triggers and signs of distress. Create a signal they can use with you during class.

Provide visual supports

- Have a clear visual daily schedule (see picture).
- Use technology aids for social and/or academic support, like videos and PowerPoints.
- Use concept maps, pictures, written words, maps, labels and timelines to help the student better conceptualize lessons.

What does inclusion look like?

Studies show when teachers have a positive view of their relationships with students, behavioral problems decrease and the child is more socially included. Here are some ways you can promote inclusion:

- Provide extra academic support so the student can learn in the same class as their peers (visual aids, technology, individual instruction)
- Prompt peers to interact with their classmate with autism
- Facilitate group work activities (role-playing, storytelling)
- Make a concerted effort to deliver interventions at home and school by collaborating with one another

Whom should I talk to?

- **The IEP team**: work together to tailor the IEP to the student’s needs.
  - **Your student**: collaboration is important. Discuss with your student what they want to disclose and encourage self-advocacy.
  - **The parents**: no child with autism is the same. Parents can help you anticipate certain problems and make accommodations ahead of time.
- **Your administration**: administrative support plays a big role in the student’s academic success.
- **Your class**: educate them about autism and explain why students with autism might receive extra attention. Encourage them to promote appropriate social behaviors.
Which practices and strategies work?

Building social skills:

• **Social Skills Training**: use direct instruction, role-playing, and immediate feedback to practice appropriate social behaviors.

• **Social Narratives**: use narratives and images to demonstrate appropriate social skills.

• **OAR’s Kit for Kids program**: use an illustrated story to teach students in K-8 about their peers with autism, why they learn differently, and why they receive certain accommodations.

Developing communication skills:

• **Naturalistic intervention**: prompt the student to elaborate verbally and increase their word utterances.

• **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)**: use picture cards to communicate desires and needs.

Technology supports: use these to increase understanding and help the student reach their goals.

• **Computers**: instruction, feedback, peer role-playing

• **Video modeling**: visual models of target behaviors

Which interventions work best for which subjects?

• **Across all subjects**: explicit instruction, direct instruction (basic skills), text analysis (main ideas, relationships, sequence), mnemonics, study strategies

• **Reading/Writing**: picture-to-text matching, computer aids, vocabulary instruction, story maps, guided reading, SRSD model (see right)

• **Spelling**: technology aids, speech-generating devices

• **Math**: visuals, manipulatives, verbal cues, modeling think alouds, self-monitoring

• **Social Studies**: vocabulary instruction, concept maps, modified notes

• **Science**: vocabulary instruction, visuals, graphic organizers, repeated readings, cooperative learning, coached elaboration

Addressing behaviors: tackle behavioral goals one at a time.

• **Prompting**: gestural, verbal, or physical cues to encourage student towards target behavior.

• **Reinforcement**: give rewards for good behavior.

• **Trial training**: cue a specific behavior, help child respond appropriately, reinforce the behavior: Repeat as necessary.

Promoting independence: empower students to control their own behavior.

• **Self-management strategies**: have student assess their own performance and reward themselves for their success.

• **Self-regulated strategy development (SRSD)**: help student develop writing skills and create more complete stories.

1. Develop background knowledge
2. Discuss strategy
3. Model the strategy/self-instructions
4. Memorize the strategy
5. Support/collaborative practice
6. Independent practice

Follow the six-step plan!

1. **Educate yourself**: have a working understanding of autism and its associated behaviors.
2. **Reach out to the parents**: they are your first and best source of information about the child.
3. **Prepare the classroom**: modify physical aspects and placement of child in the classroom.
4. **Educate peers and promote social goals**: children with autism have the ability to establish and maintain relationships.
5. **Collaborate on the implementation of an education program**: create plan based on child’s academic skills and goals.
6. **Manage behavioral challenges**: children with autism may act out when they are fearful or confused about something.

Where can I learn more?

For more information and free resources, go to: bit.ly/EduAutism