

TALKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERIES

VOLUME 8

# AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

INFORMATION BOOKLET



This pamphlet is one of a series of resources prepared by the First Nations Schools Association (FNSA) and First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNEC) to share information about how to support all First Nations students, regardless of their needs.

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**FNSA MANDATE:**

to collaborate with First Nation schools to create nurturing environments that develop learners' pride and competence in their First Nations language and heritage and equip them to realize their full potential within self-governing First Nations communities.

**FNEC MANDATE:**

to facilitate discussion about education matters affecting First Nations in BC by disseminating information to and soliciting input from First Nations. FNEC's primary goal is to promote and support the provision of a quality education to First Nations learners.

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We hope that these pamphlets provide a useful overview of key special education topics, representing an introduction to issues that some people may want to investigate in more detail. Anyone who requires more information or has specific questions is welcome to contact the FNEC/FNSA special education staff.



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# What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (referred to in this pamphlet as ASD), refers to a range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviours, speech problems or nonverbal communication, as well as a number of other unique issues.

There are many types of ASD, caused by various combinations of genetic and environmental influences. The term “spectrum” reflects the wide range of experiences for each individual who is affected by autism.

The most-obvious signs of ASD tend to appear between 2 and 3 years of age, although it can be diagnosed as early as 18 months and some developmental delays associated with autism can be identified and addressed even earlier. Early detection and interventions can improve long-term outcomes.

# Students with ASD

Students with ASD often experience the following challenges - although the specific characteristics of each student are unique.

- **DIFFICULTY WITH SOCIAL INTERACTIONS**, including recognizing and understanding other people's feelings and managing one's own.

People with an ASD may ...

- not understand common social rules, such as respecting personal space, appropriate public comments, conversation norms, etc.
- appear to be insensitive because they may not readily recognize how someone else is feeling.
- prefer to spend time alone.
- appear to behave "strangely," as they may find it difficult to express their feelings or needs.
- want to interact with other people and make friends, but be unsure how to go about this.

These issues can lead to challenges in the classroom and on the playground, and with making friends. They can also put students with ASD at greater risk for bullying.

**DIFFICULTIES WITH SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS**, including using and understanding verbal and non-verbal language and having a very literal understanding of language.

People with an ASD may find it difficult to use or understand ...

- facial expressions, gestures, or tone of voice.
- abstract jokes and sarcasm.
- common phrases, sayings and metaphors.

Other people with an ASD may have good language skills, but may still find it hard to understand common conversation patterns, perhaps repeating what the other person has just said or talking at excessive length about their own interests.

- **DIFFICULTY WITH SOCIAL IMAGINATION**, including the ability to understand and predict other people's intentions and behaviours and to imagine situations outside of their own routine. This characteristic may be accompanied by a narrow, repetitive range of activities.

People with an ASD often have a good imagination and are creative, but may find it hard to ...

- understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and actions.
- predict what could happen next.
- understand the concept of danger, such as running onto the road, swimming in fast running water, etc.
- prepare for change and plan for the future.
- cope in new or unfamiliar situations.

People with an ASD may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours and may also have other co-existing conditions, such as Attention Deficit Disorder.

# Autism In the Classroom

If a student has an ASD, he or she should have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Consistently applying the strategies included in the IEP is the most important consideration when working with a student with an ASD.

Also, many students with ASD learn best when there are limited changes or surprises. Even small, unintentional differences can have a big impact on their ability to learn. This means that a clear structure and consistent daily routine / schedule can be beneficial for students with an ASD, and it is useful to try to provide plenty of warning and explanations if there will be a change in the usual school or classroom activities. Negative changes in a student's behaviour or mood can be triggered by an unexpected situation that causes the student anxiety.

The following tips may also help when working with a student with an ASD.

- Describe tasks very specifically and in sequential order.
- Be as clear as possible in your communication. Keep your language simple and concrete. Get your point across using as few words as possible.
- Intentionally teach and reinforce key social rules and skills, such as taking turns, respecting personal space, not taking the belongings of other children, etc.
- Offer fewer rather than numerous choices, which can be overwhelming. Also, give very clear choices that are not open ended. "Do you want to read or draw?" will often lead to better results than "What do you want to do now?"
- When asking a question or giving instructions, use short sentences for clarity and check for understanding, such as asking the student to repeat it back using his or her own words.
- Say exactly what you mean. Anything implied will probably not be understood. Always avoid sarcasm or abstract humour / subtle jokes that can be easily misinterpreted. Idioms, like "Put your thinking caps on", "Open your ears" and "Zipper your lips" may also leave some students confused.
- Explicitly teach your expectations, ideally using visuals. Show what a finished assignment should look like. Use a photograph to illustrate how an organized desk will appear. Practice and show students what you mean when you ask them to form a "calm line."

- Address the student individually when possible. Students with an ASD may not realize that general instructions are meant to include them, and it can be helpful to either include a student's name when giving directions or speak to them individually.
- Slow down your communication, and allow time for the student to process information and respond.
- Never take what appears to be rude or aggressive behaviour personally; the cause and the target for difficult behaviours are often not the same.
- Avoid overstimulation and minimize distractions, such as overly colourful and cluttered displays, too much noise, and excessive activity; these can be difficult for students with an ASD.
- Try to connect assignments and school work with the student's particular interests.
- Try using computer-based learning for literacy development.
- Protect the student from teasing, and help his or her peers understand the student's unique needs.
- Allow the student to avoid activities that he or she finds particularly difficult or upsetting (such as specific sports and games), and try to support the student in group tasks.
- Reward effort and encourage the student's success with positive responses.

- Be patient. A student with an ASD may appear to be intentionally aloof or disinterested, but that is rarely the case. These students may not know how they appear to others. Deal with concerns in a calm way.
- Plan an exit strategy, such as a quiet place to go when stress levels get too high, in case a student is experiencing difficulty in class.
- Avoid confronting an angry/upset student by arguing or raising your voice. Use a neutral tone of voice – never shout. Try to divert and defuse the situation, giving a clear alternative choice or compromise and providing adequate time for response. If necessary, use clear and expected consequences consistently and calmly.
- Communicate with parents. Keep them informed. Ask for their help. Parents are always the best resource for knowing how to help their children.

# Summary

There is no cure for ASD, but early behavioural / educational interventions can be very successful in substantially helping students. Therapists can use highly structured and skill-oriented training sessions to help children develop social and language skills. In addition, counseling support can help families cope with the particular challenges of living with a child with ASD.

Teaching students with ASDs in the classroom is complicated, and sometimes can be a challenging process. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to help every student reach his or her academic potential. Using a student's Individual Education Plan, seeking advice from specialists, appropriately structuring the classroom, and building positive relationships with parents are among the most effective ways to achieve the best outcomes for students with an ASD.

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**REFERENCES**

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