

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects how people process information. ASD is a lifelong condition, and while one cannot grow out of it, it can be mitigated by early diagnosis and intervention. ASD can affect behaviour, social interactions, and one's ability to communicate. Characteristics of autism occur on a spectrum, meaning that while all people with ASD will experience certain difficulties, the degree to which each person experiences these challenges will differ. Commonly, students with ASD will experience delays in language development; present challenges with verbal and non-verbal communication, social skills; show unusual patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities; or express more interest in objects than people.

TYPES OF ASD

Previously there were different diagnoses of autism, namely Aspergers, PDD-NO and CDD. In 2013, a new diagnostic criteria was released (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)) which no longer includes these disorders. There is now only one diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Autism also demonstrates an extreme gender bias with current estimates in Canada and the US showing a 4:1 ratio of males to females. This is due in part to females demonstrating characteristics which don't fit with the ASD profile (usually associated with males). It is also thought that perhaps females are more efficient at masking their difficulties.

COMMON ISSUES WITH ASD

- **Trouble with social skills:** People with ASD struggle to read and interpret nonverbal cues like body language and facial expressions. They might also have trouble with 'unwritten' social rules.
- **Executive functioning:** Students may struggle with transitions, managing assignments, organizing their work, and planning for task completion. One common challenge is with flexible thinking, or the ability to think in new ways about a problem.
- **Sensory processing:** It's common for people with autism to have trouble taking in and responding to sensory information. They may seek out or avoid certain sensations, or have a heightened sensitivity to light, sound, touch, taste, or other senses. This can also lead to meltdowns.
- **Reading comprehension:** Students may struggle with reading comprehension, especially answering higher-order thinking questions. This in particular is noticeable with cause and effect questions or questions that involve emotional response.

- **Written and verbal language:** People may struggle to express themselves and participate in conversation. Some also can't control how loud they speak, and with what tone. Students are sometimes unable to express themselves in writing, have trouble brainstorming and organizing ideas, and struggle with how to improve their writing.
- **Handwriting and motor planning:** Students may have difficulties with fine motor skills required for handwriting. Students may seem clumsy and uncoordinated.
- **Repetitive behaviours, obsessions of routine:** Physical behaviors like arm flapping or rocking (sometimes called stimming) are common. Some people might also repeat certain sounds or phrases. Predictable routines and structure help people feel safe and comfortable. People with autism may "get stuck" on a topic or an idea when something unexpected happens.

HOW WE SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH ASD

- ✓ Using Concrete-Representational-Abstract teaching to promote the ability to use and understand various reading comprehension strategies and help link higher order thinking skills to more concrete lesson activities
- ✓ Using direct instruction in numerical or rule-driven written expression (using Rumack Writing programs) approaches to writing
- ✓ Breaking down activities into smaller and more manageable steps, and providing explicit examples for a student to copy, then model before they act independently
- ✓ Introducing and training students in the use of assistive technology related to writing, emotional comprehension, and executive functioning
- ✓ Partnership with teachers and parents to ensure that the systems are consistent across multiple environments and daily check-ins become part of students' routine

Our experiences are all unique. Regardless, I do believe that it is important to find the beautiful. Recognize that there is bad, there is ugly, there is disrespect, there is ignorance and there are meltdowns. Those things are inevitable. But there is also good.

- Erin



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LEARNING SPACE