



## Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a group of developmental disorders that affect social communication and social interaction. Individuals with ASD tend to exhibit repetitive behaviors, sensory issues, and limited interests. Each individual with ASD may be affected by a varying and wide range of symptoms, strength of symptoms, and level of impairment. Other terms used to describe ASD include autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified.

According to Siminoff, Pickles, Charman, Chandler, Loucas and Baird (2008), 70 percent of adults with autism have at least one additional disorder such as social anxiety and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and oppositional disorder. Obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette's syndrome, insomnia, and depression are commonly also found in people with autism (Attwood, 2007).

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### Common Presentations of ASD in the Classroom

Not all persons with ASD will exhibit the following behaviors but most will exhibit several to many:

- Repeat certain behaviors or have unusual behaviors
- Have overly focused interests, such as with moving objects or parts of objects
- Have a lasting, intense interest in certain topics, such as numbers, details, or facts
- Be upset by a slight change in a routine or being placed in a new or overstimulating setting
- Make little or inconsistent eye contact
- Tend to look and listen less to people in their environment
- Rarely seek to share their enjoyment of objects or activities by pointing or showing things to others
- Respond unusually when others show anger, distress, or affection

- Fail or be slow to respond to their name or other verbal attempts to gain their attention
- Have difficulties with the back and forth of conversations
- Often talk at length about a favorite subject but won't allow anyone else a chance to respond or notice when others react indifferently
- Repeat words or phrases that they hear, a behavior called echolalia
- Use words that seem odd, out of place, or have a special meaning known only to those familiar with that person's way of communicating
- Have facial expressions, movements, and gestures that do not match what they are saying
- Have an unusual tone of voice that may sound sing-song or flat and robot-like
- Have trouble understanding another person's point of view, leaving him or her unable to predict or understand other people's actions

In the college classroom setting, an instructor might see:

- Above-average intelligence
- Ability to learn things in detail and remember information for long periods of time
- Strength in visual and auditory learning
- Excellence in math, science, music, and art and excellent knowledge in specific areas
- Friendliness
- Punctuality
- Easy following of rules and structure
- Intense attention to detail

As well as:

- Odd language structures
- Excessive talking
- Abnormal focus
- Talking too little
- Awkwardness - both social and physiologically (body in relation to space)
- Brutal honesty
- Seeming belligerence about making a point, or when differing in opinion
- Poor organization and poor time management
- Tendency to lose things
- Inability to see the "big picture"



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## Supporting Students with ASD in Class

Some examples of possible accommodations that a student with ASD may require include (but are not limited to):

- "Dear Professor Memos" verifying the need for accommodations
- Priority/early course registration
- Accommodated testing for in-class and online exams and quizzes
- Note-taking services and/or the use of an audio recorder for class lectures
- Allowance of laptops, tablets, or assistive technology in the classroom

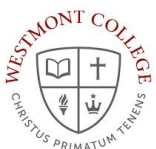
Each student with ASD is unique, but many tend to think literally and require very specific instructions. The student is not helped by the common phrase: "Turn your papers in by the due date." They may not respond to a directive that they perceive to be somewhat vague and will not turn their work in. More effective would be, "When you are dismissed from class, place your research papers on this desk on your way out of the room. Be sure to upload your papers to Canvas by Wed, September 3".

Below is a list of tips, as suggested by Atwood (2007):

- Make directions clear and provide step by step instructions in written format
- Ask student to repeat instructions to verify comprehension
- Allow student to have short breaks if necessary - people with ASD are calmed, sometimes, by pacing
- Allow delivery of assignments in different formats such as electronically
- Extend deadlines to allow for challenges in organization, time management, and processing
- Provide students with the option to work in a group or independently if they feel uncomfortable in a group work setting
- Provide visual supports to promote understanding

In addition:

- Try to clearly and specifically warn students of changes in routine
- Be willing to re-explain information concretely
- Help students to see concrete connections between topics



- Establish rules as needed for the classroom. Communicate to the student calmly and in private when there have been violations in class etiquette.
- Work with the Office of Disability Services if behavior modification is needed
- Set clear guidelines for participation (e.g. 3 times per class) if the student is over contributing or under contributing
- Be aware of sensory overload

(Extracted, modified, and condensed from [Students with Autism in the College Classroom](#), 18 August 2016; with reference to: Attwood, T. (2007). *The complete guide to asperger syndrome*. Philadelphia, Pa: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.)

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