

A Quick Guide to Working with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Related Disorders (Nonverbal Learning Disability, Pervasive Developmental Disorder [PDD])

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a developmental disability that is characterized by social interaction deficits, impaired communication skills, and unusual behaviors. Another related disorder is Nonverbal Learning Disability, a term used to describe deficits in nonverbal communication.

The following characteristics may be present in an individual with an Autism-Spectrum Disorder. Due to the diversity and complexity of this disability, some of the characteristics or problems discussed may not be evident in a particular individual. An understanding of these characteristics is important, because the behavior of these individuals is frequently misinterpreted. Many behaviors that seem odd or unusual are due to the disability and not the result of intentional rudeness.

General Characteristics

- Frequent errors in the interpretation of body language, intentions or facial expressions of others
- Difficulty understanding the motives and perceptions of others
- Problems asking for help
- May show motor clumsiness, unusual body movements and/or repetitive behavior
- Difficulties with transitions and changes in schedule
- Wants things “just so”
- Problems with organization (including initiating, planning, carrying out and finishing tasks)
- Deficits in abstract thinking (concrete, misses the “big picture”, focuses on irrelevant details, difficulty generalizing)
- Unusual sensitivity to touch, sounds, and visual details, may experience sensory overload

Impact on Communication and Social Skills

- Difficulty in initiating and sustaining connected relationships with people
- Poor quality eye contact
- Problems understanding social rules (such as personal space)
- Impairment of two-way interaction (May seem to talk “at you” rather than “with you”)
- Conversation and questions may be tangential or repetitive
- Restricted interests that may be unusual and sometime become a rigid topic for social conversation
- Unusual speech intonation, volume rhythm and/or rate
- Literal understanding of language (difficulty interpreting words with double meaning, confused by metaphors and sarcasm)

Impact on Writing

- Papers may be redundant, as they return to the same topic focus repeatedly
- Able to state facts and details, but will be greatly challenged by papers requiring
 - taking another’s point of view
 - synthesizing information to arrive at a larger concept

- comparing and contrasting to arrive at the “big picture”
- arriving at the “big picture”
- the use of analogies, similes or metaphors

Some considerations:

These students may have impressive vocabularies and an excellent rote memory, but may have difficulty with high-level thinking and comprehension skills. They can give the false impression that they understand, when in reality they may be repeating what they have heard or read. Many individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder are visual learners. Techniques suggested for students with learning disabilities who are visual learners are often helpful.

Instructional Strategies

- Clearly define course requirements, the dates of exams and when assignments are due. Provide advance notice of any changes.
- All expectations need to be direct and explicit. Don't require these students to “read between the lines” to glean your intentions. Don't expect the student to automatically generalize instructions. Provide direct feedback to the student when you observe areas of academic difficulty.
- Encourage use of resources designed to help students with study skills, particularly organizational skills.
- Avoid idioms, double meaning and sarcasm, unless you plan to explain your usage.
- If the student has poor handwriting, use of a computer may be easier for them.
- Use the preoccupying interest to help focus/motivate the student. Suggest ways to integrate this interest into the course, such as related paper topics.
- The setting for tests should account for any sensitivity to sound, light, touch etc.
- Don't use absolute words such as always or never unless that is exactly what you mean
- Clear directives should be used when
 - a student invades your space or imposes on your time
 - giving assignments or specifying revisions to submitted work
 - the student's classroom comments or conversational volume become inappropriate
- Clear, detailed directives should be used when referring to revisions that need to be made to a piece of writing.
 - have the student make a “to do list” of what needs to be changed
 - number the changes on their writing so they have an order to follow
 - if modeling writing rules, write them on a separate sheet for future reference
 - keep directions simple and direct
 - ask students to repeat directions in their own words to check comprehension

Example: (Student arrives at your office at 1:40). “We have only 20 minutes to work together. At 2:00, I'm going to ask you to take my suggestions home and start making changes to your paper. Come to my office tomorrow afternoon at 3:00 and show me what you've done.”