

# Common Threads for Inclusive Education



## Autism Spectrum Disorder

### PLANNING YOUR LEARNING

What universal and targeted strategies and supports can be used to address the learning needs of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in an inclusive learning environment?

### WHAT IS ASD?

ASD is a range of complex, lifelong neurological disorders that affect the brain's functioning. People with ASD have "developmental disabilities that can impact how [they] understand what they see, hear and otherwise sense. This can result in difficulties with social relationships, communication and behaviour" (Alberta Learning 2003, 1). *Autism spectrum disorder* is an umbrella term used to describe symptoms that can be present in a variety of combinations and levels of intellectual ability.

The current rate of ASD diagnosis in Canada is 1 in 66 children (1 in 42 boys and 1 in 189 girls).<sup>1</sup> People with ASD can have other medical and mental health issues, including learning disabilities, intellectual impairments, anxiety, attention difficulties or unusual responses to sensory stimuli, gastrointestinal disorders, and seizures.<sup>2</sup> About one-third of people with ASD are nonverbal; about one-third have an intellectual disability; nearly half wander or bolt; and about one-quarter engage in self-injury (such as banging their head or scratching themselves).<sup>3</sup>

*Students are entitled to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self.*

—Education Act, SA 2012, c E-0.3



**With the right strategies, supports and interventions, all students can be successful learners.**





*If you've met one  
person with autism,  
you've met one  
person with autism.*

—Stephen Shore

## UNDERSTANDING ASD

The term *spectrum* reflects the wide variety of challenges and strengths possessed by people with ASD. It is important to understand that there is no typical person with ASD. As Stephen Shore says, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.”<sup>4</sup> Some children and adults with ASD are fully able to perform activities of daily living, whereas others require substantial support. Some common characteristics, however, are important in the diagnosis of ASD:

- Social interaction and communication challenges
- Stereotypical repetitive patterns of behaviour (such as hand flapping, body rocking, echolalia, insistence on sameness and resistance to change)
- Symptoms present in the early childhood developmental period
- Symptoms that cause significant impairment in daily life<sup>5</sup>

People with ASD have mild to severe difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication, including

- Spoken language (around a third of people with autism are nonverbal)
- Gestures
- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Tone of voice
- Expressions not meant to be taken literally<sup>6</sup>

As well, they may have difficulty with

- Recognizing emotions and intentions in others
- Recognizing one’s own emotions
- Expressing emotions
- Seeking emotional comfort from others
- Feeling overwhelmed in social situations
- Taking turns in conversation
- Gauging personal space (appropriate distance between people)<sup>7,8</sup>

People with ASD may also exhibit mild to severe restricted or repetitive physical behaviours, such as repetitive body movements or the repetitive movement of objects. Other behaviours may include the need for consistent routines and a resistance to change, ritualistic behaviours (such as lining up objects), and narrow or extreme interests.<sup>9</sup>

These challenges can hamper the ability of students with ASD to be accepted by their peers. Like others, students with ASD want and need friendships, but they may lack the skills to make and keep friends.<sup>10</sup> Teachers must actively teach all students about acceptance and diversity in an inclusive learning environment to support students with ASD so that they feel safe, respected and welcomed and have a sense of belonging.

Speak with your administrative team if you have a student who exhibits any of these characteristics.

## PLANNING FOR INSTRUCTION

Students with ASD are unique, and their strengths and challenges vary immensely. Therefore, it is essential to take a collaborative team approach to developing an instructional support plan (ISP) or individualized program plan (IPP) that outlines the learning goals and necessary supports for a student to experience success in the inclusive classroom. A student's learning team may include the classroom teacher, the family, district- and school-based inclusive education teachers, and an educational assistant (when available). Other professionals familiar with the student may also join the learning team, including the school psychologist, a speech-language pathologist, an occupational therapist and a behaviour consultant. Including the perspectives of the family and the student is essential to understanding their goals and identifying effective supports and strategies.

### The following strategies can extend your knowledge of your student with ASD and help you develop a plan for inclusive learning:



- **REVIEW** the relevant information in the student's record. If possible, set up a transition meeting with the staff who worked with the student in the past.



- **MEET** with the student and the family early in the school year to learn more about
  - › the student's strengths, interests and areas of need;
  - › the student's specific characteristics in relation to his or her diagnosis; and
  - › successful strategies used at home or in the community that could be applied at school.

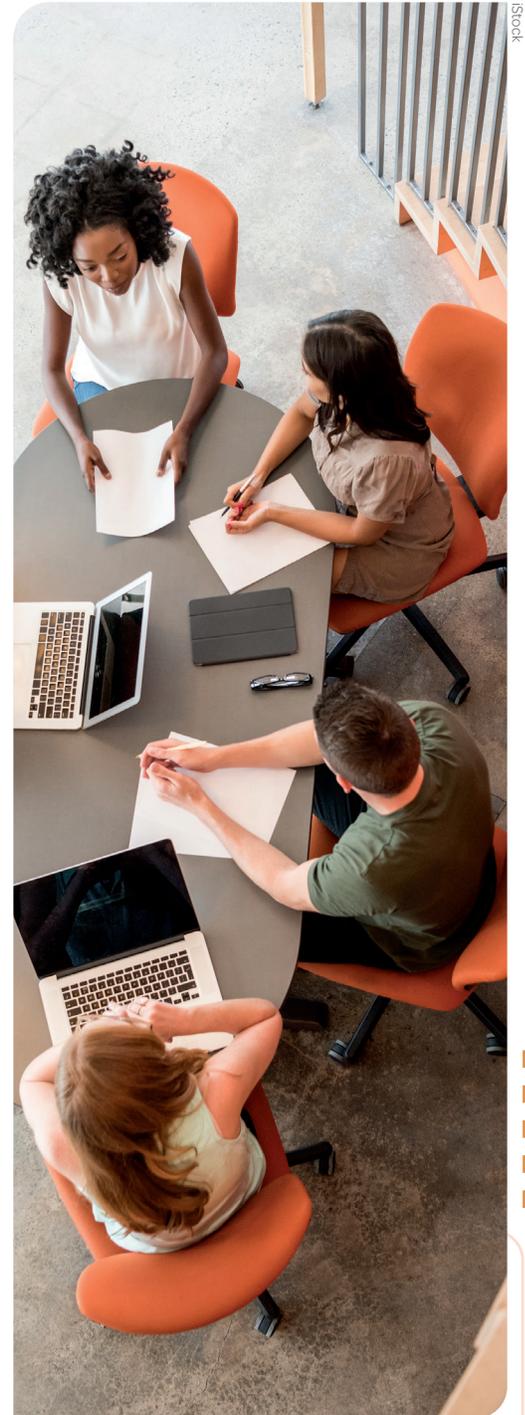


- **COLLABORATE** with other members of the student's learning team to identify and coordinate supports and any consultations needed.



- **TALK** with the family, the supportive group and the student to determine if, and how, they want information on ASD to be shared with other students. Teaching self-advocacy and helping a student with ASD find his or her "voice," whether the student can communicate verbally or not, is an essential component of success.

For more information on individualized program planning, consult Alberta Education's (2006) *Essential Components of Educational Programming for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders*.



*When developing an ISP or IPP for your student, take a collaborative team approach by involving the student, the family, district- and school-based inclusive education teachers, and other professionals.*



## RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

The response to intervention (RTI) approach is a useful planning framework for teachers working with students with ASD. RTI is a three-tiered problem-solving approach built on the foundational idea that with the right strategies, supports and interventions, all students can be successful learners.<sup>11</sup>

**Tier 1 (universal supports)** consists of instructional strategies and learning supports that are provided to all students.

**Tier 2 (targeted supports)** consists of strategies and interventions designed for students who require additional supports.

**Tier 3 (individualized supports)** consists of strategies and interventions for students who require intensive and specialized supports.

Identifying the most effective strategies and supports for students with ASD is best done through a collaborative team approach.

## Universal Supports (Tier 1)

### Inclusive Learning Environment



School communities demonstrate universal acceptance of student diversity by creating an inclusive learning environment. As Alberta Education (2017, 6) states,

Inclusive education addresses three of the most significant determinants of mental health: social inclusion, freedom from discrimination and violence [or bullying] and access to resources. . . .

An inclusive learning environment is structured to anticipate, value and respond to the diverse strengths and needs of all students.

The classroom and school culture must reflect the belief that all members of the learning community have value and can contribute to the learning of others.

- Develop a positive relationship with every student whereby all students feel that you care for them and accept them as they are.
- Treat students as individuals and adapt your approach to meet their needs.
- Be calm and positive. Model appropriate behaviour for students with autism, as well as for other students, by greeting and engaging them in a respectful way.
- Ensure that all students use positive language that promotes acceptance of others.
- Highlight the achievements and contributions to society of people with ASD and other disorders.
- Provide opportunities to celebrate students' strengths and successes.

### Classroom Routines and Physical Environment



When working with students with ASD, teachers can adapt the learning environment to meet the needs of these students and to support them in being organized and independent. Establish a learning environment and a physical space that accommodate students with ASD, who can be overstimulated or understimulated by sensory input in their environment.

- Establish clear routines and habits to support classroom activities and transitions.
- Maintain schedules and classroom routines.
- Label and organize personal belongings, classroom materials and the physical environment so that students know where things go and where activities occur.

- Use pictures to illustrate important classroom information, such as appropriate behaviours, schedules and the location of materials.
- Avoid sensory overload. Many forms of sensory input are distracting for students with ASD, including light, smells, noises and visual stimulation.
- Provide information in visual forms, including written words, pictures, symbols and photos.

### Social Interaction



ASD is a social communication disorder.

Therefore, teachers must provide meaningful and intentional opportunities for students with ASD to experience, as well as build skills for, social interaction. Finding ways for these students to communicate with their peers and develop their “voice” is essential in increasing their independence.

- Directly teach social skills by modelling appropriate perspective-taking skills.
- Plan activities for students to work in pairs or small groups. Use peer mentoring by pairing students with ASD with peers who are role models.
- Be aware that students with ASD can become isolated in the classroom as a result of their area of challenge. Structure opportunities for these students to have social interaction with their peers during classroom and school activities.

## Targeted Supports (Tier 2)

Targeted supports and interventions can be provided to meet the needs of students with ASD.

### Communication



Students with ASD may have difficulty using appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication and interpreting figurative speech.

- If a student experiences echolalia (repetition of the speech of others), provide alternative words that the student can use instead.
- Use concrete language and take opportunities, as required, to teach figurative language and hidden meanings in speech.
- Break down oral instructions into smaller, more manageable steps, paying attention to processing and pacing.

## Routines and Change



Some students with ASD are more comfortable with predictable routines and may have already-established rituals. Change can cause them to be anxious and can even

result in negative behaviours.

- Prepare students for upcoming changes by teaching expectations and activities beforehand.
- Introduce unfamiliar tasks in a familiar environment.

## Positive Behaviours



Students with ASD may have poor social skills and may engage in repetitive behaviours that affect social situations.

- Provide precise positive feedback and use meaningful reinforcements.
- Use positive messaging. Saying “Please sit in your seat” can be more effective than saying “Don’t stand up.” This lets students know exactly what you would like them to do.

## Learning Activities



Teachers should adapt learning activities to address the unique needs of students with ASD and to develop their areas of strength.

- Use technology to enhance access and support learning. Try using noise-cancelling headphones or using a computer rather than pen and paper.<sup>12</sup>
- Ensure that each task has clear instructions, with a beginning and an end.
- Provide an exemplar and model the task procedures.
- Develop students’ talents and interest areas.
- Provide choice and redirect students if they become overly focused on an interest area.
- Provide accommodations such as extra time and alternative assessments, as appropriate.

## Executive Functioning



Many students with ASD have difficulties with planning, sequencing, organizing and remembering activities.

- Consider seating that situates students for optimal attention to instruction or that addresses their sensory needs.
- Teach students to use checklists, calendars and planners.

- Write step-by-step directions and use graphic organizers to help students organize ideas.
- Provide prompts or visual cue cards.
- Establish transition routines, and use timers.

## Individualized Supports (Tier 3)



Some students with ASD require a modified education program that includes additional therapies, depending on their unique needs.

These therapies can include behaviour therapy, occupational therapy, and training in social skills and functional life skills. The members of a student’s learning team should collaborate to integrate their approaches in the student’s ISP or IPP and daily life.<sup>13</sup>

## Sensory Concerns



Some students with ASD struggle with sensory experiences that impede their ability to participate in classroom and school activities and to learn. Behaviour challenges

in some students with ASD often come after an experience of sensory discomfort that can include the range of senses.

- Provide a quiet area for students to work that addresses their sensory needs.
- Plan to minimize students’ exposure to sensory triggers (such as bright lights, loud noises and fire alarms).
- Provide manipulative options (such as squeeze balls) to control fidgeting.
- Schedule meaningful downtime during the day, such as exploring relaxation techniques, listening to classical music or working on a favourite project.

## Communication



Some students with ASD are minimally verbal or considered nonverbal. It is vital that these students have appropriate ways to communicate their needs and wants.

- Collaborate with parents and speech-language pathologists to apply strategies in students’ therapy plans.
- Consult with your school or district about augmentative and alternative communication devices and software that can help students with ASD to communicate.
- Investigate software packages with graphic symbols for producing learning materials.



*In-school group behaviour therapy sessions help to strengthen students' social skills.*

## Learning Activities



Some students with ASD have a modified education program that includes developing daily living skills.

- Help students become more independent by
  - › giving them choices, as much as possible;
  - › teaching them skills in different settings to ensure understanding and generalization across environments; and
  - › teaching them functional life skills (such as dressing and grooming themselves), if necessary.
- Structure tasks at an appropriate level for students so that they experience success.
- Provide hands-on, experiential learning activities that are relevant to daily life.
- Use students' areas of interest to teach new skills.

## Positive Social Skills



Students with ASD often display difficulties in social interaction.

- Plan opportunities to include students with ASD in nonacademic aspects of school life, including extracurricular activities, where appropriate.
- Provide individual instruction on social skills, using modelling and conversation cue cards.
- Use video programs to teach social skills and model positive behaviours.
- Develop a behaviour support plan and use a consistent, agreed-upon response to manage disruptive behaviours.

## NEXT STEPS

As Bennie (2019) writes,

It is important to understand that an educator's role is to guide the child and not try to change who that child is. None of us can predict the future outcomes for a child or what they may achieve later in life. Good teaching fosters growth and development, paving the way for a child to reach their full potential.

Working with a student with ASD can be challenging and rewarding for a classroom teacher and the student's learning team. Every person with ASD is unique and has different strengths and difficulties. Learn as much as you can about how your student's diagnosis may affect his or her learning and social and emotional well-being. Collaborate with other members of the student's learning team to gather data through learner assessments, observations and documentation for discussion and problem solving. Take care to maintain a good working relationship with the student's family. As Alberta Education states, "Inclusion is a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance of, and belonging for, all children and students."<sup>14</sup>

## CONTINUING YOUR LEARNING

### Learning to Know

How has the information in this publication contributed to your understanding of ASD?

### Learning to Do

How can you structure the learning environment and modify your instructional strategies to support students with ASD?

### Learning to Be

How will you make students with ASD feel welcome, cared for, respected and safe in an inclusive learning environment?

### Learning to Live Together

What have you learned about ASD that helps you better understand your students and the perspectives of their families?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

### **Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders**

Alberta Learning, 2003

<https://education.alberta.ca/media/385138/teaching-students-with-asd-2003.pdf>

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**

Government of Canada

[www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/autism-spectrum-disorder-asd.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/autism-spectrum-disorder-asd.html)

### **“Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Tips, Resources, and Information on Supporting Students with Autism”**

Waterford.org, 2019

[www.waterford.org/education/activities-for-children-with-autism/](http://www.waterford.org/education/activities-for-children-with-autism/)

### **Autism Awareness Centre**

<https://autismawarenesscentre.com>

### **Evidence-Based Practices**

National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder

<https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices/>

## NOTES

1. “What Is Autism,” Autism Speaks Canada, [www.autismspeaks.ca/about-autism/what-is-autism/](http://www.autismspeaks.ca/about-autism/what-is-autism/) (accessed January 7, 2020).
2. “Autism’s Associated Medical and Mental-Health Conditions,” Autism Speaks Canada, [www.autismspeaks.ca/about/about-autism/autism-s-associated-medical-and-mental-health-conditions/](http://www.autismspeaks.ca/about/about-autism/autism-s-associated-medical-and-mental-health-conditions/) (accessed January 7, 2020).
3. “Autism Facts and Figures,” Autism Speaks, [www.autismspeaks.org/autism-facts-and-figures/](http://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-facts-and-figures/) (accessed January 7, 2020).
4. “Leading Perspectives on Disability: A Q&A with Dr. Stephen Shore,” Lime Connect, [www.limeconnect.com/opportunities\\_news/detail/leading-perspectives-on-disability-a-qa-with-dr-stephen-shore/](http://www.limeconnect.com/opportunities_news/detail/leading-perspectives-on-disability-a-qa-with-dr-stephen-shore/) (accessed January 7, 2020).
5. “What Are the Symptoms of Autism?,” Autism Speaks, [www.autismspeaks.org/what-are-symptoms-autism/](http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-are-symptoms-autism/) (accessed January 7, 2020).
6. See note 5.
7. See note 5.
8. For more information, watch the video “Autism: See the Potential,” Autism Speaks Canada, 2017, 8:45, <https://youtu.be/VNpR7dIP3vc> (accessed January 7, 2020).
9. See note 5.
10. “Social Skills and Autism,” Autism Speaks, [www.autismspeaks.org/social-skills-and-autism/](http://www.autismspeaks.org/social-skills-and-autism/) (accessed January 7, 2020).
11. For more information, see “Response to Intervention,” Alberta Education, [www.alberta.ca/response-to-intervention.aspx](http://www.alberta.ca/response-to-intervention.aspx) (accessed January 7, 2020).
12. For more information about using technology with students with ASD, see Bennie (2016).
13. “Autism Therapies and Supports,” Autism Speaks Canada, [www.autismspeaks.ca/about/about-autism/autism-therapies-and-supports/](http://www.autismspeaks.ca/about/about-autism/autism-therapies-and-supports/) (accessed January 7, 2020).
14. “Inclusive Education,” Alberta Education, [www.alberta.ca/inclusive-education.aspx](http://www.alberta.ca/inclusive-education.aspx) (accessed January 7, 2020).

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*Common Threads for Inclusive Education* is a publication of the Alberta Teachers' Association intended to support certificated teachers on their learning journey to inclusive education competency.

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