
21 ADVISING TIPS FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

1. REMEMBER THAT EVERY INDIVIDUAL IS DIFFERENT

Individuals on the spectrum can range from entirely non-verbal to highly intelligent. Every student on the spectrum has different strengths, weaknesses, and interests.

- It is probable (but not guaranteed) that a CP student who identifies as being on the spectrum has High Functioning Autism commonly referred to as Asperger's. Aspergers is defined as a developmental disorder characterized by impaired social skills, repetitive behaviors, and often, a narrow set of interests, but not involving delayed development of linguistic and cognitive abilities:
- Familiarize yourself with the student. Understand where they **excel** and where they struggle.
- Use the student's **strengths** to minimize the impact of their deficits. Students on the spectrum tend to have a wider disparity between areas of strength and weaknesses than "neurotypical" students.
- It is common for students on the spectrum to wish to be perceived as "neurotypical". There may be a great deal of stigma associated with the word "disability". This student may not wish to use accommodations or even associate with disabled services.

2. BE CLEAR, CONCRETE, AND SPECIFIC

Individuals on the spectrum may struggle with integration and executive functioning. This makes it difficult to organize work, thoughts, and use small details to create a big picture.

- Students on the spectrum may have problems with abstract and conceptual thinking. Provide step by step concrete directions if you think a student is lost or overwhelmed.
- Print out hard copies of important documents such as class schedules, weekly calendars, curriculum sheets, and flow charts
- Be aware that students on the spectrum may take sarcasm and/or figures of speech literally.
- Make backup copies of all material given to the student and keep it in their file.
- Use principles of Universal Design whenever possible. Communicate information and check for understanding in as many ways as possible. For more information visit the National Center on Universal Design: <http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines>.
- Remember that most individuals with autism have difficulty reading facial expressions and interpreting "body language". Due to this, students on the spectrum may lack appropriate eye-contact and misinterpret social cues.

3. MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Students on the spectrum can be more sensitive to the environment. Sensory overload may cause them to initiate anxiety-reducing behaviors also referred to as perseverations or "stims".

- Note if anything in the environment may be particularly distracting. Visually check to see if the student seems unusually anxious.
- In general your best bet is to minimize strong fragrances, flashing or overly bright lights, and uncomfortable office furniture.

- Remember that some of the student's strange behaviors may serve an anxiety-reducing purpose (Egs: hand-flapping, rocking, and humming). Seek to understand these behaviors not to "fix" them.
- Consider providing a squeezeball, fidget toy, or candy if this may calm the student.
- Eye contact may be more difficult for someone on the spectrum. If the student struggles with eye contact, remain comfortable and continue talking. You may also try diverting their focus to something you can both look at. (Eg: Computer screen)

4. CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

- Staple your business card to the folder containing all of the material you would like the student to have. Clearly explain what you can and can't do for the student.
- Create a Contact-Resource sheet for resources outside your expertise (example provided).
- Repetition is key: At the end of your session have the student repeat their plan of action back to you.
- Emphasize self-advocacy but realize that students on the spectrum may need more initial guidance advocating in high-pressure social settings. Refer the student to the Disability Resource Center if appropriate.
- Many students on the spectrum display extreme difficulty reading reactions of others. Try role-playing or scripting classroom situations to develop the student's awareness and empathy.
- If the student only responds with yes or no answers, try to ask open-ended questions, smile, and wait patiently for the student to respond.