

Teaching Strategies for Working with Students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS)

If this is your first experience having a student with Asperger's Syndrome (AS), you may be feeling nervous. This is normal. However, as you continue throughout the semester, you may come to realize that this student is just like the other students in the class. The only difference is that this student will have challenges with communication, social relationships, behavior and/or learning.

This can be a wonderful and unique experience! To assist you in this new learning experience, this information has been developed to inform you on how to work with students in your class who have AS. If you have any questions or comments, you may contact University Disability Support Services (UDSS), 766-6189 or e-mail udss@uwyo.edu. If you would like to discuss a classroom situation with another instructor who has had a student with AS, please contact UDSS for a referral.

According to Thomas Welch, Psy.D., in his presentation "What is Asperger's Syndrome, and How Does it Affect College Performance," "Asperger's Syndrome is considered a disorder at the higher end of the Autistic spectrum" and that "unlike an Autistic individual who lives in his own world, an Asperger's individual lives in our world - but in his own way" (Consortium presentation on September 19, 2008).

Behavioral Challenges: Although students with AS they tend to be rigid thinkers and experience difficulty adapting to change, they generally exhibit less severe symptoms than students with Autism. According to Teaching Students with Autism, a Resource Guide for Schools, students with AS may exhibit the following behaviors:

- Difficulty learning
- Language problems
- Insistence on sameness
- Impairment in social interaction
- Restricted range of interests
- Poor concentration
- Poor organizational skills
- Poor motor coordination
- Academic difficulties
- Emotional vulnerability
- Sensory sensitivities

Learning Challenges: Students with AS are highly intelligent, capable, and proficient in knowledge of facts. However, they may have academic struggles in the area of:

- Reading comprehension
- Problem solving
- Organizational skills
- Concept development
- Making inferences and judgments

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

CLASSROOM

- Control the amount of light in the classroom (perhaps have window(s) to the back of the student).
- Be aware of auditory distraction and take action, if possible, to limit it.
- Be aware that normal levels of auditory/visual input may be perceived by student as too much or too little.
- Limit visual clutter. Some doors with windows might be a distraction to the student viewing people passing by.
- Excessive light, sound, and smells can cause stress and even physical pain.
- Student may exhibit unusual motor behaviors that are characteristic of autistic persons, such as rocking and stereotyped finger or hand movements.

LECTURE

- Lessen eye gaze with the student.
- Provide a visual schedule of activities, be structured and predictable, and inform student if there will be a change in plans.
- Assign student to a group rather than allowing the student to choose own group.
- Provide concrete examples and hands-on activities.
- Break down complex tasks into smaller steps.
- Provide positive reinforcement to student and give specific correct and incorrect examples.
- Visual information may be more accessible than verbal information.
- Student's strengths may be in concrete thinking, rote memory, and visual-spatial relationships.
- Be concrete. Avoid idioms, irony or sarcasm.
- Allow time for the students to process the information. It may be necessary to talk more slowly or to pause between words.
- Break down verbal instructions into small steps.
- Extra clarification and specificity on assignments as needed.
- Be clear, firm, and gentle about behavior and apply the school rules with consistency.
- Be explicit in expected behavior and redirect incorrect behavior.

EXAMS

- Offer practice tests that will reflect the type of questions that will be asked on quizzes and exams.
- Provide a study guide in advance that reflects the format as well as the content of the exam.

ACCOMMODATIONS

If approved via a test accommodation letter from UDSS, allow accommodations such as:

- Extended time for in-class assignments or exams (time and one half to double time is a common recommendation).
- Allow testing in a quiet room. Be aware that distractions while taking the test in the classroom are due to students finishing early, getting up to turn in exams, and then packing up to leave.

Consider other ways for the student to demonstrate mastery of course material.

Assistive Technology: Students are encouraged to use the adaptive equipment in the UDSS Computer Lab, located in room 7, Knight Hall. They may contact UDSS for a brief orientation on what technology and software is available.

Discuss with the student the accommodations you may provide, as they may have their own preferences.

Treat the student as you would any other student, and keep your expectations of the coursework the same.

Adapted from: "Teaching Students with Autism: A Resource Guide for Schools." Ministry of Education, Special Programs Division, British Columbia. 24 Apr.2008, www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/docs/autism.pdf.