



Accommodating Students with Asperger's Disorder

Many students with Asperger's will also exhibit tics, obsessive-compulsiveness, executive dysfunction, and ADHD, even though they may not be formally diagnosed with those disorders, and educators should familiarize themselves with the strategies or tips for dealing with those conditions. The section on executive dysfunction is particularly important because of the organizational deficits and difficulties making transitions.

Some tips or strategies to consider after determining the student's needs:

- Use visual organizers for daily routine, and highlight any changes in routine. Consistent routine and structure reduces stress for the student and the organization and consistency of your classroom environment is one of the key factors in managing the student's deficits.
- As much as possible, try to stick to a structured routine. Wherever possible prepare the student for potential changes or transitions.
- Prepare the student for any changes in routine. Because students with Asperger's Disorder generally do not handle transitions well, extra verbal and visual cues may need to be employed in the classroom, as well as providing direct instruction in how to make a transition.
- Verbal skills tend to be a strength or relative strength, so whenever possible, use verbal cues that are short, direct, and concrete.
- Remember that students with Asperger's Disorder tend to interpret language very literally, so avoid slang or idiomatic speech. Students with Asperger's Disorder may also have difficulty interpreting tone and facial expressions, so a sarcastic "Oh, that was great!" may inadvertently positively reinforce an inappropriate behavior. And don't count on them understanding that you're trying to give them one of those "meaningful looks" that work so well with their non-Asperger's peers. If the student is doing something inappropriate, do not bother asking them why they are doing it. Tell them in clear, short statements what they should do.
- When presenting multi-step directions, pause between instructions on multi-step tasks and check for comprehension.
- Because abstract thinking is challenging, incorporate visual cues and graphics organizers for written expression tasks. Visual editing strips, like those described in the executive dysfunction section of this site, can help the student remember what to do and in what order.

- If the student appears to be getting agitated or headed for a "melt-down," it may be due to stress from the particular situation or frustration. Avoid situations that might produce "sensory overload" for the student.
- If the student is getting overwhelmed, help the student make a "graceful exit" to go to some safe place that you've agreed upon where they can relax and calm themselves for a while.
- Eye contact is difficult for many students with Asperger's Disorder, and on some level, it may be meaningless to them if they don't derive as much information from looking at you as their non-Asperger's peers do. If you do want them to look at you, rather than cueing or demanding eye contact, try holding a prop in your hand when you're speaking to the class. If you change props or what you're holding, the student will be more likely to look at you.
- Do not expect skills learned in one setting to generalize to another setting. Teach the skill and rehearse it in a variety of settings.
- Provide clear expectations and rules for behavior.
- Foster social skills by direct instruction and teach the student how to interact through social stories, modeling and role-playing.
- Because many students with Asperger's have handwriting deficits, allow extra time for handwritten work and explore the use of word processors.
- If the student engages in perseverative questioning that interferes with classroom instruction, you can try instructing the student to write the question down and that you will meet with him after class to answer his question. If that doesn't work, talk with the student, state that his questions are creating a problem for his peers and for you, and ask him what he thinks would work to help him not ask so many questions during class. You may wish to incorporate a private visual signal.
- Behavior modification plans may work well for some behaviors and some students, but it may engender some "robotic-like" or rigid behaviors.
- Be particularly sensitive to peer rejection and bullying. You may need to insure that there is added adult supervision in settings like the playground, in the cafeteria, on the school bus, and in the halls (if the students go from room to room on their own). Pre-plan with the student what she will say or do in particular situations if you expect that they will be difficult for her, then quickly review with her afterwards how her plan worked.
- Arrange for the student to get speech and language services in school to help address the pragmatics of communication and conversational social skills. Provide small-group training in social skills.
- The lament of the adult with Asperger's that his wife shouldn't have to hold up a sign to tell him how to respond points out what is actually a useful strategy, however, in working with young students with autism spectrum disorders: some research suggests that a combination of peer education/training and written text cues for social skills may improve the child's quality and quantity of successful peer interactions.