

autism at-a-glance

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Autism at-a-Glance
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Center on
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(CSESA)



Supporting Functional Communication in High School

This *Autism at-a-Glance* was designed to support high school staff and family members in understanding and improving the communication skills of adolescents on the autism spectrum. The content was developed to specifically target the needs of students who have more significant communication needs.

If you serve students who are able to communicate conversationally, please see our *Autism at-a-Glance* titled *Supporting Communication in High School*.

Autism at-a-Glance is designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents on the autism spectrum. *Autism at-a-Glance* provides a current summary of topics relevant to high school students on the autism spectrum as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

Students on the autism spectrum exhibit characteristic difficulties associated with communication. Deficits appear in three main areas: comprehension, expressive communication, and interacting with others.

Comprehension

Understanding verbal and non-verbal communication

Potential Areas of Difficulty Related to Comprehension

- **Speed of processing language.** Students may process comments, questions, and directions more slowly than would be expected for their academic or cognitive abilities or age.
- **Following directions.** Students may have difficulty following directions, especially multi-step directions, directions that are presented only verbally, and directions that are out of context.
- **Questions.** Students may struggle to understand and answer functional questions, even when they know the content or answer of the question.
- **Pronoun confusion.** Students may have trouble understanding pronouns, especially “I” and “you.”

What This Might Look Like in the Classroom

- Mrs. Clarendon tells Charlie to staple his papers together, hand in the papers, and sit down. Charlie staples the papers, but then sits down without handing the papers in.
- A peer asks Whitney “Do you have any pets?” Whitney says “I don’t know” even though she talks about her dog all of the time.
- Vincent has difficulty following 1-step directions if his teacher does not provide some type of gestural or visual prompt.



Expressive Communication

Using verbal and/or non-verbal means to convey a message

Potential Areas of Difficulty Related to Expressive Communication

- **Verbal language.** Students may have very limited or no verbal language, and may struggle to put together phrases or sentences.
- **Pronoun reversal.** Students may mix up pronouns in sentences, especially “you” and “I.”
- **Stereotyped or scripted speech.** Students may use certain words or phrases over and over, or use scripted phrases from TV shows or movies.
- **Echolalia.** Students may repeat verbatim words, phrases, or sentences that were just said to them or were said to them previously.
- **Nonverbal communication.** Students may have difficulty using appropriate tone of voice or body language. They may have monotone speech, have exaggerated intonation, or have an odd vocal quality.

What This Might Look Like in the Classroom

- Leo does not speak at all, but uses gestures and points to pictures to show what he wants.
- Tanner says “Do you need a break?” when he really means “I need a break.”
- Alexis regularly uses lines from TV shows and movies in her speech. For instance, every time she doesn’t want to do something, she says “I can’t be a princess,” a line from her favorite movie, *The Princess Diaries*.
- Gerald uses a high-pitched and sing-songy voice with a cartoon-like quality when he talks.

Interacting with Others

Using communication to collaborate or engage with others

Potential Areas of Difficulty Related to Interacting with Others

- **Initiating interactions.** Students may be less likely to initiate communication with others, such as greetings or asking questions.
- **Conversation.** Students are challenged by the give and take of simple conversation. They may have difficulties responding to questions or comments from others, or taking turns in conversation.
- **Reading non-verbal cues.** Students have difficulty interpreting facial expressions, gestures, and body language during interactions with others.

What This Might Look Like in the Classroom

- Every time Yusef starts a conversation, he says, “Hello, what is your name?” even if he already knows the person.
- Danny goes up to his classmate who is clearly upset and begins to talk about how excited he is for the truck rally this weekend, not picking up on the classmate’s mood.
- Kristy only initiates interactions to get her needs met (e.g., requesting), and rarely initiates for social purposes (e.g., greetings, commenting, conversation).
- Andre rarely engages in interactions with peers or staff, not out of disinterest, but because he has difficulty with initiations and responses.



There are numerous approaches you can use to support and encourage comprehension, expressive communication, and/or interaction in the high school environment. Some of these key strategies and examples include:

1 Visual Supports

Provide objects, gestures, pictures, or written cues to support comprehension and expressive communication in the classroom

- Use pictures or writing with verbal directions and questions to support understanding.
- Give cards with conversation starters, topics, or jokes to promote interaction during lunch or other times during the day.

2 Additional Processing Time

Build in extra time for support in processing and responding to directions or questions presented to the class.

- Make sure to pause for at least 5 seconds after giving a direction or asking a question

3 Opportunities for Communication

Arrange the environment in a way that encourages, and even necessitates communication

- On occasion, put away materials that are necessary for a familiar routine (e.g., worksheet) so the student has to communicate in order to get the materials.
- Embed times for casual conversation during the day, just as you would see students doing during the day, similar to what you may see during passing time between classes.
- Use topics of interest to the student during class to increase interactions.
- Offer students the opportunity to communicate a choice whenever possible.

4 Modeling

Demonstrate and identify appropriate use of communication and social skills

- Take short videos of other high school students (or your student) modeling appropriate communication and social skills and show the videos to your student.
- Use classroom staff or peers to model skills live (e.g., turn taking in conversation, initiating an interaction)

5 Peer Supports and Social Connections

Find other high school students that may be able to support the student with communication and social connections in class or around school

- Find clubs or sports teams for the student to join that align with his/her interests
- Arrange a lunch group with other high school students
- Start peer programs or have high school student interns in your classroom

5 Key Strategies for Supporting Communication



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Important Reminders

Slow Down, Support, and Simplify

Remember, high school environments are fast-paced and complex which often makes comprehension, communication and conversations more difficult for students on the autism spectrum. Think of strategies to slow the pace, minimize confusion, and reduce complexities in conversations, activities, and other situations.

- Provide information in small chunks – one step of a series of directions or one question at a time
- Think of ways to embed visual supports around the school environment—in the cafeteria, the media center, the gym, and more.

Provide Specific Positive and Constructive Feedback

Offer specific feedback to the student about their communication skills. General feedback, such as “good job” or “nice work in class,” does not provide enough information to reinforce specific target skills.

- “Nice job giving an answer to the question David asked you.”
- “I like how you said ‘hi’ to other students in the library.”

Resources

American Speech-Language Hearing Association

<http://www.asha.org/slp/clinical/autism-resources/>

Augmentative and Alternative Communication Resources

<http://www.asha.org/slp/clinical/aac/>

Communication Bill of Rights

http://www.asha.org/NJC/bill_of_rights.htm

Understanding Autism: A Guide for Secondary School Teachers

DVD

<http://www.researchautism.org/resources/teachersdvd.asp>

Brochure

<http://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/resources/understanding-autism-guide-secondary-school-teachers>

State Assistive Technology Resources

<http://resnaprojects.org/allcontacts/statewidecontacts.html>

*A Note About Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is a field that focuses on helping individuals augment or compensate for significant challenges in the area of communication using various systems or aids. The goal of AAC is to maximize effective communication for an individual. AAC systems/aids may be high-tech (e.g., applications on an iPad, speech-generating devices) or low-tech (e.g., picture symbols, communication boards, sign language). When considering different systems/aids, it is important to include someone with expertise in AAC.

School districts may have a person or team of people who are able to evaluate and support students who have limited verbal abilities and need alternative methods for communication. This team may consist of special educators, speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, or others. If you have a student who may benefit from AAC or uses some form of AAC, look for contacts in your district or in your local area to help support these students in maximizing their communication.