

# 20 TIPS FOR SCHOOL STAFF AND PARENTS

## *For Addressing the Needs of Children on the Autism Spectrum*

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### **TIP #1 LEARN HOW THEY THINK**

Get to know your students with autism before designing strategies for approaching and communicating with them. Get to know and understand how they think.

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### **TIP #2 PHYSICAL CONTACT**

Try to avoid conducting class activities that will require physical contact among students until you know how your students on the spectrum will react to physical contact.

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### **TIP #3 STRONG AROMAS AND LOUD NOISES**

We all have senses. Some say we have five while others may say seven yet either way the nose is known as our olfactory system. It's responsible for our sense of smell and some of us are a bit more sensitive here than others. Have you ever smelled something that was "sticky" or offensive to your nostrils? Strong perfume may be a problem for some people – even some not on the spectrum. Or it may not. Just be aware.

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### **TIP #4 CONSISTENCY**

People with autism rely on learning a routine and then having it remain consistent. A room with visual and physical consistency is ideal. To understand what a room devoid of visual and physical consistency is to a person with autism, just imagine a grocery store without any signs

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### **TIP #5 DEFINE THE END PRODUCT**

Be certain that your students understand what will represent the end of a task or activity.

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### **TIP #6 BE CAUTIOUS WITH METAPHORS**

Students on the spectrum often have difficulty with metaphors because they tend to take words literally.

Expressions most of us would instantly understand are confusing for many on the spectrum, such as: "Clam up," "You're way off base," "Slow down Tiger," "Hey, motor mouth," "Go jump in the lake," etc., etc., etc.

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**TIP#7 BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS ARE COMMUNICATION**

Regard inappropriate behavior as communication, not as a reflection on the student or the teacher. One educator was able to support a student who had been throwing tantrums by regarding the tantrums as a method of communication and she discovered that he only

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threw a tantrum when he didn't understand an assignment.

**TIP #8 BE CAUTIOUS WITH SARCASM**

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As with metaphors, people on the spectrum most likely will not understand sarcasm.

**TIP #9: DIFFICULTIES WITH THE SPOKEN WORD**

Some people on the spectrum have difficulty understanding the spoken word. Some also have difficulty communicating what they are thinking. People with autism can often learn better from what they can see or feel than what they hear. For someone with autism, being able to see and/or feel what they are trying to learn can be the difference between passing or failing a course in school. There are also many people who do not have autism who would do better in school if, in addition to hearing what the teacher wants them to know, they could also receive information through multisensory practices. In other words,

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multisensory approaches to teaching and learning can have benefits for all people, not just those on the spectrum. Try to accommodate all learners.

**TIP #10 ALLOW SUFFICIENT WAIT TIME, TIME FOR THOUGHT**

Students with autism, many of whom are high performing, often take longer to think

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through a question before responding. This can be if the question is posed verbally, or it can be simply because, like a computer, they have a lot of information stored in their brain and it can take longer for them to access it than the average person.

**TIP #11 ESTABLISH ROUTINES**

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Students with ASD can learn routines and then can become better than most of us at sticking to that routine.

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Also, people with autism often require routines for their own sense of security.

**TIP #12 ACCEPT LACK OF EYE CONTACT**

Many people on the spectrum are uncomfortable making eye contact. It could be wrong to say to a person with autism, as many of us might, "Look at me when I am talking to you."

**TIP #13 CREATE C.A.L.M:** Comfort, Affirm, Love, Model

When a student is losing control and getting emotionally upset, do you remain calm and model the attitude and tone of voice that you expect from the student? Do you avoid trying to communicate with the student about the issue before you have been successful in getting the child to calm down? (This is a good strategy with any person who is emotionally wrought.) Do you avoid threats, or physical contact (even that which is

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intended to be reassuring)?

**TIP #14 SOCIAL SKILLS**

Someone with autism may lack the basic social skills possessed even by people who are

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extremely shy. They may be reclusive and may not understand the common courtesies that most of us take for granted.

**Tip #15 ABILITY TO FOCUS IS A TWIN-EDGED SWORD**

People with autism can focus on what they are doing to such a degree that they can lose sight of obligations, appointments and everything going on around them to appoint

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beyond what might befall the most absent-minded of us. This can enable them to have great success accomplishing their task at hand, but it can also result in distracting them from obligations.

**TIP #16 EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS**

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The phrase "executive function" refers to a set of skills that underlie the capacity to plan ahead and meet goals, display self-control, follow multiple-step directions even when interrupted, and stay focused despite distractions, among others. People on the spectrum often have difficulty with executive functions.

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**TIP #17 STRONG ON DETAILS; NOT NECESSARILY ON GLOBAL PICTURE**

People on the spectrum often are strong on noticing details but can miss seeing the more global picture that many of us would grasp.

For an educator or parent what this can mean is that what seems obvious as the intent of a picture or written piece may be totally missed by someone on the spectrum. Once again, as stated before, we are sharing characteristics of many people on the spectrum, but these do not apply to ALL people on the spectrum. To know one person with autism is to know one person with autism.

**Tip #18 CHAOS AND CONFLICTING SOUNDS**

Noise or movement that we might not find at all bothersome can be like chaos to someone with autism.

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**TIP #19 THE CULTURE OF AUTISM**

View autism as a culture and encourage students and colleagues to do the same. If you were with someone from another country and neither of you spoke the other's language, mightn't you view it as an opportunity to explore and learn?

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**TIP #20 STRONG AVERSION TO CERTAIN FOODS**

Some people with autism have a strong aversion to certain foods. For example, there may be texture issues such that individuals will not like soft, mushy foods, slimy foods, or crunchy foods (one person with autism once described eating a slice of apple like "eating sweetened wood").

Just as all of us have food preferences, these may be more significant/severe with autistic people. They may "mono-eat"- preferring only one food over others or they may get into what occupational therapists call food "jags" where they want to eat the same food for each meal (e.g., being stuck on eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for breakfast, lunch, and dinner) or day after day. The appearance of foods can affect whether a food is tried or not (e.g., not wanting grill marks on a steak, bits of seasoning seen on a food, etc.) where they want only one thing meal after meal or day after day).

An autism trainer in France, speaking of her own son who is autistic, says, "I have a stepson, eight years old, with high functioning autism. There is a sausage that comes in two sizes. The name of the big sausage is Bullens hot dog, and the smaller sausage, Bullens Lager hot dog. My son had always had the smaller sausage, and it fit perfectly on the bun he would have with it. He went to a party where they served the larger of the two

sized sausages. He wouldn't eat it because it extended beyond the outer edges of the bun, and he needed it to be the same size.

Also, my son is very particular about foods. The meat has to be on the left side of the plate, the potatoes on the right side, for example. He is not comfortable going to school if his jacket is cold. It has to be warmed up.”

The introduction of new foods is a very common issue parents and teachers face on a regular basis. Brand issue or expectancy issues can occur with foods as well. For example, a child may eat McDonald's McNuggets, but not Chik-Fil-A Nuggets or Grilled Nuggets, or Burger King Nuggets, or store-bought Tyson Fun Dino Nuggets. Foods touching each other on a plate can be enough for some children to refuse to eat what they are served.

Tips: Introduce a food chart whereby the child is able to be rewarded for trying new foods or have trying new food days (New Food Thursday!)

Grandma's Rule: Try one bite of a new food before preferred food. My cousin used to talk about “No Thank You bites” with her kids.

Introduce a food work system where the child can see with a checklist how many bites of each food they take in a meal. Check off the required number of bites. Have the child's back-up preferred food at the ready if needed to fall back on. Some parents find they have to make separate meals for the person with ASD from the other family. At some point, stating “This is what we are having tonight. I am not making another meal.” is a way to leverage some motivation to eat. Don't be surprised if the child might opt not to eat the food, but usually kids will eat when they are hungry. There are some issues with the kids with ASD seeming to have differences in how they experience hunger (interoception issues), and they may be fine with skipping a meal at times. Introduce food purees into other foods. Consider visiting [www.thesneakychef.com](http://www.thesneakychef.com) to see some wonderful suggestions on this and recently a book was published by author, Missy Chase Lupine on the subject! Also, consider supplement with multi-vitamins and Ensure if needed. Most importantly, collaborate with your child pediatrician to make sure everyone is informed.

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## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST**

- A Guide for Parents (30 pages)
- 43 Strategies for School Staff and Parents: <https://tinyurl.com/mpp9kyju>