

Educational Identification of ASD & Implications for a Child's Individual Education Program

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a behaviorally defined neurodevelopmental disability. Neuro indicates that ASD is neurological, or involving the brain and the nervous system and developmental indicates that the disability alters the course of a child's development, meaning the pattern of growth across functional areas is atypical and/or uneven. The functional areas which are typically impacted by ASD include verbal and nonverbal communication, learning, sensory perceptiveness, flexibility in thoughts and actions and social understanding. Although there are commonalities and unique features of autism, every child, including those with autism, is an individual. The affects of ASD can range from mild to severe and there are differences in age of onset, severity and the presentation of symptoms.

The core symptoms of autism, as well as their severity, can vary considerably in each individual on the autism spectrum. The functional areas of *communication, social interaction, and repetitive behaviors and/or inflexibility* are viewed as the 'core' symptoms of autism. Autism affects the way a child perceives the world, making communication and social interaction difficult. It also results in repetitive behaviors, peculiar or intense interests or such a high need for routine that there is rigid and inflexible thinking patterns or actions. At this time there is no single known cause for ASD but researchers are continuing to analyze genetic, heredity, environment and medical components as contributing factors. There is no known cure for this set of conditions and although the characteristics typically last throughout a person's lifetime, they can change considerably over time and through intervention.

Communication Difficulties:

Children with autism often have an unusual pattern of language development from the early years. They may never develop verbal language, relying on visual symbols, sign or communicative devices to get their needs and wants met. They may use language in unusual ways, unable to combine words into meaningful sentences, speaking only in single words, or repeating the same phrase over and over. Some children are only mildly affected and may exhibit slight delays in language. These children may have advanced or precocious language and unusually large vocabularies, but have great difficulty sustaining a fluid integrated conversation, although able to carry on a monologue on a particular subject of interest. They may have difficulty understanding body language, tone of voice, sarcasm or figurative language. Facial expressions, movements, and gestures may not match what the child is trying to communicate.

Social Difficulties:

Children with autism are typically slower in learning to interpret what others are thinking and feeling. Subtle social cues, whether a smile, a wink, or a grimace, may have little meaning. Often a child with autism seems disconnected from those around them, their expression of attachment or enjoyment in another person may be seen as unusual or difficult to “read.” The ability to interpret gestures and facial expressions may also be limited, creating a social world where they are unable to predict or understand other people's actions. As a child with ASD navigates through what can be an overwhelming social world, they may have difficulty regulating their emotions, which may manifest in immature, disruptive or physically aggressive behavior to themselves or others.

Repetitive Behavior Difficulties:

Children with autism usually appear physically normal, with good muscle control and growth. Unusual behaviors observed may include odd repetitive motions, such as hand flapping, toe walking, jumping or pacing. Persistent, intense preoccupations are also common, which may be seen in an all-encompassing need to learn about vacuums or buses or a science topic. Difficulty with imaginative or more complex play schemes may also be observed resulting in inflexible, repetitive play such as lining objects in a row or pattern. Children with autism often need, and demand, absolute consistency in their environment. A slight change in routine may be extremely disturbing.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which provides legal guidance in the provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities, specifically includes an eligibility category for “Autism Spectrum Disorder” (ASD). This is an **educational identification** of ASD, which is based upon the definition of Autism in IDEA. This educational identification is not the same as a medical or clinical diagnosis and has different criteria for what constitutes an “Autism Spectrum Disorder”, employs different methods of evaluation and has different interventions, goals and outcomes.

As a parent of a student educationally identified as ASD, your child's educational programming will be based on the specific strengths as well as skill deficits identified through the special education evaluation process. You are a vital part of the team who made this decision and will continue to be an important team member as the Individual Education Program (IEP) is developed, implemented and monitored.

In supporting a student with autism, it is nearly always beneficial to employ a team approach as each team member brings a unique perspective and set of observations and skills, which are helpful in assisting with complex and variable needs. In addition to your child's special education teacher, related services staff, such as a speech language pathologist, an occupational or physical therapist or a school psychologist, may assist in providing services to your child. These supports may be direct services in a one to one or small group setting or indirect services aimed at consultation and problem solving on behalf of your child. Services can be provided either in the general education classroom or outside the general education classroom, taking into consideration the best environment to focus on the skills being addressed.

Your child's educational program will include curriculum that maximizes appropriate independence and emphasizes the development of skills in communication, social relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, vocational and self-determination skills. Environmental supports will facilitate your child's ability to understand social and learning expectations, predict activities, anticipate change and handle transitions. Specialized instruction provided through special education will be provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and will seek to support, but not supplant, instruction in the general education classroom.

If you have questions about your child's special education program, please contact Caryl Reinhardt, Autism Coordinator, or your child's case manager. We look forward to partnering with you and providing the best educational experience for your child