

Inclusive Programming for Students With Autism

Belinda W. Crisman

Although autism varies from one child to another, this inclusion program works for all.

When our district's director of special education asked if our school would become the district center for students with autism, little did I know how much I had to learn about this disability. Now, 10 years and 85 students later, I'm still learning. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 150 American children has some form of autism. Given this number, it is now critical for all school administrators to educate themselves about it. The complex thing about autism is that if you know one student with this disability, you only know one because students with autism are all so different. Despite the many distinctions of this disorder, we have learned that there are several key factors to creating a successful inclusion program.

A yellow diamond-shaped sign with a black border and the text "AUTISTIC CHILD" in bold black letters. The sign is mounted on a post and is set against a background of a road and greenery.

**AUTISTIC
CHILD**



Appropriate Placement. The experts support placing students with autism in a regular education setting, allowing them to learn from their peers and adapt accordingly (Wagner, 1998). At Boynton Elementary School, we offer a range of settings, the most restrictive being a self-contained classroom for intensive intervention. The goal for the self-contained classroom is to move students into the regular education classroom as soon as it is appropriate. We also offer a resource special education classroom where students may go for academic, social, or behavior support up to five times a day to take a break from the regular classroom.

Other options are the inclusion classroom, where the special education teacher works with the regular education teacher, or support by paraprofessionals in the regular education classroom. The goal is always to move these students to the regular education

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classroom. “If we isolate them, it’s like closing the door on their education,” says Lisa Badacour, a third-grade classroom teacher.

Teacher and Paraprofessional Selection. Teacher and paraprofessional selection is critical for the success of students with autism, especially the selection of the special education teacher. This must be someone who has a passion for working with these students because the physical, emotional, and professional demands can sometimes be overwhelming. Special education teachers are required to be advocates for students

with autism at all times. They must have the backing of their administrators or else they will feel like they are out on a limb by themselves.

In selecting regular education teachers, we ask for volunteers or recruit regular education teachers who have the necessary skills, are flexible, and are willing to learn. Strict disciplinarians will not work well. For paraprofessionals, it’s a good idea to hire people who have a passion for working with students with autism and are willing to receive the appropriate training.

Parental Involvement. The best thing for students with autism is for parents and schools to work as a team. It is important to listen to the parents and actively seek their input. Many times they know more about autism, particularly their child’s autism, than school employees. Disparaging remarks about parents and their parenting skills have no place in the school. Because parents often care very deeply about the education of their children, they may cross the line when it comes to involvement. If this happens, it is the principal’s responsibility to set the boundaries. Treating everyone—parents, students, and teachers—with respect should be the rule.

Vision and Belief. The school leadership team, with input from all stakeholders, should establish a vision and belief that all students can learn and that all students have the right to learn. It is up to the principal to communicate this vision to everyone involved.

Professional Learning. A program for students with autism cannot be successful without continuous professional learning. All staff members (i.e., special education teachers, regular education teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, receptionists, custodians, and food service workers) must be trained. If everyone in your building understands the needs of your students with autism, things will go much smoother. We have found the University of North Carolina’s TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-handicapped Children) training and Emory University’s Autism Center training to be very helpful.



Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are found in all cultures and across all socioeconomic groups with the ratio of boys to girls with ASD being 4-to-1. In the past 30 years the prevalence rate has skyrocketed, with recent estimates by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicating their presence in one out of every 150 children. Because the disorders are not rare, effective intervention is critical on a personal, familial, and societal level.

What Is Autism?

Autism is a neurological disorder that typically is diagnosed by the age of 3. The symptoms of autism involve three major areas of development and impact a child's abilities to:

- Engage in reciprocal social interactions with others;
- Communicate with others in developmentally appropriate ways; and
- Participate in a range of activities and behaviors typical of the child's age and stage of development.

One of the hallmarks of autism is that the characteristics vary significantly among different children with autism. No two children with autism are the same.

The impairment can range from relatively mild, resulting in a diagnosis within the spectrum of Asperger

Syndrome, to more severe, leading to a diagnosis of more classic autism. If a child has symptoms of either of these disorders, but does not meet the specific criteria of either, the diagnosis is called Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS).

What Is Asperger Syndrome?

Asperger Syndrome is a complex developmental disability marked by impairments in socialization, communication, cognition, and sensation. Like classic autism, Asperger Syndrome is a neurological disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. It is a lifelong disorder that carries with it considerable and long-term challenges. Common effects of the disorder include:

- Trouble understanding social cues and conversational language styles;
- An inflexible adherence to routine or ritual;
- Repetition of movements or words and phrases;
- Difficulties with fine-motor skills and sensory integration; and
- A persistent preoccupation with objects or narrowly focused topics of interest.

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Peer Support. Another important factor is training students about autism in a formal or informal setting. As you place students with autism in classes each year, make sure that you assign peer buddies, general classroom students who can provide them with nurture and support. We have found that general education students learn a great deal about accepting people with differences when they work beside students with autism. We have also found that regular education students become very protective. “Watching the growth of the autistic and regular education children as they become friends is unbelievable,” says Debbie Rogers, a regular education kindergarten teacher at Boynton. “I have watched the regular education students take care of the students with autism all the way through high school.”

Team Approach. It truly takes a village to educate these students. Administrators, teachers, speech therapists, occupational therapists, parents, paraprofessionals, peers, and other school staff members all have an important role to play. As mentioned earlier, education is the key to success. We have found that a well-trained secretary or cafeteria worker may be just the person you need to diffuse a particular situation.

Behavior Plans. Effective behavior plans for students with autism play a huge role in their success. Finding the appropriate motivators is like finding gold, but once the motivator is found, much progress can be made. Aggression, often related to this disability, must be targeted through positive intervention. Redirecting, treating aggressive students with respect and dignity, and providing space and time for calming are important. It is necessary to be flexible with out-of-school suspension because many times this is what the students actually want. Consider this quote from one of our parents: “Punishing students for being autistic is like punishing children in wheelchairs because they can’t walk.”

Sense of Humor. Working with autistic students can be extremely intense and laughter can be the antidote for burn-

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out. Students with autism can make your day when you ask if they are ready to roll, and they respond by rolling on the floor, or if you tell them to get on their work and they jump on top of their textbooks. Some of my best days as an administrator have been enjoying the interesting ways that students with autism interact and communicate.

Promising Results

I’m sure you’re asking if these suggestions really work. They do for my school. Ninety-one percent of our students with autism scored at or above grade level on our state assessment in reading, and 79 percent in math. Do they distract from our regular education students’ education? Last year in our inclusive classrooms, 98 percent of our students were at or above grade level on our state assessment in reading and 99 percent in math.

I would like to close by sharing with you the thoughts of two teachers who are experienced with working with autistic students. “Students with autism are smart, funny, and very capable individuals. They need to feel welcomed and reassured that they are doing everything the right way,” says Annie Hanna, a special education teacher who has worked with students with autism for 11 years. “Once they feel comfortable in the school environment, there is no limit to their potential.”

“Kids with autism are just like other kids, and they want the same things as other kids, too—love, respect, friends, security, and understanding,” adds Brittney Gann, a fourth-grade teacher. “When the regular education teacher invites a student with autism into the community of her classroom with open arms and excitement, the typical peers

in the classroom will innately follow her example and treat the student with autism just as the teacher does—as a unique individual who is full of potential, has a lot to offer, and who deserves the same respect as everyone else.” 

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References

- Long, C. (2008, February). Autism going mainstream. *NEA Today*, 37-39.
Wagner, S. (1998). *Inclusive programming for elementary students with autism*. Atlanta, GA: Emory Autism Resource Center.

WEB RESOURCES

Opportunities for professional learning and tools for success with students with autism can be found at the Emory University Autism Center’s Web site. www.psychiatry.emory.edu/PROGRAMS/autism/Monarch

The Web site of the University of Florida’s Center for Autism and Related Disabilities offers visuals and interactive activities that are useful for students with autism.

www.card.ufl.edu/visual.htm#imgmap

The Web sites of the Organization for Autism Research (www.researchautism.org), Autism Society of America (www.autism-society.org), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Information Center (www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.htm), and National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/autism/complete-publication.shtml) are just a few of the sites that provide valuable information about autism spectrum disorders.

