

16. Working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Welcome to the Inclusive Education course.

In this tutorial, we focus on how to help students with Autism Spectrum Disorder succeed in mainstream education.

This module deals with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in mainstream education.

It consists of three chapters:

- The characteristics often associated with autism
- The importance of identifying students with Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Challenges in teaching a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder and some strategies for teaching students with autism

Autism is a spectrum of many different behaviours. No two children on the spectrum are alike. It is a developmental disability.

Characteristics often associated with autism are

- significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction
- engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements,
- resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines,
- and unusual responses to sensory experiences.

It is important to identify students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the classroom.

If a student is not developing at the same rate as the peers, the teacher can start collecting information on the student, use stages learning materials and other evidence to support concerns.

The teacher should communicate this with parents and transmit the information about concerns to the school psychologist and the special education teacher.

Together with the parents, the team will make a comprehensive evaluation. Social skills, communication skills and restricted interests and repetitive behaviors should be assessed because these are hallmarks of an autism spectrum disorder.

Together with the parents, the team will prepare a plan of action taking into account the strengths and concerns of the student and provide support to address the individual needs of the student.

What are the main challenges in teaching a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder and strategies to change the environment to meet the needs of the student with autism.

Most students with autism need more time to complete a task, gather materials, and move from one task to another.

Any change in the environment of a student with autism can increase anxiety, trigger challenging behaviors, or aggression.

The teacher should:

- try to ensure that events are consistent with the daily schedule and avoid abrupt changes;
- warn the student about unexpected changes as early as possible;
- create a visual schedule of the day timeline that includes the daily activities of the student;
- monitor sections of the daily schedule of classes and activities and restructure as needed;
- make sure the student with autism understands that sometimes planned activities can be changed, cancelled, or postponed. Failure to understand this relationship is the cause of many conflicts, misunderstandings, and escalating challenging behaviors.

Students with autism have difficulty understanding abstract concepts, interpreting facial expressions, or specifying their own and others' feelings.

The teacher should:

- keep communication language simple and concise, speak slowly and at an appropriate pace;
- be clear and precise when giving instructions
- find an opportunity to praise the student for a job well done or good behaviour;
- also praise the student for attempting a task as trying is part of success;
- be precise in praise so that the student knows exactly what he is praised for;
- not express disapproval if the student does not try or does not do the task correctly.

The parents of a student with autism are the best source of information about the student.

- the parents provide the teacher with information about the behaviour of the student and daily activities;
- meetings with parents should begin before the start of the school year
- it is important to establish a mutual routine and schedule regular meetings throughout the school year;
- keep a diary of communication with parents to ensure daily exchange of information.

Adequate classroom preparation is key to making a student with autism spectrum disorder feel comfortable in the classroom.

By learning about the specific sensitivities and individual characteristics of the student with autism, the teacher has the information to organize the classroom of that student.

Students with autism have many difficulties in their relationships with others which make it extremely difficult for them to make friends. With the right help, these students can interact with their peers and establish mutually enjoyable and lasting relationships.

The teacher should

- support peer relationships. This is a very important part of working with a student with autism in school;
- not only focus on academic achievement but also focus on relationships. Choose sensitive, empathetic students who can model appropriate social behaviour and protect a student with autism from teasing or bullying;

A mainstream school is an extremely stressful environment for a student with autism.

Often trivial academic and social situations can trigger challenging behaviour, tension and aggression.

When difficult behaviour occurs, the teacher should:

- always make observations of the environment and events and analyse the situation that could be the cause of the escalation of the behaviour. This will make it possible to avoid a similar problem in the future;
- help the student with autism to deal with his emotions, to teach him how to express his needs and desires in an appropriate way. This will allow the teacher to model difficult behaviour and prevent it from happening again.

The attitude of the teacher towards the student with autism is the key to being effective in teaching and in dealing with difficult behaviour.

Assets of a teacher working with a student with autism are:

- authenticity,
- acceptance,
- flexibility,
- attitude,
- believe in the student with autism,
- respect the fact that the student is trying his best in spite of the enormous difficulties,
- assume good intentions on the part of the student with autism and be supportive,
- approach supervisors and express the need for further education on autism.

In summary

Inclusion of students with autism in mainstream education can contribute to minimize stigma against autism while the students in the same classroom will learn how to work with one another.

Research has shown that students with autism who are in inclusive classrooms demonstrate better cognitive and adaptive characteristics (Rattaz et al., 2019, p. 464).

In inclusive education, the students with autism are able to observe and practise interacting with their peers, and their peers are more likely to respond in a socially appropriate way (Vivanti et al., 2019).