

Bright Kids on the Autism Spectrum: Making the Most of Academic Strengths in Students with ASD

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Plan for today's talk

- ▶ Research on Gifted & ASD
- ▶ Two lenses for problem-solving
- ▶ Specifics on:
 - Classroom Participation Problems
 - Homework Problems

What lens should we use?

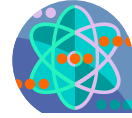


Will we find what we expect?
Which lens provides the most accurate view?
Which set of tools works to help the problem?

Overexcitabilities

- ▶ Heightened intensity and complexity in 5 areas

- Psychomotor
- Sensual
- Imaginational
- Intellectual
- Emotional



- ▶ An abundance of energy
- ▶ Sensitivity of reception
- ▶ Information channels

Psychomotor Overexcitability

- ▶ Surplus of energy
 - Need for less sleep/ pressure for motion
 - Animated gestures and or rapid speech
 - Marked enthusiasm
 - Self-imposed tasks & organizing
- ▶ Nervousness
 - Tics and Nail-biting
 - Competitiveness and workaholism
 - Impulsive behavior, compulsive chatter

Sensual Overexcitability

- ▶ Heightened sensory pleasures in visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or oral experience
 - Sensation-seeking or avoidance
 - Aesthetics
 - Focus on visual/clothes/appearance
- ▶ Sensual outlets for inner tension
 - Self-medicating/soothing
 - Seeking the limelight

Imaginational Overexcitabilities

- ▶ Free play of the imagination
 - Frequent distraction & daydreaming
 - Expressive imagery and metaphor
 - Invention
 - Fantasy
 - Animistic thinking
 - Dramatic perceptions and actions

Intellectual Overexcitabilities

- ▶ Intensified and accelerated activity of the mind
 - Curiosity & probing questions
 - Concentration
 - Problem solving
 - Theoretical thinking
 - Avid reading

Emotional Overexcitabilities

- ▶ Extremes of feeling
- ▶ Strong affective memory
- ▶ Inhibition, timidity, shyness
- ▶ Concern with death, depression, suicidal moods
- ▶ Concern for others and relationships
- ▶ Somatic expressions of anxieties, guilt

Research on Overexcitabilities

- ▶ The OE which most distinguish gifted samples are
 - Intellectual
 - Imaginational
 - Emotional
- ▶ "Although there is still only anecdotal evidence, **high Psychomotor OE**, in combination with other characteristics of giftedness, may suggest the presence of a learning disability or ADHD in gifted students. Baum and Owen (1988) found that gifted students with learning disabilities were typically the most disruptive students in their classes. Additionally, Eisenberg and Epstein (1981) found that gifted children with disabilities understand faster, ask more questions, hurry through math, and may be terribly disruptive."

Tieso, 2007

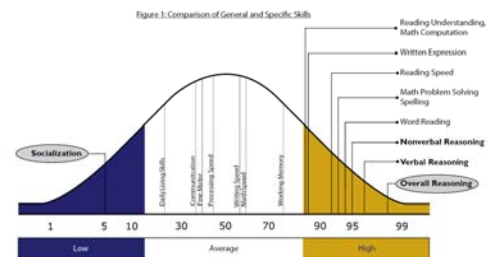
Research on Gifted Students with ASD Belin-Blank Center in IA

[Profoundly Gifted Girls and Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Psychometric Case Study Comparison](#)

[Parent, Teacher, and Self Perceptions of Psychosocial Functioning in Intellectually Gifted Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)

[Comparison of cognitive, psychosocial, and adaptive behavior profiles among gifted children with and without Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)

Cognitive, academic, & adaptive functioning profile



Some points to consider...

- ▶ Adaptive behavior and executive functioning can reveal important distinctions between gifted and gifted with ASD.
- ▶ Parent reports resulted in clinically elevated scores on the **Atypicality**, **Attention Problems**, **Depression**, **Hyperactivity**, **Withdrawal**, **Activities of Daily Living**, **Adaptability**, and **Social Skills** subscales,
- ▶ Teacher reports resulted in clinically elevated scores on the **Atypicality**, **Depression**, **Withdrawal**, and **Adaptability** subscales.
- ▶ Self-report scores were in the average range.
- ▶ Parents and teachers of adolescents reported greater adaptability and fewer symptoms of atypicality than parents and teachers of children.

What does this all mean?

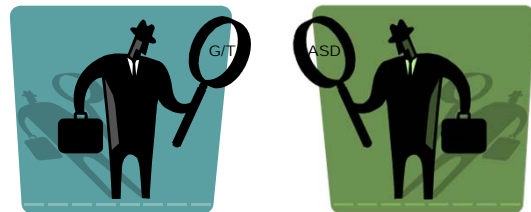
1. Results of the current study demonstrate that statistically significant differences exist between gifted youth with and without ASD in the areas of processing speed, adaptive functioning, psychosocial/behavioral functioning, and social skills, despite equivalent verbal and nonverbal intellectual functioning.
2. Our sample of gifted students with ASD exhibited **extremely large discrepancies** in their cognitive, academic, adaptive functioning, and psychosocial profiles
3. These discrepancies are confusing to the child/adolescent as well as to those who work and live with him/her (e.g., why are some things so easy and others so hard?)

What does this all mean?

3. Verbal and nonverbal reasoning skills are **typically much stronger** than are working memory and processing speed skills
4. These cognitive discrepancies can, and often do, affect academic functioning
5. Psychosocial profiles are often consistent for parents / teachers
6. Teachers may not necessarily observe educational problems
7. Students self-perceptions are **often** not consistent with parent/teacher perceptions

<http://research.education.uiowa.edu/belinblank/clinic/pif.pdf>

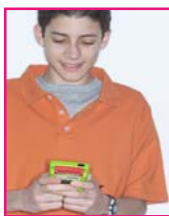
Two lens with which to view behaviors



Which set of tools works to help the problem?

Influences on Behavior

In order to change a behavior, we must first understand:



Learner

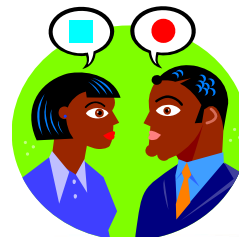


Situation



Behavior

Learner Characteristics



Can be viewed as positive or negative

Individual "Picture" of ASD

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Understanding the student

How are the **characteristics of ASD** expressed in the student?

- Sensory behaviors? Repetitive behaviors? Routines?
- Executive Function? Theory of Mind? Special interests? Literal Thinking?

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Executive Function

- Allows an individual to keep a problem solving set for the attainment of a future goal.
- Recommendations:
 - Direct training for skill deficits
 - Visual cues to accompany auditory messages
 - Provide a model of acceptable assignments
 - Consistent structure and schedule
 - Support effective time use with assignment books, timelines

Theory of Mind

- Acknowledging the possibility that a different perspective could exist
- Taking the perspective of another
 - Can be improved with training
 - Hurlburt, Happe, & Frith, 1994
 - Use interests to practice

Other issues to address

- Literal thinking
 - Avoid idioms or explain them
 - Check for comprehension
 - Use written or visual cues
- Interests/Obsessions
 - Use in motivating schoolwork, if appropriate
 - If one is asking the child to repress, provide "down" time to "indulge"
 - Use to build organization, written, or research skills


Understanding the student

How are the **characteristics of G&T** expressed in the student?

- Overexcitabilities? Frustration? Organizational problems? Curiosity?


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Understanding the student




What are the student's strengths and weaknesses?
 What does s/he do well? And
 What is difficult for him/her?

What are the student's preferences and interests?
 What activities does s/he like and dislike?



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Understanding the Situation



Where is the student?
 Consider environmental/sensory factors.


What time of day?
 The student may be tired, hungry, or distracted at certain points in the schedule.

What are the behavioral expectations?
 Is it time to work or play?
 Is the student interacting with a group or working independently?

What happened before and after the behavior?

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Understanding The Situation



A-B-C MODEL:
 understanding how situational events can contribute to problematic behavior

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    graph LR
      A[Antecedents] --> B[Behavior]
      B --> C[Consequences]
    
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The Antecedents are the events that occur **BEFORE** the behavior occurs

The Consequences are the events that occur **AFTER** the behavior occurs

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Using The A-B-C Model to Change Behavior




A: Change the Antecedents to **prevent** the problematic behavior from occurring

B: Teach the student appropriate, alternative Behaviors that satisfy the motivation


C: Change the Consequences by not reinforcing the problematic behavior and **increasing reinforcement** for the appropriate alternative behavior

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G&T Interventions that focus on Changing the Antecedent



- ▶ **Adapting curriculum**
 - Finding appropriate instructional level
 - Adjusting amount of practice
- ▶ **Giving choices**
 - Timing and order of work
 - Type of learning product




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Recognizing the motivation behind a behavior is a necessary and important step of the A-B-C model used to successfully change behavior.


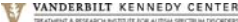
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Motivations of Problematic Behavior (ASD)




There are **four** primary motivations that underlie behavior:

- The desire for social **attention**
- The desire to obtain a **preferred item** or **activity**
- The desire to **avoid** or **escape** from an activity or demand
- The desire for **sensory stimulation**






Motivations of Problematic Behavior (G&T)



There are other motivations or needs that could underlie behavior:

- The desire for **complexity**
- The desire to **achieve a goal/complete a task**
- The desire for **information**
- The need to be **right**

ASD Interventions that Teach Appropriate Alternative Behaviors



- ▶ Identify desired alternative behavior
- ▶ Teach new skills
- ▶ Prompt appropriate behavior
- ▶ Reinforce positive behavior





G&T Interventions that Teach Appropriate Alternative Behaviors




- ▶ Clarify values
- ▶ Identify actions that match
- ▶ Connect choices with consequences
- ▶ Thought experiments





ASD Interventions that Focus on Changing the Consequence



Make the behavior ineffective.



How To Make Behavior Ineffective For Satisfying The Motivation (ASD)



Motivation	Response
▶ Attention	▶ Ignore the behavior
▶ Desire to obtain an item	▶ Eliminate access to item
▶ Stimulation or "just fun"	▶ Redirecting the behavior
▶ Escape or avoidance	▶ Do not allow the child to escape
▶ If you don't know ...	▶ Continue until the child is doing something you can reward. Ask a colleague to observe to help identify the function.



G&T Interventions that Focus on Changing the Consequence




Meet the motivational need in other ways.

How To Make Behavior Ineffective For Satisfying The Motivation (G&T)



Motivation	Response
▶ Complexity	▶ Increase complexity of work
▶ Achieve Goal Complete A Task	▶ Provide open-ended time
▶ Information	▶ Provide opportunity for self-study
▶ Right	▶ Don't concede argument until conducted kindly
	▶ Choice on right/friends



Modifications: OUR Attitudes

Behavior is rule-governed.

- ▶ Ask yourself, "What is the child's sense of what is happening?"
- ▶ How can the rules be communicated clearly and consistently?

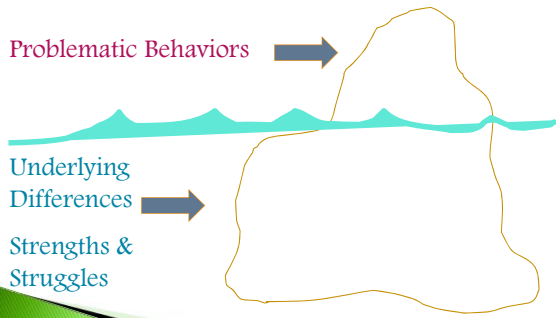


Modifications: OUR Attitudes

"Every human being has a need to be effective, competent, and independent, to understand the world and to act with skill"

- —Diane Twachtman-Cullen, Ph. D. CCC/SLP
- ▶ Assume competence!
- ▶ When you see "incompetence" think about what skill gaps, perceptions, may be at work?
- ▶ What scaffolding could support success?

Potential Problem Areas



Adapted from Division TEACCH; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Overall recommendations: Academics

- Offer books in area of interest (diverse genres)
- Student pairing in areas of interest
- Provide challenge but may need to adjust rate of exposure / amount of work given
- Limit timed tests (math facts)
- Consider computation plus reasoning

The Center for the Study of Exceptional Children, International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development

Nurturing Potential Inspiring Excellence

Overall recommendations: Processing speed

- Allow time to respond
- Provide extended time on tests
- Avoid timed tests
- Emphasize quality over quantity
- Make available outlines / notes

The Cecelia Baker St. Jacques St. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development *Nurturing Potential Inspiring Excellence*

Overall recommendations: Writing/fine-motor

- Allow most comfortable writing style
- Provide copies of class notes
- Allow large graph paper for math
- Allow writing in test booklet
- Consider assistive technology
- Allow some writing in area of special interest

The Cecelia Baker St. Jacques St. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development *Nurturing Potential Inspiring Excellence*

Overall recommendations: Social skills

- Offer specific suggestions for relating to others
- Look for multiple peer groups
- Introduce to peers with similar interests
- Develop a cue to help regain focus
- Lunch bunch or peer mentor
- Social stories
- Appropriate scripts

The Cecelia Baker St. Jacques St. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development *Nurturing Potential Inspiring Excellence*

Overall recommendations: Language/communication

- Feedback in conversations
- Review teasing / humor issues
 - (bullying, misunderstood communication)
- Praise efforts
- Instructions – straightforward and direct


The Cecelia Baker St. Jacques St. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development *Nurturing Potential Inspiring Excellence*

Overall recommendations: Behavior

- Behavioral problem emergence = distress
 - Allow safe place
- Warnings about transitions
- Structure and planning
 - Posted schedule
- Sensory issues
 - Allow “escape plan”
 - Reduce sensory stimulating items in room

The Cecelia Baker St. Jacques St. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development *Nurturing Potential Inspiring Excellence*

What lens should we use?



Which set of tools works to help the problem?

The Cecelia Baker St. Jacques St. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development *Nurturing Potential Inspiring Excellence*

Classroom Participation Problems

1. Answering Questions
2. Staying in Seat
3. Class work
4. Group Work/Projects

Answering Questions

► Issues

- Intellectual over-excitability
- Love to know & SHOW they know
- Enjoy interaction with teacher/adult
- Forget others may need more time/practice
- Impulse control an issue

Answering Questions

► Preventative measures

- Validate their feelings of excitement about learning
- Explain needs of classmates
- Develop (secret?) signals between student & teacher
 - "I know you know & I'm proud of you for waiting"
 - "I'm glad you know, please answer"
 - "I know, I know!"
- Set times for interaction with teacher
- Provide opportunities for sharing knowledge with class
- Self-prompt of hand over mouth!

Class work

► Issues

- Avoidance (skill gaps?)
- Waiting until the last-minute to do (difficulty factor)
- Incomplete due to distractions
- Doing quickly, sloppily, slap-dash
- Too simple

Class work

► Preventative measures

- Determine whether strengths or weaknesses are interfering with success
- Reward immediate and consistent work habits
- Compete against self for complete/neat
- Earn special interest/research project time
- Match the practice level to the child's independent level
- Adjust amount of practice (5 hardest first)

Staying in Seat

► Issues

- Psychomotor over-excitability
- Finish work quickly
- Curious about others/classroom activities
- Impulse control an issue
- Avoidance

Staying in Seat

- ▶ **Preventative measures**
 - Plan opportunities for sanctioned movement
 - Develop menu of “Things to do when you are done”
 - Earn extra center time
 - Visual supports: (Limited # of get-up passes)
 - Self-monitoring of in-seat behavior!

Group work/projects

- ▶ **Issues**
 - Trusting others for quality of work
 - Communication is key
 - Requires flexibility of thought
 - Cognitive load managing social and academic demands
 - Lack of control over others
 - Frequently resolved with either
 - Take-over
 - Total withdrawal

Group work/projects

- ▶ **Preventative measures**
 - Rubrics for group & individual grades
 - Assigned roles to promote communication
 - Assigned sections or roles for final product
 - Directly identify strengths and weaknesses of group members
 - Closer teacher supervision of project process to solve problems early

Group work/projects

- ▶ **Intervention measures**
 - Remind student of limited role/responsibility
 - Place project in perspective
 - Concrete Approach to Compromise
 - Sketch/act out/write down positions
 - Absolute best (my way), present plan, and absolute worst (their way) on continuum
 - Notice plusses
 - Identify areas of discrepancy
 - Identify reasons for discrepancy
 - Identify what can be changed
 - Look for compromises that can be made

Homework Problems

1. Avoidance
2. Too Fast/Messy/Slapdash
3. Losing it/Forgetting to turn it in
4. Last-Minute Projects

Homework Avoidance

- ▶ **Issues**
 - Attention
 - Fade as time lengthens
 - Reward starting with attention
 - Genuine need for more supports
 - Organizational supports
 - Product options
 - Perfectionism/Fear of mistakes
 - Offer options of multiple drafts
 - Get it done and then fix it
 - Co-set level of acceptable mistakes

Too Fast/Messy/Slapdash

► Issues

- Genuine muscle control/motor planning
- Thinking faster than s/he can write
- Equating fast with smart
- Just getting done so s/he can do what s/he wants to do

Too Fast/Messy/Slapdash

► Intervention/Prevention

- OT evaluation/modifications
- Technological alternatives
- Contest between self-check & parental check for completeness and accuracy
- Some things are ok to do "good enough"; some things deserve our "best"
- Control access to rewarding activity; contingent on homework success

Losing it/Forgetting to turn it in

- "Absent-minded professor"
- **Addressing the Issues**
 - Routine for checking with supports
 - Technology
 - Faded over time
 - Self-developed "mouse-trap" reminders
 - Natural consequences/rewards

Last-Minute Projects

► Issues

- Procrastination
- Perfectionism
- Unrealistic goals
- Unrealistic sense of time/effort involved

Last-Minute Projects

► Addressing the issues

- Use calendar for planning-work backwards
- More concrete approaches to time/task (e.g., fraction manipulatives)
- Make contracts with rewards for intermediate steps
- Ask for/use rubric to adjust plans
- Time predicted/actual data chart

Web:

<http://www.sengifted.org/> Social & Emotional Needs of Gifted

<http://www.freespirit.com> “Free Spirit Publishing puts out an award-winning list of books and other learning materials for children and teens, parents, educators, counselors, and everyone else who cares about kids. “

<http://www.giftedbooks.com/index.asp> **Great Potential Press** books and other learning materials focused on giftedness

<http://www.sylviarimm.com/> Dr. Sylvia Rimm is a child psychologist who directs Sylvia Rimm's Family Achievement Clinic, Inc., in Cleveland, Ohio, and Hartland, Wisconsin, and is a clinical professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. She has authored many articles and books, including *How to Parent So Children Will Learn*, *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades--And What You Can Do About It*, *Raising Preschoolers*, and *See Jane Win®*.”

<http://aspergerwomenassociation.com/index.html> The AWA is dedicated to the lifestyles and support of Women and Girls with Asperger's and Autism.

<http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/parents/parentrp.html> “The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented is funded by the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act.

<http://www.education.uiowa.edu/belinblank/> The Belin-Blank Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development empowers and serves the gifted community through exemplary leadership in programs, research, and advocacy.

<http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/default.aspx> Resources and self-evaluations to locate and increase your happiness

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When Gifted Kids Don't Have All the Answers. Jim Delisle and Judy Galbraith. Free Spirit Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades: And What You Can Do About It (3rd Edition), Rimm, S. Scottsdale: Great Potential Press.

The Optimistic Child. M. P. Sellinger

Bringing Up Parents: The Teenager's Handbook by Alex J. Packer, Ph.D.
Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

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Living With Autism In College

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

One in 166 children has autism, compared to 1 in 2,500 a decade ago

Students with autism-related disorders may have trouble making friends

Expert: Students need to be their own advocates

Students should ask if the school has an autism organization

(AP) -- When Dan Hackett started college, he didn't make the grades he knew he could.



Hackett, who has Asperger's syndrome, found at the Community College of Allegheny County in Pittsburgh that some of his symptoms were holding him back. He had difficulty organizing his time and managing assignments.

"I always knew I could do better," said Hackett.

His parents tried to help, but he wasn't comfortable with them intervening at college. He was relieved to discover Achieving in Higher Education with Autism/Developmental Disabilities, a group that helps college students like him.

Colleges are aware that that students with autism-like disorders face new challenges on campus.

After contracting with AHEADDD, Hackett's grade point average increased from 1.5 to 3.6. "They kept me on track," says the now 21-year-old political science major. "They helped me manage my time."

Many students with Asperger's or other autism-like disorders face new challenges in a college setting. The syndrome hampers communication and social skills, so along with difficulties staying on top of their studies, these students may struggle with making friends and living more independently. They also may be more reluctant to ask for help.

It's a problem colleges and universities are "very aware" of as the first big wave of children with diagnosed autism-related disorders moves beyond high school, says Gwendolyn Dungy, executive director of NASPA, a Washington-based organization of student affairs administrators. "We've been very interested in it and finding out how ready colleges are for these students," she said. "We want to establish a climate for success."

While higher education institutions usually make accommodations for students with disabilities, the law does not require them to provide the extent of services that students receive in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Living With Autism In College

College students must become their own advocates, a change that can take them and their families by surprise, said Donna Martinez, executive director of George Washington University's Heath Resource Center, an online clearinghouse for students with disabilities. "It's night and day" from high school, she said. "It's a whole different world."

Colleges are trying to educate faculty and staff about autism-related disorders and gauge how much services will cost, said Dungy, who organized a seminar on these questions at her association's annual conference in March. Most colleges already provide services to students with disabilities or special needs.

For decades, only children with severe language and social impairments received the autism diagnosis. In the 1990s, the autism umbrella expanded, and autism is now shorthand for a group of milder, related conditions, known as "autism spectrum disorders." One in 166 children is now diagnosed with autism, compared to 1 in 2,500 a decade ago. There has been a corresponding surge in special education services for autistic children in elementary and high schools.

"More and more of these people who were identified (in the 1990s) could be headed to college," said Marjorie Solomon, who studies high-functioning children with autism disorders at the University of California Davis' M.I.N.D. Institute.

One college that has added services for such students is Marshall University, home to the West Virginia Autism Training Center. Through its College Program for Students with Asperger's Syndrome, graduate students help autistic students manage class assignments and develop social and living skills. The program fields about 10 calls a week from parents of prospective students, said Barbara Becker-Cottrill, director of the training center. "The parents are saying, 'Wow, my student has the grades and there's a place that will provide the appropriate support for him or her?'" she said. Students pay \$3,200 per semester to enroll in Marshall's program. Advisers may speak with them several times a day, have weekly contact with their professors and help find them social activities. They might give guidance on dorm living or cafeteria food.

"Most classes are 50 minutes long, two to three times a day," noted program coordinator Marc Ellison. "The rest of the time, you're navigating the college community. My advice to students is to realize the least amount of time you spend in college is in the classroom."

Families looking for the right college for autistic kids should ask whether a school has a counselor who specializes in autism, if professors receive training about it, and what academic accommodations, such as additional time for taking tests, can be made, experts said. Students also should inquire about social opportunities: Does the school have an autism organization for students? Would the university help find a peer mentor?

Living With Autism In College

Peter Breslin of South Salem, New York, knew his son, Jason, could handle college academics, but he worried about the rest of the experience. The center at Marshall has made all the difference, Breslin said, even though Jason doesn't always think to contact it himself.

"They have to seek him out," said Breslin. "He thinks he could do it without going to the center. But he really does need them."

Jason Breslin, 20, a music performance major, says, "They have all been very helpful and supportive of me. I tried a semester without going to the center and ended up with very low grades because of late assignments or no assignments turned in."

The Organization for Autism Research, a nationwide group, is creating a line of videos designed to educate college staff. The first is aimed at professors; a second, in the works, will be geared to resident assistants.

AHEAD, the Pittsburgh-based organization, recently opened offices in Dallas, Washington and Albany, New York. It charges between \$4,200 and \$5,700 per semester for help with all aspects of college life.

"We start with academics," says founder Carolyn Komich Hare. "If our students don't do well academically then they're not around to deal with the big issues."

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Classmates and Asperger Syndrome

By Dan Coulter

I've heard it too often. The teasing and rejection that many children with Asperger Syndrome face in school from classmates who don't understand why they act different. The frustration and impatience from teachers who assume that these students are simply being disrespectful, stubborn, or lazy.

I've also often heard about how much things have improved for children with Asperger Syndrome when teachers and classmates learn about AS.

Parents who were concerned that they'd make things worse for their children if they disclosed the facts, have told me how those disclosures made things better.

If you're the parent of a child with AS worried about what will happen if other students find out, here's a thought: they already know.

They know they have a classmate who has different and difficult behaviors. But they don't realize the reasons. And the reasons they imagine are much worse than the facts.

So children who have AS are routinely misunderstood by unprepared teachers and classmates. Their school lives can be torture. They're friendless and under constant stress. No matter how hard they try, they can't make things better. Often, they don't tell parents the worst of it. From shame, or because they stop believing anything can be done for them.

Disclosure may not be the best approach in every situation, but I'd urge parents to consider it carefully before ruling it out. Again, I've heard stories of dramatic improvement from parents who've chosen to share information about their children's condition with school staff and classmates. Children making real progress with help from patient teachers. Children making friends for the first time and being invited to parties. Children being protected from bullying by other students. Children leading class sessions on topics of special interest or tutoring other students. Children feeling like they belong.

I recently heard from a father who said, in addition to the many other benefits of disclosure, that the parents at his son's new school don't treat him and his wife like they're the worst parents in the world.

I'd love to have us all make 2009 the year of Asperger Syndrome awareness.

You can get help making decisions about disclosing AS from support groups, school counselors, or psychologists who specialize in AS. The magic is not simply in telling others your child has Asperger Syndrome. The magic is in sharing appropriate information in a way that allows them to understand your child's thought processes and shows how they can make allowances and help him interact and progress. It's also important to talk about your child's strengths and what he has to offer, and not focus only on his challenges.

Dan Coulter is the producer of the Intricate Minds series of DVDs, which help students understand classmates who have Asperger Syndrome and similar conditions.

You can find more articles on his website: www.coultervideo.com.

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Classmates and Asperger Syndrome

By Dan Coulter

A mother just wrote me to ask how old classmates need to be to understand about Asperger Syndrome. Great question. In the youngest grades, you may determine that you don't need to discuss the diagnosis. Maybe you just address behaviors. Everybody's brain works differently. Jared is very enthusiastic. He has trouble remembering to take his turn and raise his hand so we need to be patient with him. Emily is smart, but she has trouble remembering to be polite. She doesn't mean to hurt your feelings when she says things about how you look. We need to tell her when she says something that hurts our feelings so she can learn how friends talk to each other.

You need to make determinations about what to say based on your child and his or her classmates, but I think the earlier children hear the words Asperger Syndrome and what AS does and doesn't mean, the more accepting they're likely to be from that point forward. And children are never too young to learn that we're all different and that we need to treat each other with patience, kindness and understanding.

If you're the parent of a child who has Asperger Syndrome and you're conflicted about disclosing his or her condition to teachers and classmates, consider how great it would be to feel relieved and glad that...they know.

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Transitioning High School Students with Disabilities into College Programs

By

Mary Ann Cummins Prager

On May 4, 2008 the Center on Disabilities at California State University at Northridge held its annual recognition awards ceremony, awarding scholarships to 10 outstanding students with disabilities for their academic and leadership accomplishments.

The audience was completely quiet as the achievements of these amazing students were described. With a variety of disabilities including vision, mobility, mental health and learning disabilities, the awardees spoke eloquently about their successes.

Sitting in the audience were many of us who have worked with literally thousands of students with disabilities over the years, many of whom have fallen short of achieving their academic, personal, and career goals. As we listened to their stories, I thought about why these students were succeeding when so many others either struggle through college or leave disappointed at their failure to achieve their college dreams. I realized that each of these students had a set of characteristics in common that allowed them to achieve in spite of the extra challenges they faced.

The following account is a consideration of those characteristics and what we parents, educators, service providers and community members can do to assist students with disabilities.

We begin by understanding that the transition to college is difficult for all students, not just students with disabilities. This generation of students, born between 1980 and 2000 and popularly called the Millennials, has been characterized by a number of researchers as distinctly different from their predecessors. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a Research Professor in the Department of Psychology at Clark College, has coined the term “emerging adulthood” to describe older teens and 20-somethings, who are not quite adults. He and others, who studied this generation, discovered that they are not reaching the traditional milestones of independence: graduating from college, leaving home, marrying, obtaining a permanent job, and becoming parents until much later than earlier generations.

Added to this discovery is a new generation of Boomer parents, sometimes called helicopter parents for their hovering behavior, who are remaining intimately involved in their children’s lives long past the first year of college. In fact, human resource professionals and college career counselors have noted the number of parents who are attending job fairs and interviews with their adult children (unthinkable in the past!) is on the rise. Given this broader generational context, it is no wonder that the transition to college for students with disabilities is difficult as they are further behind their non-disabled peers in terms of their ability to function independently. Those students at the recognition awards, who were sterling examples of achievement, had the ability to take on academic and personal challenges because they were able to do the following:

Describe their disability. They were able to discuss their disability in a knowledgeable manner, sharing the impact of the disability on their lives in a detailed and relevant way with faculty and service providers. They knew how their disabilities impacted them in the classroom, in social settings and in the workplace, and they were able to use that knowledge in communicating the accommodations they needed to optimize their chance of success.

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Objectively analyze their strengths and weaknesses. They engaged in a great deal of self-reflection and could tell you what they were good at and where they faced challenges. They had gained a strong self of self and were comfortable with their identities, including their identity as a person with a disability. While clearly their disabilities were an important component of their self-image, they could speak about their complete profile of talents, abilities and affinities. They had developed practical ways to use their strengths to overcome weaknesses and made realistic choices about majors and careers.

Advocate effectively. Leaving the high school environment where parents and in some instances teachers had advocated for them, each of the students learned to ask for accommodations and press the case when they felt they needed more assistance. They built effective alliances with faculty and service providers, understood procedures and utilized them, and had learned to navigate a complex organizational environment. Even those students with disabilities that caused them discomfort in social settings had developed advocacy and networking skills.

Differentiate between their rights and their responsibilities. They knew when they had the right to request accommodations, and they understood their responsibilities as students in the college setting knowing that they needed to meet the high expectations of faculty and rigorous academic requirements.

Organize and manage their time and workload. All of these students had struggled in some way with the organizational and time management skills that are essential to succeed in college. Each student had a unique challenge in this area beyond those faced by all college students. For some, simply getting to campus using public transportation was a significant time management issue, which could cause a great deal of stress. For most, the increased academic workload required them to become more focused and organized. Even those with significant learning, attention and mental health disabilities learned survival skills in these areas.

Access available resources. These students learned where to go for assistance before they got into trouble. As simple as this sounds, not all students access the resources that are available on college campuses. When they reach an academic or personal crisis, they are amazed to find that help was available that could have prevented the crisis.

The situations described above may seem simplistic, but students with disabilities who succeed have the ability to communicate, advocate for themselves, manage time and resources, utilize their strengths, and make wise choices based on realistic self-appraisals. They can navigate complex organizational structures and find needed resources. They did not start out with these skills and many never acquire them. Designing programs and activities that support the attainment of these skills should be a high priority both at the high school and college level if we truly want students with disabilities to succeed.

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