

Educational Priorities for Students with ASD

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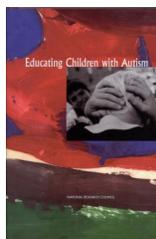
OK— the evaluation is done and the student will receive Special Education services with an educational eligibility of Autism. What should go in that Individualized Educational Plan? IEP time may be viewed as a painful yet necessary evil or an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to a student’s educational plan. It is important for all of the team members, families included, to have a clear idea of what makes the plan “individualized” and what the priorities are based on the unique characteristics and needs of the student at various stages of development/learning.

What are the educational priorities for students with ASD?

In some ways, that’s an easy question. *“The appropriate goals for educational services are the same as those for other children: personal independence and social responsibility.”* (National Academy of Sciences– Committee on Educational Interventions for Children with Autism. 2001) In other ways, it’s a much harder question as the characteristics, and needs of students with ASD are different from other students. The National Academy of Sciences has recommended that educational objectives include the following:

- ◆ Functional spontaneous communication (functional means communication that helps the student to get needs met)
- ◆ Social instruction
- ◆ Play skills (focused on peers, age appropriate toys/material)
- ◆ Instruction for maintenance and generalization (using skills in the settings/ contexts in which they will be used)
- ◆ Positive approaches to problem behaviors
- ◆ Functional academic skills (functional means able to be used in the real world)

While these objectives may look different for children at different ages and of differing abilities, these are the educational priorities for students with autism of all ages and abilities.



Educational Priorities in Preschool

“There is no debate or doubt: early intervention is your child’s best hope for the future.” (**Does My Child Have Autism?** by Wendy L. Stone, PhD, with Theresa Foy DiGeromino, MEd, 2006) The absolute priority for preschool children with ASD (as well as infants and toddlers) is to learn to engage with the world and the people in it. Children with autism may lose learning experiences as they have not developed social interaction skills and they have a narrow range of interests. It is, however, also true that the brains of very young children are plastic (able to be molded and changed).

Autism specific early intervention does more than support development; it changes the way the brain grows.



Young children with autism need to be actively engaged in individualized learning for at least 20 hours per week. (This can include engagement with therapists, caregivers, siblings, etc. at home).

Preschool intervention for children with autism is more intense and focused on communication and interaction with others—both peers and adults. It will include teaching children play skills with age appropriate toys and with peers (this includes the ability to pretend and respond to the play initiations of others.) Teaching such skills as using the toilet independently, dressing, eating, etc. will also include an emphasis on social interaction. There should be more one to one or very small group interaction rather than large group activities. Emphasis on beginning academic skills should be minimal.

Any problem behaviors should be addressed through using positive support strategies, however, improved communication and social skills often eliminate problem behaviors.

Resources for Preschool

- Rogers & Dawson, *Early start Denver model for young children with autism*
- Maurice, *Behavioral Intervention for young children with autism: A manual for parents and professionals*
- Leaf & McEachin, *A work in progress: Behavior management strategies & curriculum for intensive behavioral treatment of autism*

Educational priorities for elementary aged students

As typical children move into the school age years, goals focus on “preparing students with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in college and careers” (NM Public Education Department). Typically, the priority is on the development of core academic skills—reading, writing, math, learning about the environment and natural world (science & social studies) and cultural knowledge (history, social studies, etc.). While the same may be true for students with autism, it is vital to take into consideration the ongoing need of students with autism to develop in the ways described on the previous page. The development of academic skills depends on adequate social communication. Reading (in all contexts) is communication written down. Communication only takes place in a social context. A student who does not have a reliable communication system is not ready to learn to read. Learning to play is not just about recess—it is learning to interact, problem solve, etc., etc. Problem behaviors will interfere with the learning and must be quickly and skillfully treated; all skills must be used in the contexts in which they are needed (maintenance and generalization). **Academic learning must be meaningful.** Traditional activities such as work sheets, flashcards or phonemic awareness drills may not be meaningful for students with ASD. They may also emphasize skills that may be weak for many students with autism (fine motor, making a whole out of the pieces (sounds into words, words into sentences, etc.).

Developing the IEP

As the IEP is developed, there should be goals related to the priorities mentioned above as appropriate for the individual student. In most cases, the IEP team is required to develop goals based on Common Core Standards. This can be difficult as many teachers are still learning their way around the Common Core. It will require some creativity to find the standards appropriate for the priority needs of some students with autism. In general, it will be best to start with the “Anchor Strands.” Please see the resources for additional information.

Inclusion in less restrictive (general education) environments

Parent and educators alike are concerned about quality experiences in general education environments. Students who have IEPs must also have access to the general education curriculum. Obviously, this is a very general statement and how it applies to individual students may be different. In general, it is important to remember that sitting in the back of the room with an assistant doing unrelated (or even the same) work as the general education students is not inclusion. Inclusion also does not require that students demonstrate mastery of the concepts being taught in the general education setting. For example: A student may be included during science with a goal of learning to interact with peers in a small group. In general it is important to consider:

1. What are the goals of inclusion (to be determined in collaboration with the general educator)?
2. What supports will be needed to make the inclusion experience meaningful and positive for all students?
3. What instruction may be needed for students with and without IEPs to make the experience as meaningful and appropriate as possible.

Resources for Elementary School

- Common Core Standards: <http://newmexicocommoncore.org/>
- *Universal design for learning in the classroom* by Hall, et. al
- *Quality Literacy Instruction for Students with ASD* by Carnahan & Williamson
- *Teachers Guides to Inclusive Practices* (Set of 8) Brookes Publishing
- *Practical Ideas that really work for teaching math problem solving* by Byer, et al

Educational priorities for middle school students

Although the differences between preschool children and middle school students are vast, the priority needs for middle school students with ASD are very similar to those for younger students—effective social communication skills including appropriate interactions with adults and peers, reduction or absence of problem behaviors, independence in adaptive skills including participation in school routines and the ability to use academic skills meaningfully. For middle school students, some important additions are the ability to organize themselves to complete and turn in assignments, independently navigate the campus and perform other tasks as necessary (executive function). This is an area of concern and difficulty for many students with ASD.

Continuing, and extensive instruction in social skills is necessary in middle school as this is a time when students are very focused on the social environment and are developing adult social skills as opposed to those appropriate for younger students. Growing independence in all areas of functioning is also a high priority.

For some students with ASD, middle school may be a time for IEP teams to begin to make some important decisions regarding the goals of instruction. Curricula are often structured in ways that make some skills pre-requisite to the next as this is the way that development occurs. Some students with disabilities, including those with ASD, are not able to develop skills in this step by step manner. For example, if a middle school student with autism is not able to say the ABCs, it is time to teach that student to read without wasting any more time on early pre-requisite steps. Hopefully, these needs have been assessed and addressed earlier in the school career, but if they have not, middle school is definitely the time to look at different goals for, and methods of, Instruction.

Resources for Middle School

Understanding Autism: A guide for secondary school teachers [http://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/sites/csesa.fpg.unc.edu/files/The Autism Journey: Middle School](http://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/sites/csesa.fpg.unc.edu/files/The%20Autism%20Journey%20Middle%20School) <http://www.autismla.org/The-Autism-Journey/Middle-School.htm>

See Elementary School resources

Educational priorities for high school students

Wow! If you've made it to high school, you may hope it's time to rest but you really know better, don't you? Once again, the educational priorities remain the same, however, there needs to be a shift in focus from how those priorities apply to children and youth to how they apply to adults. At the beginning of high school, decisions are made regarding transitions including the graduation pathway. (<http://www.ped.state.nm.us/SEB/technical/GraduationOptionsStudentswithDisabilities.pdf>)

The four years of high school are short! In that time, it is important to think about what skills will be needed to pursue post-secondary education, a job or career and independent living.

Domains of Adult Life (Parents Reaching Out, Spring 2007)

Employment/ Education	Leisure	Community Involvement	Physical/ Emotional Health	Home and Family	Personal Responsibility/ Relationships
Job Skills (including social skills)	Indoor activities	Citizenship	Physical—self care and knowing when to ask for help	Home management	Goal setting
Obtaining necessary training/ education	Outdoor activities	Community use/ awareness	Emotional—self care and knowing when to ask for help	Financial management	Relationships
Employment settings	Community/ neighborhood	Community service & resources	General/ individualized daily care activities	Family relationships and responsibilities	Expression
Career advancement/ Evaluation	Travel	Self-advocacy	Sexual health and responsibility		Self-advocacy
	Entertainment				

Resources for High School:

- Understanding Autism: A guide for secondary school teachers
<http://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/sites/csesa.fpg.unc.edu/files/>
- New Mexico Public Education Public Education Department
<http://www.ped.state.nm.us/SEB/technical/GraduationOptionsStudentswithDisabilities.pdf>

An Important Word about Applied Behavior Analysis

The majority of instructional strategies (evidence based practices) found to be most effective for students with ASD are based in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). While school staff members working with students with ASD may not be formally trained in ABA, they should be aware of many of the principles and instructional strategies used in ABA (discrete trial training, differential reinforcements, functions of behavior, etc.) and the systematic use of these strategies in the education of students with ASD. The IEP and, if applicable, Functional Behavior Assessment and Behavior Intervention Plan are most effective when based in behavior analytic methods. For more information about ABA and autism go to:

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/treatment/applied-behavior-analysis-aba>

Tips for Success

1. In setting priorities at any age, take into consideration the core characteristics of autism:
Social communication
Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, activities or interests
2. Consider the “learning to learn” skills. Does the student need to develop learning skills such as being in a group, attending to task/instruction, following directions and routines, etc.
3. Consider how learned skills will be maintained and generalized (used in the real world). Skills that are not meaningful will not be maintained or generalized.
4. The IEP should be a dynamic document that changes as the student grows and changes.
5. Look for evidence of growth. In general if there is little or no growth evident within a school reporting period, something needs to be changed.
6. Ask to see the documentation related to all IEP goals.

Some Useful Resources

- Partington, J. 2010 *The assessment of basic language and learning skills* Behavior analysts, Inc.
- Partington, J. & Mueller, M. 2012 *The assessment of functional living skills*; Behavior analysts, Inc.
- National research council, 2001. *Educating children with autism*; National Academy Press

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For more information about this resource or to inquire about the Autism Programs call
(505) 272-1852 or **1-800-270-1861** www.cdd.unm.edu/autism

