

Meeting the Needs of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

By Timothy E. Morse



Autism has recently become a more common topic in discussions about how schools can best serve special-education populations. During the 1970s, only 2 to 5 cases per 10,000 people were reported as autism (Fombonne 1999). Recent studies have reported the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to be 1 in 152 children (Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network Surveillance Year 2002 Principal Investigators 2007).

Since educators are increasingly aware of ASD, they need more information about how to meet the needs of these special students. In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), students with autism can be eligible to receive special-education

services. Consequently, school business officials have much to consider as they work to support teachers and administrators in the development and implementation of appropriate programs for students with ASD.

Understanding Autism

Autism is a brain development disorder that is characterized by core deficits that have been referred to as the “triad of symptoms”: (1) qualitative impairment in social interaction skills, (2) qualitative impairment in communication, and (3) ritualistic, repetitive behaviors (Bruey 2004). It is one of five pervasive developmental disorders associated with abnormal social and communication behaviors and highly repetitive behavior. The others are

Asperger's syndrome, Rett's syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified.

Autism is defined as a spectrum disorder since individuals with autism display different behaviors at different levels along the spectrum (Fein and Dunn 2007). Some are considered low functioning if their condition is associated with mental retardation, limited or no speech, and significant maladaptive behaviors. Others are relatively high functioning with fairly mild social and communication problems.

Although autism is characterized by its specific core deficits, individuals with ASD are noteworthy for their overall uneven patterns of development. One student may be capable of completing complex mathematical calculations but may be unable to dress himself. Consequently, the individualized education programs (IEPs) for students with this disorder must address both their academic needs (i.e., performance in academic areas such as math or reading) and functional needs (i.e., daily life activities such as using the toilet and dressing).

Recommendations for Practice

The following suggestions for creating appropriate districtwide and individual programs for students with ASD are based on relevant literature and are offered with the understanding that when planning for the needs of stu-

dents with ASD, one is simultaneously planning for the needs of many other students with disabilities.

1. Employ personnel who are capable of conducting a comprehensive, individualized evaluation of students suspected of having ASD. Diagnosing autism is a complex, challenging endeavor that entails a detailed examination of a student's developmental history and current behaviors. Issues that should be addressed include

- Identifying a psychologist who is well-versed in ASD to lead all diagnostic efforts,
- Allowing for the time necessary to conduct the evaluation activities and write reports (10–20 hours per case), and
- Ensuring that the data collected lead to the development of an appropriate IEP, as this is the foundation on which all appropriate educational programming efforts are based.

Some districts may have to subcontract with appropriately trained personnel rather than employ them full time. The multidisciplinary teams that conduct evaluations could include students' primary caregivers, a speech and language pathologist, an occupational therapist, and both a general education teacher and a special-education teacher. Assessment instruments would include measures that focus on autism, as well as instruments that identify a student's academic and functional needs.

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2. Follow the IDEA's procedural requirements when developing an IEP for a student with ASD. The National Research Council (2001) reported that no one intervention has proved effective for all students with ASD. Therefore, school personnel should follow the procedural requirements put forth in the IDEA to develop an IEP that provides a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for each student with ASD. This includes using data as a foundation for the IEP and creating an IEP team that involves parents.

3. Address students' academic and functional needs, paying particular attention to the core deficits of autism. By definition, students with autism display deficits in social interaction and communication skills. Therefore, IEPs for students with ASD should include long-term goals and short-term instructional objectives and benchmarks related to these deficit areas, as well as the provision of relevant services by qualified personnel, such as speech and language pathologists who are knowledgeable in ASD.

4. Create a long-term plan for developing a school system's internal capacity to provide an appropriate education for students with ASD. As was the case when the IDEA category of specific learning disabilities was established, the creation of autism as an IDEA category of disability in 1990 resulted in a tremendous increase in the number of school-age children who have been identified as eligible to receive special-education services. There is no reason to believe that this trend will not continue.

Districts are best served by developing their internal capacity for meeting the needs of students with this disorder. Plans for developing this capacity should, at a minimum, include the following components:

- Large-scale initial training to provide as many key personnel as possible (e.g., administrators, teachers, instructional assistants, parents, related service providers) with basic information about ASD and effective interventions.
- Specialized tools and curricula to support students with ASD.
- A multiyear plan of sustained professional development that addresses the range of issues relevant to students with ASD, such as classic autism versus Asperger's syndrome, visual supports, sensory integration, and effective means of home-school collaboration. Training should be conducted by qualified personnel, some of whom the district will need to subcontract with and others who are currently district personnel with relevant expertise.
- Inclusion of parents as informed team members. In some instances, school personnel and parents are at odds at the outset of the IEP development process simply because both groups come to the table with different information about how to design and

implement an appropriate program for a student with ASD. Including parents in all school-sponsored professional development activities will, at the very least, establish common ground from which program planning can evolve.

5. Collect and analyze data, and adjust programs accordingly. As students with ASD acquire targeted skills and the programs that service them evolve, educators must adjust the services they provide. In all instances, data-based decision making must guide everyone's efforts.

Conclusion

The increasing number of students diagnosed with ASD has created a heightened awareness about this disorder among school personnel and the need to develop appropriate instructional programs for them. Accordingly, school business officials and other education leaders should educate themselves about ASD and the issues they must address to meet the needs of these students.

Fortunately, many professionals in the field of developmental disabilities recognize that once you have planned for and implemented an appropriate education program for an individual with ASD, you most likely have planned for the needs of many other IDEA-eligible students who are not labeled autistic.

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