

Supporting Communication in High School

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Students on the autism spectrum exhibit characteristic difficulties associated with communication. Deficits appear in three main areas: comprehension, expressive communication, and interacting with others.

COMPREHENSION

Understanding verbal and non-verbal communication

Potential Areas of Difficulty Related to Comprehension

- **Speed of processing language.** Students may process comments, questions, and directions more slowly than would be expected for their academic or cognitive abilities or age.
- **Non-literal language.** Students may struggle to understand sarcasm, hyperbole, figures of speech, or other forms of non-literal language.
- **Inferences.** Students may have difficulty reading between the lines or making assumptions about information that is not directly presented.
- **Vocabulary.** Students may have difficulty generalizing vocabulary words outside of the specific contexts in which they were learned.
- **Point-of-view.** Students often struggle to understand points of view other than their own, which can inhibit their understanding of oral and written language.

What This Might Look Like in the Classroom

Mr. Van Rynbeck tells the students to put their pencils down and pass their papers forward, but Darnell takes 10 seconds to put his pencil down, and does not pass his paper forward until he gets another prompt.

A peer says “thanks for letting me know” after Garrett rudely corrects her, and Garrett responds with a very sincere “you’re welcome,” not understanding the sarcastic tone.

The short story mentioned “an emotionally draining year” and a character’s “first birthday dinner without his mom,” but Monique could not figure out that the character’s mom had died.

In classroom discussions, Khaled struggles to understand the arguments of peers who have different opinions and values from his own.

EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

Using verbal and/or non-verbal means to convey a message

Potential Areas of Difficulty Related to Expressive Communication

- **Sentence formulation.** Students may have difficulty putting words together fluidly, which can show up as struggling to find the right words or abandoning sentences mid-stream or using long sentences without much actual content.
- **Vocabulary.** Students may have limited expressive vocabulary or, at the other extreme, may use unusually complex, obscure, or formal vocabulary.

- **Stereotyped speech.** Students may use certain words or phrases over and over.
- **Nonverbal communication.** Students may have difficulty using appropriate tone of voice or body language or gestures. Their tone of voice or body language or gestures may be confusing or off-putting to others.

What This Might Look Like in the Classroom

Oskar says “as a matter of fact” before nearly every comment, which is noticed by his teachers and peers.

When asked a question about how he solved a math problem, Jeremy starts his response with “I was putting together, well, adding, I mean multi...actually, first, I was, I looked at the formula...”

Ashleigh is excited about her upcoming art show, but when her homeroom teacher asks about the show, Ashleigh speaks in a monotone voice with her arms crossed over her chest.

Emmett uses obscure and oddly formal vocabulary stating “Actually, I have impaired emotional capacity, which makes the possibility of a romantic relationship virtually inconceivable, at least for the foreseeable future” after being asked if he will invite anyone to the homecoming dance.

Interacting with Others

Using communication to collaborate or engage with others

Potential Areas of Difficulty Related to Interacting with Others

- **Initiating interactions.** Students may be less likely to initiate casual communication with others. They may also over-initiate communication at times, such as blurting out, interrupting, or asking too many questions.
- **Conversation.** Students are challenged by the give and take of conversation. They may have difficulties starting or ending conversations.
- **Maintaining topic.** Students have a hard time staying on topic. They may make tangential or off-topic comments or stay on a preferred topic for too long.

- **Reading non-verbal cues.** Students have difficulty interpreting facial expressions, gestures, and body language during conversations.
- **Perspective taking.** Students may have difficulty understanding the perspective of another person, which may result in misunderstandings with others.

What This Might Look Like in the Classroom

Janella wants to make friends. Yet, during downtime in her advisory period, she looks at peers who are talking, rather than joining the conversation.

Despite his peers looking at their watches and tuning out, James continues to talk about obscure naval military battles.

Nyoshi will engage in conversation with peers by asking questions, but rarely comments or expands on their answers, typically just switching to a new question.

While talking about future plans, Tony says “Anyone who doesn’t go to college is either an idiot or worthless,” not recognizing or understanding that some people may struggle with school or may have career plans other than college.

There are numerous approaches you can use to support and encourage comprehension, expressive communication, and/or interaction in the high school environment. Some of these key strategies and examples include:

1. **Priming:** Provide information about tasks or activities ahead of time to support comprehension and expressive communication in the classroom.
 - Provide an outline of class notes or written directions.
 - Offer a list of questions to student before the beginning of class so they can formulate answers ahead of time.
2. **Additional Processing Time:** Build in extra time for support in processing and responding to directions or questions presented to the class.
 - Warn the student that you will be asking them to respond to the question next.

- Have the class think about or write down answers for 15–30 seconds before raising their hands.

3. Modeling: Demonstrate and identify appropriate use of communication and social skills.

- Model target communication skills and social skills in class to the student.
- Model appropriate ways for peers to interact with and respond to the student with ASD
- Show a video of another person or the student appropriately performing the target skill(s).

4. Peer Supports: Encourage and coach peers to provide supports (e.g., prompts to participate in discussions) to the student in class.

- Intentionally seat the student near peers who you have coached to provide support.
- Give the student specific roles within small group activities that challenge the student with ASD to practice target skills (e.g., group leader for a student who needs practice initiating).
- Give the student a list of topics or questions to use when initiating conversation.

5. Social Connections: Help students to connect with peers in and out of class.

- Point out commonalities or shared interests with peers in the class.
- Sponsor a club around a student's interest.
- Offer your classroom as a meeting place and arrange a lunch group once a week.

IMPORTANT REMINDERS

Slow Down, Support, and Simplify

Remember, high school environments are fast-paced and complex which often makes comprehension, communication and conversations more difficult for students with ASD. Think of strategies to slow the pace, minimize confusion, and reduce complexities in

conversations, activities, and other situations.

- Use a subtle signal that the student knows to indicate when you are joking or using sarcasm or when the student is drifting off topic.
- Pair visual supports with verbal instruction in order to maximize comprehension and capitalize on strengths and preferences for visual modalities.

Provide Specific Positive and Constructive Feedback

Offer specific feedback to the student (and others in the class) about their communication skills. General feedback, such as “good job” or “nice work in class”, does not provide enough information to reinforce specific target skills.

- “Nice job focusing on the main idea. Next time try to look up at the class when you talk.”
- “I like how you are facing me while you listen. It might be helpful to give some other clues that you are listening—maybe nodding your head or saying ‘uh-huh’.”

RESOURCES

American Speech-Language Hearing Association: <http://www.asha.org/slp/clinical/autism-resources/>

Understanding Autism: A Guide for Secondary School Teachers

DVD: <http://www.researchautism.org/resources/teachersdvd.asp>

Brochure: <http://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/resources/understanding-autism-guide-secondary-school-teachers>

Recommendations for Students with High Functioning Autism: <http://teacch.com/educational-approaches/recommendations-for-students-with-high-functioning-autism-kerry-hogan>

Understanding the Student with Asperger's Syndrome: Guidelines for Teachers: <http://www.aspergersyndrome.org/Articles/Understanding-the-Student-With-Asperger-s-Syndrome.aspx>

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This issue of Autism at-a-Glance focuses on understanding and improving the communication skills of adolescents on the autism spectrum. The content specifically targets the needs of students who are able to communicate conversationally. Examples are provided in the context of academic courses and teacher and peer relationships. If you serve students with more significant communication needs, please see our Autism at-a-Glance titled Supporting Functional Communication in High School.

Autism at-a-Glance is designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents on the autism spectrum. Autism at-a-Glance provides a current summary of topics relevant to high school students on the autism spectrum as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

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