

Serving Students with Autism

Characteristics of Autism

“If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.”

-Dr. Stephen Shore-

Students with autism are a diverse group, however they do share several distinct commonalities that impact educational performance and should be considered by the IEP Team:

- Difficulties with language and communication,
- Deficits in social skills and behavioral challenges, and
- Sensory sensitivities.

In Alabama, autism is defined as “a developmental disability that significantly affects verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction generally evident before age three (3) that adversely affects educational performance. This includes other pervasive developmental disorders. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or changes in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. Autism does not apply if a child’s educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disability, as defined in these rules. A child who manifests the characteristics of autism after age three (3) could be identified as having autism if the criteria herein are satisfied.” (AAC, 290-8-9-.03(1)(a))

IEP Team Considerations to Address the Impacts of Autism

Academics - Consider achievement testing to identify academic weaknesses which may need to be addressed through evidence-based practices in special education services.

- **Reading Comprehension-** Many students with autism learn to read as easily as their typical peers. Despite their strong decoding skills, many struggle with reading comprehension. They often struggle with the meaning of what they are reading, reading “between the lines” beyond what is explicitly stated in text, applying information from text, and relating personally or emotionally to the text.
- **Math Problem Solving-** Students with autism often perform well with rote mathematical skills in early grades. As problem solving becomes more complex and abstract, many students with autism struggle. This can be attributed to difficulties with organization, planning, mental flexibility, and attention which are necessary to solve multi-step problems and word problems.
- **Written Expression -** Many students with autism have motor skill deficits which affect their handwriting legibility and production of written work. Additionally, deficits in planning, organization, and attention may make getting thoughts down on paper difficult. Language deficits and weaknesses in central coherence (ability to “see the big picture”) impact the ability to express thoughts in sentences and paragraphs in a cohesive fashion.

Sensory Integration and Fine Motor Skills - Consider an Occupational Therapy (OT) evaluation to determine the need for direct or consultative OT services through evidence-based practices to promote independence and social participation.

- **Self-regulation and Sensory Needs**- Students with autism may have difficulties with monitoring and controlling their own feelings, emotions, and behavior to adapt to changes in their environment often due to over or under responsiveness to sensory input. Helping children become better regulated enables them to adapt to environmental demands, be more tolerant and flexible, willingly engage to process and learn from instruction, and improve attention and focus.
- **Adaptive Skills** - Daily living skills, including social skills, are often noted to be impaired in students with autism, regardless of their cognitive abilities. They need explicit instruction in the complex, nuanced skills of everyday life that are outside of typical classroom instruction in order to fully participate in academic and community settings.

Social Skills - Consider the need for explicit social skills instruction to enhance participation and support positive outcomes for students with autism.

- **Social Skills Groups** - Many students with autism need explicit instruction in social skills, or soft-skills, as well as opportunities to practice these skills with each other and their typical peers.
- **Social Skills Groups** - may be led by special education teachers, counselors, speech-language pathologists, or occupational therapists.

Accommodations - Consider supplementary aids and services to provide accessibility to and promote independence within general education settings, addressing the impacts of autism on students in the educational environment.

- **Communication/Language**-visual supports, highlighting or color-coding important information, graphic organizers, assistive technology, and more.
- **Social Interaction**- social stories, scripts, role playing, and more.
- **Rigidity**- picture schedules, cues/warnings, peer models, and more.
- **Sensory Sensitivity** - incorporate calming/alerting activities, environmental changes such as lighting/noise/seating, a quiet place for self-regulation, and more.



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