

**Autism Spectrum Disorders - Disorders of Attention
Diagnostic and Comprehensive Care Clinic**

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**IEP Planning and Educational Recommendations for
Children with Asperger's and High Functioning Autism**

Program Development: Broad IEP Goals: Remember that Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) have to be developed with the child or teenager's educational needs kept in mind. Ideally, all interventions should be presented as an educational need. It is the responsibility of the parents to educate and convince the school district that their child has unique educational needs.

Identifying your child's educational needs can often be a very frustrating experience. We often know what the child needs in a common sense way, and often skilled and intuitive teachers respond to a child's needs in a hard to define way. We know what works and what doesn't, but sometimes it is hard to exactly define it on a piece of paper.

Other times what our children need is so obvious that it doesn't seem worth writing it all down, the need itself is so simple and so intuitive that "everyone should just know" what the child needs. For example, some children need everything written down instead of being told homework assignments for example. Other children need to always be at the end of a line as they have sensory issues that make waiting in the middle of a line impossible. Why can't we just tell the school and the teacher our children's needs and expect them to follow through.

I cannot emphasize the importance of a well written IEP that includes all the really obvious easy stuff, and at least a fair try at defining the difficult and hard to describe educational needs. The IEP is a document that travels with your child, from Elementary to Middle to High School and even College. Many teachers have never heard of Asperger's syndrome. Many want to help your child but are too stressed and overburdened to spend a lot of time thinking about your child's specific needs. Virtually all teachers care about your child and teaching, so why not make it as easy as possible for them with a well designed flexible IEP that acknowledges the realities of the school system and the difficult job teachers have today. Program Development: Broad IEP Goals Part Two:

1. Your child has an educational need for improved communication and socialization. Learning is a social process. Children do not learn in isolation. The child with poor social skills and delayed language pragmatics is at a disadvantage in the classroom. They have to understand what is expected of them. Children often learn in groups or teams.

Typical students learn from each other, asking their neighbors what they might have missed. Teachers often expect classmates to help each other when assignments are missed, a child is absent, or they don't understand a problem or concept. Note taking is often a shared behavior.

All of these depend on social skills and good communication.

2. Learning depends on the ability to self organize and regulate. Many children with autism or Asperger's have significant educational needs in this area, either from the primary problems associated with autism or the accompanying sensory integration issues. Organizing a binder, keeping information in a organized fashion that can be easily retrieved, keeping a desk neat, having supplies on hand and anticipating the need for supplies, tracking long and short term assignments, and being able to make smooth transitions to new concepts are all examples of abilities typical children have and ones that may be lacking in children with Asperger's and autism.

These are skills that are learned and are woven into the educational process. A child with Autism or Asperger's often have an educational need for extra help in these areas as their abilities to learn these concepts are an inherent part of their handicap.

3. All children need a safe and predictable environment for learning. However, children with Asperger's and Autism have special educational needs in this area. They may be picked on or made fun of by other children. They may have special sensory needs which can make the classroom environment difficult to learn in. They may not be able to filter out minor distractions. They may have problems ignoring minor teasing. They may not be able to handle the perception that others are laughing at them. They may need visual cues to understand their schedule. They may have excessive problems with transitions, or become anxious and angry with disruptions in the schedule.

Their perceptions of what is a safe and predictable environment is different than the typical child's, so they have an educational need to have this addressed.

Program Development: Broad IEP Goals: Part Three Specific Ideas.

1. Provide OT, and SLP where needed, using the above needs as a rationale.
2. Consider the use of paraprofessionals.
3. Inclusion is a priority whenever possible, even if it is just for field trips, etc.
4. Provide as much structure as possible, but give the teacher as much flexibility as possible in the IEP. Autism Spectrum Students do best with highly structured classroom and flexible teachers. This is why it is so important not to overburden the teacher or burn them out on your child's needs.
5. Provide as much help as you can to the regular education teacher, even if it is helping out in areas unrelated to your child's problems. If you volunteer to teach reading to slow learners, this will free up time and energy for someone else to help your child, for example.
6. As a general rule, treating the autistic child as an emotional or behaviorally disturbed child is not a helpful strategy. However, be flexible, my own daughter thrived in a special school for students with behavior problems. Often such classrooms and schools are highly structured.
7. Consider adaptive technology assessments.
8. Consider staff in-services. Maybe you can arrange or give them!
9. Remember: The school has the right to choose their specific form of educational methodology. Work with them. Understand what they can and can't do for your child.

DO:

- a. Set firm and clear expectations of quality and quantity of work. In writing!
- b. Use visual aides and memory aides whenever possible.
- c. Be positive, creative and flexible. Make them your best friends. (this is one I am particularly challenged with. Be prepared to be humble and apologize if you accidentally call them ignorant meanies who could care less about your child and only want the money associated with disabilities.
- d. Reinforce, reinforce, reinforce.

DON'T:

- a. Assume that the student understands a concept just because they can recite it back.
 - b. Assume anything when assessing skills. Uneven skill development is a hallmark trait.
10. Identify support people the child can turn to.
 11. Create times and places for regular time outs and breaks throughout the day.

COMMUNICATE COMMUNICATE COMMUNICATE COMMUNICATE COMMUNICATE
FACILITATING ACADEMIC SUCESS: GENERAL CONCEPTS

(Please understand that these are very theoretic goals, frankly often only seen in highly expensive private school systems. Nevertheless, it is nice to have an understanding of these goals, even if they aren't often seen in the public school system. Hey, maybe you are the one who will advocate for change or run for school board)

1. Small highly structured classrooms are preferred.
2. Explicitly teach problem solving skills.
3. Explicitly teach organizational skills.
4. Explicitly teach social and executive function skills.

In other words, don't make these skills an unspoken inherent part of the curriculum but specifically teach them using the curriculum as an example of how to implement these skills and benefit from understanding them.

4. Use activity based multi-module learning.
5. Use concrete rule based approaches to learning.
6. Use familiar concepts and environments to teach unfamiliar skills and concepts.
7. Start by accommodating the curriculum and teaching strategy to the child, but then increasingly shift the responsibility to the student. (For example, start by working out a system where the parent can turn in homework for a child, but soon emphasize that taking work home and returning it is a life skill everyone needs)
8. Break long term tasks and projects into small steps with clear deadlines and goals.
9. Have a syllabus that both teachers and parents can work from.
10. Use visual aides and strategies as much as possible. For example, instead of a written book report, allow the student to design a poster or web page.
11. **USE POSITIVE INTERMITTENT RE-INFORCEMENT TO SHAPE BEHAVIOR AND REWARD ON TASK BEHAVIOR. MAKE IT RANDOM YET FREQUENT!**
12. Realize the student may not know how or when to ask for help.
13. Recognize that Asperger's patients often fear failure and react strongly to even mild criticisms. Avoid reactive discipline techniques.
14. Team learning situations can be stressful.
15. Use the "Parent's academy" teaching technique which makes abilities such as remembering backpacks, returning homework, etc skills instead of moral failings. If a child, for example, always leaves his backpack at school, spend a productive 30 minutes on a weekend practicing "remembering the backback and bringing it home behavior". This should be ideally timed to interrupt the child's favorite TV show or cut into computer time.
16. Have planned breaks. They don't have to be recess or even fun, just a break.

17. Reduce homework load.
18. Recognize that the child might be listening and learning even if not giving off the typical cues of paying attention.
19. Ignore minor disruptive behavior, especially if the child is learning.
20. **MONITOR YOUR OWN STRESS LEVEL AND AVOID BURNOUT!**
21. Use schedules, calendars, "to do" lists, visual reinforcements.
22. Use visual reminders instead of written reminders. My daughter responds well to pictures of a child sitting with a pencil, etc.
23. Visuals are so important I repeated it again.
24. And again, remember to be creative about using visuals. If a teacher says "open the book to page 28", it is helpful if they pick up a book, open it, and write 28 on the board, for example.
25. TYPES OF VISUAL CUES
 - a. Pictures that show "what am I supposed to do?", "how long will it take?", "how will I know I am finished", and "what should I do next?". For example, my wife, to remember to take her pills, drew herself a big picture of a clock with pictures of the different pills at the various hours of the clock.
 - b. Calendars and organizers to provide structure and organization.
 - c. Transition and travel helpers. For example, a picture of the bus, and a clock face.
 - d. Maps and pictures of physical structures.
 - e. Choice boards with pictures, for example, pictures of foods on a menu.
26. Provide lots of detail, more than we think is needed. For example, my daughter continually got lost leaving school to walk home, in spite of clear written directions. However, once we added, go up stairs and leave front door of school, then turn right and walk down hill to street, she never got lost again.

An Example of a To Do List for science homework:

1. Read all directions for the project first.
2. Cross off each step over you have finished it.
3. After all directions are read, go back to number 2 and follow it.
4. Read pages 34-38 in your science book.
5. Write two paragraphs about the information you read. Each paragraph should have five sentences or more.
6. When you are finished, put the paper in the red bin on the teacher's desk.
7. Open your notebook and see what you have to do next.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR SPECIFIC PROBLEMS AND SITUATIONS:

The child who perseverates:

1. Provide concrete limits, for example, only allow five minutes to color a picture.
2. Set specific goals and FIRM expectations. "You will do ten math problems in the next 10 minutes"
3. DO NOT ENGAGE IN VERBAL BATTLES. YOU WILL NEVER WIN

For the child with processing speed issues, organizational challenges, or fine motor problems.

1. Allow for slowness.
2. Make untimed tests an option.
3. Use tape recordings, handouts, and teach note taking.
4. Test with multiple choice or short answers.
5. Emphasize quality or quantity.
6. Pause, and check to make sure student can demonstrate understanding.

Strategies for children who have problems with abstract concepts:

1. Use multiple examples.
2. Use lots of visuals.
3. Be creative in making abstract concepts concrete and use illustrative examples.
4. Lecture format is least successful.

Strategies for children with language pragmatic difficulties:

1. Visuals, visuals, visuals,
2. Limit verbal instruction.
3. Use lots of pauses, say "did that answer your question", and would you like to hear more".
4. Pause and assess understanding of what you just said.
5. use social stories, written scripts, written reminders.
6. Coach child to verbalize thoughts and ideas.
7. Teach the child to give feedback and receive feedback.

Strategies for children with problems with transitions:

1. It is never too early to remind and prepare for a transition.
2. Treat the transition as a separate event. For example, "when the bell rings, we will go to the gym for physical education. We will walk down the hall in a single file line. It will take about three minutes. You will not be able to use the bathroom or drinking fountain."
3. Inform how long activities and transitions will last.
4. Give warnings.
5. Give specific cues as to what will happen next.
6. Allow time in advance for closure of an activity. (Wrap up your video game, we will be having dinner in ten minutes. Think about saving your "level" now)
7. Emphasize the positives of the next activity.

FINAL COMMENTS

1. Many complex and seemingly difficult to solve issues will respond to simple interventions and environmental changes. Children with autism spectrum disorders often overreact to minor things and have major meltdowns that can seem more intimidating and difficult to solve than they really are. Be patient. Be flexible.
2. Making significant change and helping children function in the school environment often requires considerable trial and error, flexibility, and the willingness to involve many different approaches and techniques. There is rarely one solution for every situation.
3. Monitor your own stress level and degree of burn out. If you feel you have reached a point where there are impossible barriers or everyone else is unrealistic, it often signals that you are overwhelmed and burned out on a situation. Let go of the problem for a while, and then be willing to re-approach it at a later date.

So often I myself, or parents I work with, tell me that "they have tried everything" and nothing works. I find that this is often a sign that I am exhausted and no longer want to try. Often taking a break from your child's problems can be the best thing you can do for them and yourself.