

INSIGHT from Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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The following are lessons that I have learned as I have supported persons on the spectrum. As you start your school year, try to look at the world through the eyes of someone on the spectrum. You may be surprised!

“If I can’t see it I don’t understand.”

- This does not necessarily mean that they have to literally see it. The student needs to be able to visualize it in his/her mind. Remember, individuals with ASD are typically visual thinkers; they do think in pictures.

When in doubt, write it out.

- Persons with ASDs tend to feel anxious when they do not know what is happening next. Even though you may voice the plan, writing it out or showing pictures will utilize their visual strength. Also, you can refer to the schedule or plan when the student persistently asks when someone is returning, what they are supposed to do now, what are they supposed to do next, etc. Let the written word or picture answer the question or direct the student.

Remember to be literal when conversing with a person with autism spectrum disorders.

- Attempting to understand what we are trying to say when we use sarcasm, idioms, and lots of words with little meaning is very difficult for the person with ASD. Say specifically what you mean using few words. Be simple, be concrete, and use the words that convey the meaning you are trying to express. Leave little room for misinterpretation.

Rest is needed after a day in school. This may manifest itself in a number of different ways – video gaming, watching TV, and/or being alone in a room.

- School can be one of the most difficult times. The person with ASD has to “act” all day to function in the neurotypical world. Homework may not get done due to the exhaustion. Imagine teaching all day with the Superintendent and Principal in your room. After being on your best behavior all day, you too would be exhausted and have a difficult time planning for the next day.

A social life is desired. “I just want to be able to go out.”

- Although it may appear that the student does not want to socialize, he or she very much desires to be like everyone else. Although they may want to go out, they have to fight the characteristic that says how hard it is. It is difficult trying to do something that is hard to do.

As students understand their disability they may find that they feel like they have a disease. They may feel that their personality is changing because of the disability.

- This is the time to educate students about ASDs. Help them understand that it makes them who they are. Others may need to be educated, too. Teach the student to be a self-advocate.

Typically having a purpose and reason to be involved will enhance their desire to do so. There needs to be something in it for them.

- The reason or purpose must make sense to the person. An example may be when meeting with a person with ASD you ask him to teach you about his disability so you can better understand how to help others. This empowers the individuals so they have purpose in the meetings. Also, during group activities make sure the person with ASD has a part that not only taps his strength, but includes him in the activity.

Individuals may feel left out or different. They may ask if others feel this way.

- This feeling may come from an understanding that they are different. They know that they are not part of “the crowd,” but don’t know how to make this happen. This seems to be self-actualization and may be a start to understanding and learning the steps to genuinely feel included.

Directions are often best understood if you give landmarks to the person instead of road signs and numbers. The person will remember the buildings and landmarks since they are unique.

- The visual strength of the disability supports this principle.

The person may have certain rituals, routines, favorite things, or just ways of doing something that may appear unusual or unnecessary to us.

- This could be due to a sensory need or sensory defensiveness. It may just be what he/she needs to do. An example may be that the person only likes to drink from a water bottle or straw. Drinking from a glass may be offensive to the person. If it does not hurt or seriously offend someone, then let it go. It is not worth the battle. We all have our own idiosyncrasies that we want left alone.

The T/TACs have specialists trained in working with students with autism spectrum disorders, as well as a wealth of resources in the lending libraries. Additional resources are also available at T/TAC Online (<http://ttaconline.org>).