

SIX-STEP PLAN

Following the six-step plan, detailed below, will help prepare you for the entrance of a child with Asperger Syndrome in your classroom, as well as foster inclusion throughout the school. The steps are as follows: (1) educate yourself; (2) reach out to the parents; (3) prepare the classroom; (4) educate peers and promote social goals; (5) collaborate on the implementation of an educational program; and (6) manage behavioral challenges.

Step 1: Educate Yourself

As the person responsible for the education and behavior management of all your students, including a child with Asperger Syndrome, you must have a working understanding of Asperger Syndrome and its associated behaviors. Different behaviors are very much a part of Asperger Syndrome. When children with Asperger Syndrome do not respond to the use of language or act out in class, it is typically not because they are ignoring you, trying to clown around, or waste class time. These behaviors may be more related to their Asperger Syndrome, and they may be having difficulty interpreting language and expressing their needs in socially acceptable ways. It is important to find ways to create a comfortable environment for your students with Asperger Syndrome so that they can participate meaningfully in the classroom.

"Students with Asperger Syndrome benefit from organization and structure. The teacher who has invested in providing an organized and structured environment for the student will not only provide a better learning environment, but also feel more relaxed and competent."

— Autism program specialist

Learning about Asperger Syndrome in general and about the specific characteristics of your student will help you effectively manage this behavior and teach your class. You have already started your education by reading this guide. Below are some helpful hints that can guide everyday school life for young people with Asperger Syndrome. They can be applied to individuals with Asperger Syndrome across the school years and are applicable to almost all environments.

- ◆ **Operate on "Asperger time."** "Asperger time" means, "Twice as much time, half as much done." Students with Asperger Syndrome often need additional time to complete assignments, to gather materials, and to orient themselves during transitions. Provide this time or modify requirements so they can fit in the time allotted and match the student's pace. Avoid rushing a child with Asperger Syndrome, as this typically results in the child shutting down. When time constraints are added to an already stressful day, the student can become overwhelmed and immobilized.
- ◆ **Manage the environment.** Any changes—unexpected changes, in particular—can increase anxiety in a student with Asperger Syndrome; even changes considered to

be minor can cause significant stress. Whenever possible, provide consistency in the schedule and avoid sudden changes. Prepare the child for changes by discussing them in advance, over-viewing a social narrative on the change, or showing a picture of the change. The environment can also be managed by incorporating student preferences that may serve to decrease his or her stress. For example, when going on a field trip, the student might be assigned to sit with a group of preferred peers. Or if the field trip is going to include lunch, the student has access to the menu the day before so he or she can plan what to eat. Additional information is included in the Providing Academic and Environmental Supports section (Appendix B) on [page 29](#).

- ◆ **Create a balanced agenda.** Make a visual schedule that includes daily activities for students with Asperger Syndrome. It is essential that the demands of the daily schedule or certain classes or activities be monitored and restructured, as needed. For example, "free time," which is considered fun for typically developing youth, may be challenging for students with Asperger Syndrome because of noise levels, unpredictability of events, and social skills problems. For a child with Asperger Syndrome, free time may have to be structured with prescribed activities to reduce stress and anxiety. A good scheduling strategy is to alternate between preferred and nonpreferred activities with periods in the schedule for downtime. It is important to distinguish free time from downtime. Free time refers to periods during the school day when students are engaged in unstructured activities that have marked social demands and limited teacher supervision. Lunch time, passing time between classes, and time at school before classes actually begin all meet the criteria for free time. These activities are stressful for many students with Asperger Syndrome. Downtime, on the other hand, provides an opportunity for the child or youth with Asperger Syndrome to relax or de-stress. Students' downtime may include using sensory items, drawing, or listening to music to relieve stress. During downtime, excessive demands are not made on the students.
- ◆ **Share the agenda.** Students with Asperger Syndrome have difficulty distinguishing between essential and nonessential information. In addition, they often do not remember information that many of us have learned from past experiences or that to others come as common sense. Thus, it is important to state the obvious. One way to do this is to "live out loud." Naming what you are doing helps the child with Asperger Syndrome accurately put together what you are doing with the why and the how. In addition, "living out loud" helps the student to stay on task and anticipate what will happen next.
- ◆ **Simplify language.** Keep your language concise and simple, and speak at a slow, deliberate pace. Do not expect a student with Asperger Syndrome to "read between the lines," understand abstract concepts like sarcasm, or know what you mean by using facial expression only. Be specific when providing instructions. Ensure that the child with Asperger Syndrome knows what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. Be clear, and clarify as needed.

- ◆ **Manage change of plans.** When planning activities, make sure the student with Asperger Syndrome is aware that the activities are planned, not guaranteed. Students with Asperger Syndrome need to understand that activities can be changed, canceled, or rescheduled. In addition, create backup plans and share them with the child with Asperger Syndrome. When an unavoidable situation occurs, be flexible and recognize that change is stressful for people with Asperger Syndrome; adapt expectations and your language accordingly. For example, a teacher could state, "Our class is scheduled to go to the park tomorrow. If it rains, you can read your favorite book on dinosaurs." Prepare students for change whenever possible; tell them about assemblies, fire drills, guest speakers, and testing schedules. In addition to changes within the school day, recurring transitions, such as vacations and the beginning and end of the school year, may cause a child with Asperger Syndrome to be anxious about the change. Students with Asperger Syndrome may require additional time to adjust to the new schedule and/or environment.
- ◆ **Provide reassurance.** Because students with Asperger Syndrome cannot predict upcoming events, they are often unsure about what they are to do. Provide information and reassurance frequently so that the student knows he is moving in the right direction or completing the correct task. Use frequent check-ins to monitor student progress and stress.
- ◆ **Be generous with praise.** Find opportunities throughout the day to tell young people with Asperger Syndrome what they did right. Compliment attempts as well as successes. Be specific to ensure that the student with Asperger Syndrome knows why the teacher is providing praise.

Note: A special thanks to Dena Gitlitz and Diane Adreon for allowing us to adapt the above material for the *Educator's Guide to Asperger Syndrome*.

Teachers who employ the above techniques are more likely to have a successful inclusive classroom, and their student(s) with Asperger Syndrome will be better able to learn class material. In addition to these methods, it is also essential to recognize the importance of matching the teaching style with the student. Children with Asperger Syndrome generally respond well to teachers who are patient and compassionate, flexible in their teaching styles, and speak in a calm, quiet manner. Whenever possible, students with Asperger Syndrome should be placed in this type of classroom environment.

"Teachers can wield a great deal of influence in motivating the child with Asperger Syndrome. I think an effective way to do that is to provide the student with ongoing positive input. In my son's case, even just a little bit of praise from a teacher goes a long way."

– Parent of a 14-year-old boy with Asperger Syndrome

Step 2: Reach Out to the Parents

It is vitally important to develop a working partnership with the parents of your student with Asperger Syndrome. *They are your first and best source of information about their child and Asperger Syndrome as it manifests itself in that child's behavior and daily activities.* Ideally, this partnership will begin with meetings before the school year. After that, it is critical to establish mutually agreed-upon modes and patterns of communication with the family throughout the school year.

Your first conversations with the family should focus on the individual characteristics of the student, identifying strengths and areas of challenge. The family may have suggestions for practical accommodations that can be made in the classroom to help the child function at his or her highest potential. In these conversations, it is critical to establish a tone of mutual respect while maintaining realistic expectations for the course of the year.

Building trust with the parents is very important. Communication with families about the progress of the student should be ongoing. If possible, schedule a monthly meeting to discuss the child's progress and any problems he or she may be having. If regular telephone calls or meetings are hard to schedule, you can exchange journals, e-mails, or audiotapes with families. While the information you exchange may often focus on current classroom challenges, strategies employed, and ideas for alternative solutions, do not forget to include positive feedback on accomplishments and milestones reached. Families could respond with their perspective on the problem and their suggestions for solutions. Families can also support you from home in your social and behavioral goals for your student with Asperger Syndrome.

"Open communication is essential between a child's teacher and parents. The child's IEP happens only once a year for most children, but needs to be implemented daily."

– Mother of a 12-year-old diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome

Open, ongoing communication with families of students with Asperger Syndrome creates a powerful alliance. Be aware that some families may have had negative experiences with other schools or teachers in the past. You will have to help them work through that. If you make the effort to communicate with the family about the progress of their child and listen to their advice and suggestions, they will accept you as their child's advocate and thus be more likely to give you their complete support.

Appendix C, on [page 45](#), contains a worksheet with suggested questions to ask during your initial meetings with the parents. Also included is an example of a journal that can be used for teachers and parents to communicate with each other daily or weekly regarding the child's performance and progress.

Step 3: Prepare the Classroom

Having learned about the individual sensitivities and characteristics of your student with Asperger Syndrome, you now have the information you need to organize your classroom appropriately. There are ways that you can manipulate the physical aspects of your classroom and ways you can place children with Asperger Syndrome within the classroom to make them more comfortable without sacrificing your plans for the class in general. Appendix C contains information about specific approaches for structuring the academic and physical environment to address the particular behaviors, sensitivities, and characteristics of your individual student with Asperger Syndrome.

"Without a supportive classroom and teacher, an AS student has little chance to get through the day without anxiety or a meltdown. The education of teachers and staff is paramount. The behaviors that come out when a child is frustrated, confused or dealing with their OC tendencies are often misinterpreted by untrained teachers. Few kids are able to tell a teacher that the reason they're upset is because they misunderstood the directions and now they are obsessive/compulsively needing to complete a perceived task. Far too often AS kids are punished for behaviors instead of getting help discovering the root of the stress. Teachers and other staff need to have the training it takes to recognize the deficits and traits of the spectrum in order to accommodate or help an AS student."

- Parent of a 15-year-old son with Asperger Syndrome

Step 4: Educate Peers and Promote Social Goals

Perhaps the most common myth about children with Asperger Syndrome is that they do not have the ability, motivation, or desire to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with others, including friendships with peers. This, for the most part, is not true. There is no doubt that children with Asperger Syndrome have social deficits that make it more difficult for them to establish friendships than typically developing children. However, with appropriate assistance, children with Asperger Syndrome can engage with peers and establish mutually enjoyable and lasting relationships. It is critical that teachers of children with Asperger Syndrome believe this to be true and expect students with Asperger Syndrome to make and maintain meaningful relationships with the adults and other children in the classroom. Clearly stated social skills, behaviors, and objectives should be part of the IEP and assessed regularly for progress.

While teasing may be a common occurrence in the everyday school experience for young people, children with Asperger Syndrome often cannot discriminate between playful versus mean-spirited teasing. Educators and parents can help children with Asperger Syndrome recognize the difference and respond appropriately. A more serious form of teasing is bullying. It is important for teachers and school staff to know that students with Asperger Syndrome are potentially prime targets of bullying or excessive teasing and to be vigilant for the signs of such activities to protect the child's safety and self-esteem.

One strategy for educators could be to assign a "buddy" or safe student in the classroom. In this way, the student with Asperger Syndrome would have a friend to listen to them and to report any potential conflicts with other students. Also, educators should routinely check in with the student with Asperger Syndrome and/or the parents to ensure the comfort of the student in the classroom.

In addition to the "buddy" strategy described above, it may also be important to educate typically developing students about the common traits and behaviors of children with Asperger Syndrome. The characteristics of Asperger Syndrome can cause peers to perceive a child with the disorder as odd or different, which can lead to situations that involve teasing or bullying. Research shows that typically developing peers have more positive attitudes, increased understanding, and greater acceptance of children with Asperger Syndrome when provided with clear, accurate, and straightforward information about the disorder. When educated about Asperger Syndrome and specific strategies for how to effectively interact with children with Asperger Syndrome, more frequent and positive social interactions are likely to result.

Many of the social interactions occur outside the classroom in the cafeteria and on the playground. Without prior planning and extra help, students with Asperger Syndrome may end up sitting by themselves during these unstructured times. To ensure this does not happen, you may consider a rotating assignment of playground peer buddies for the student with Asperger Syndrome. The student will then have a chance to observe and model appropriate social behavior of different classmates throughout the year. This "circle of friends" can also be encouraged outside of school.

"Since social interaction is the largest deficit for children with Asperger Syndrome, a supportive classroom environment is essential so that they do not shut down and isolate themselves. To provide such a supportive classroom, everyone involved should be educated about Asperger Syndrome, even the child's peers."

- Mother of a 12-year-old diagnosed with Asperger

The academic and social success of young people with Asperger Syndrome can be greatly enhanced when the classroom environment supports their unique challenges. Peer education interventions, such as those listed in the Resources section of this guide, can be used with little training and have been shown to improve outcomes for both typically developing peers and young people with developmental disorders, such as autism and Asperger Syndrome. Specific strategies that can be used to support social interactions for students with Asperger Syndrome are described in Appendix D, [page 51](#).

Step 5: Collaborate on the Educational Program Development

The next key step in your preparations will be to participate in the development and implementation of an educational program for your student with Asperger Syndrome. It is

critical to develop this plan based on the assessment of the child's current academic skills and his or her educational goals, as defined in the IEP.

A Brief Legislative History

Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 and reauthorized it in 1990 as IDEA. This legislation guarantees that all students with disabilities will be provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). It also states that students with disabilities should be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE), where they can make progress toward achieving their IEP goals, meaning that as much as possible, children with disabilities should be educated with children who are not disabled. Finally, it states that students with disabilities must have an IEP, which describes the student's current level of functioning, his or her goals for the year, and how these goals will be supported through special services. IEPs are an important focus of the six-step plan, and they are discussed in greater detail below.

Because the challenges associated with Asperger Syndrome affect many key aspects of development, the impact of the disorder on education and learning is profound. Therefore, children with Asperger Syndrome are considered disabled under the IDEA guidelines and are legally entitled to an IEP plan and appropriate accommodations from the school to help them achieve their developmental and academic goals.

Individualized Education Program

IEPs are created by a multidisciplinary team of education professionals, along with the child's parents, and are tailored to the needs of the individual student. The IEP is a blueprint for everything that will happen to a child in school for the next year. Special and general education teachers, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists, and families form the IEP team and meet intermittently to discuss student progress on IEP goals.

Before the IEP team meets, an assessment team gathers information together about the student to make an evaluation and recommendation. The school psychologist, social worker, classroom teacher, and/or speech pathologist are examples of educational professionals who conduct educational assessments. A neurologist may conduct a medical evaluation, and an audiologist may complete hearing tests. The classroom teacher also gives input about the academic progress and classroom behavior of the student. Parents give input to each specialist throughout the process. Then, one person on the evaluation team coordinates all the information, and the team meets to

"The IEP is developed by the child's teachers who have little time to implement it, parents who wish for the best outcome but usually do not know they have any voice at the table, and specialists who probably have little knowledge about the child, as well as administrators who look at costs. After the best plan is made for the child, oftentimes it is not implemented. The parent has to become an advocate for the child and make sure the plan is implemented or changed if the original ideas are not working for the child."

— Mother of a 12-year-old diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome

make recommendations to the IEP team. The IEP team, which consists of the school personnel who work with the student and families, then meets to write the IEP based on the evaluation and team member suggestions.

IEPs always include annual goals, short-term objectives, and special education services required by the student, as well as a yearly evaluation to see if the goals were met. Annual goals must explain measurable behaviors so that it is clear what progress should have been made by the end of the year. The short-term objectives should contain incremental and sequential steps toward meeting each annual goal. Annual goals and short-term objectives can be about developing social and communication skills, or reducing problem behavior. Appendix E (page 61) provides more information on IEP and transition planning for students with Asperger Syndrome, including writing objectives and developing measurable IEP goals for learners with Asperger Syndrome.

As a general education teacher, you will be responsible for reporting back to the IEP team on the student's progress toward meeting specific academic, social, and behavioral goals and objectives as outlined in the IEP. You also will be asked for input about developing new goals for the student in subsequent and review IEP meetings. A student calendar, which may be customized for an individual student and used to document the child's progress toward each specific, measurable goal, is also included in Appendix E. This resource can decrease the time spent documenting the student's performance in a comprehensive manner.

Step 6: Manage Behavioral Challenges

Many students with Asperger Syndrome view school as a stressful environment. Commonplace academic and social situations can present several stressors to these students that are ongoing and of great magnitude. Examples of these stressors include:

- ◆ Difficulty predicting events because of changing schedules
- ◆ Tuning into and understanding teacher's directions
- ◆ Interacting with peers
- ◆ Anticipating changes, such as classroom lighting, sounds/noises, odors, etc.

Students with Asperger Syndrome rarely indicate in any overt way that they are under stress or are experiencing difficulty coping. In fact, they may not always know that they are near a stage of crisis. However, meltdowns do not occur without warning. There is a pattern of behavior, which is sometimes subtle, that can indicate a forthcoming behavioral outburst for a young person with Asperger Syndrome. For example, a student who is not blinking may well be so neurologically overloaded that they have "tuned out." They may appear to be listening to a lesson when, in fact, they are taking nothing in.

Tantrums, rage, and meltdowns (terms that are used interchangeably) typically occur in three stages that can be of variable length. These stages and associated interventions are described below. The best intervention for these behavioral outbursts is to prevent them through the use of appropriate academic, environmental, social, and sensory supports and modification to environment and expectations.

The Cycle of Tantrums, Rage, and Meltdowns and Related Interventions

Rumbling

During the initial stage, young people with Asperger Syndrome exhibit specific behavioral changes that may appear to be minor, such as nail biting, tensing muscles, or otherwise indicating discomfort. During this stage, it is imperative that an adult intervene without becoming part of a struggle.

Intervention

Effective interventions during this stage include: antiseptic bouncing, proximity control, support from routine and home base. All of these strategies can be effective in stopping the cycle of tantrums, rage, and meltdowns and can help the child regain control with minimal adult support.

Rage

If behavior is not diffused during the rumbling stage, the young person may move to the rage stage. At this point, the child is disinhibited and acts impulsively, emotionally, and sometimes explosively. These behaviors may be externalized (i.e., screaming, biting, hitting, kicking, destroying property, or self-injury) or internalized (i.e., withdrawal). Meltdowns are not purposeful, and once the rage stage begins, it most often must run its course.

Intervention

Emphasis should be placed on child, peer, and adult safety, as well as protection of school, home, or personal property. Of importance here is helping the individual with Asperger Syndrome regain control and preserve dignity. Adults should have developed plans for (a) obtaining assistance from educators, such as a crisis teacher or principal; (b) removing the student from the area [removing the upset student from the peer group is far less memorable for the peers than is moving the entire peer group away from the upset student]; or (c) providing therapeutic restraint, if necessary. Especially in elementary and middle school, every effort should be made to prevent allowing a student to have a meltdown in view of peers as this behavior tends to "define" the student in the peers' minds in years ahead.

Recovery

Following a meltdown, the child with Asperger Syndrome often cannot fully remember what occurred during the rage stage. Some may become sullen, withdraw, or deny that inappropriate behavior occurred. Other individuals are so physically exhausted that they need to sleep.

Intervention

During the recovery stage, children are often not ready to learn. Thus, it is important that adults work with them to help them to once again become a part of the routine. This is often best accomplished by directing the youth to a highly motivating task that can be easily accomplished, such as an activity related to a special interest. If appropriate, when the student has calmed sufficiently, "process" the incident with the student. Staff should analyze the incident to identify whether or not the environment, expectations, or staff behavior played a role in precipitating the incident.

Pulling It All Together

The six-step plan, discussed on the preceding pages, presents a constructive framework for how to approach the inclusion of a child with Asperger Syndrome in your

classroom. Specific strategies for developing and providing academic, environmental, and social supports are given in the Appendices of this guide.

Your classroom is already a diverse place, including many students with varying backgrounds, talents, difficulties, and interests. With the increasing inclusion of students with Asperger Syndrome, the challenges associated with managing a diverse classroom into today's educational environment will grow. Just as every child with Asperger Syndrome is different, so is every school environment. It is quite likely that there will be constraints—environmental, interpersonal, financial, and administrative—on the ways that you can implement the approaches suggested in the Guide.

Despite the challenges, your hard work makes a difference in the lives of *all* the children in the classroom. It is clear, though, that children with Asperger Syndrome may need more help and support than some of your typically developing students. The investment of time and energy in the strategies listed above can pay off tenfold—not only for the child with Asperger Syndrome, but also for all the young learners in your school community.

You will benefit as well. As you learn more about children with differences and how to support their inclusion in the classroom, you will become a mentor to other educators who may be facing this challenge for the first time. Many of the skills that make you a powerful educator will help you succeed in the tasks ahead of you. Your curiosity will fuel your education about Asperger Syndrome and other disorders on the autism spectrum; your communication skills will help you create a meaningful alliance with the parents of the child with Asperger Syndrome in your class. Most of all, your collaboration skills will help you work as a key part of the team that will support the child with Asperger Syndrome throughout the course of the school year. The reward for your patience, kindness, and professionalism will be the unique sense of satisfaction that comes with knowing that you have helped a child with a special need and will have made a difference in that young person's life!

"I learned a lot from my first experience teaching a child with autism, and it has benefited not only how I teach students with autism, but also how I work with all my students."

— General education teacher