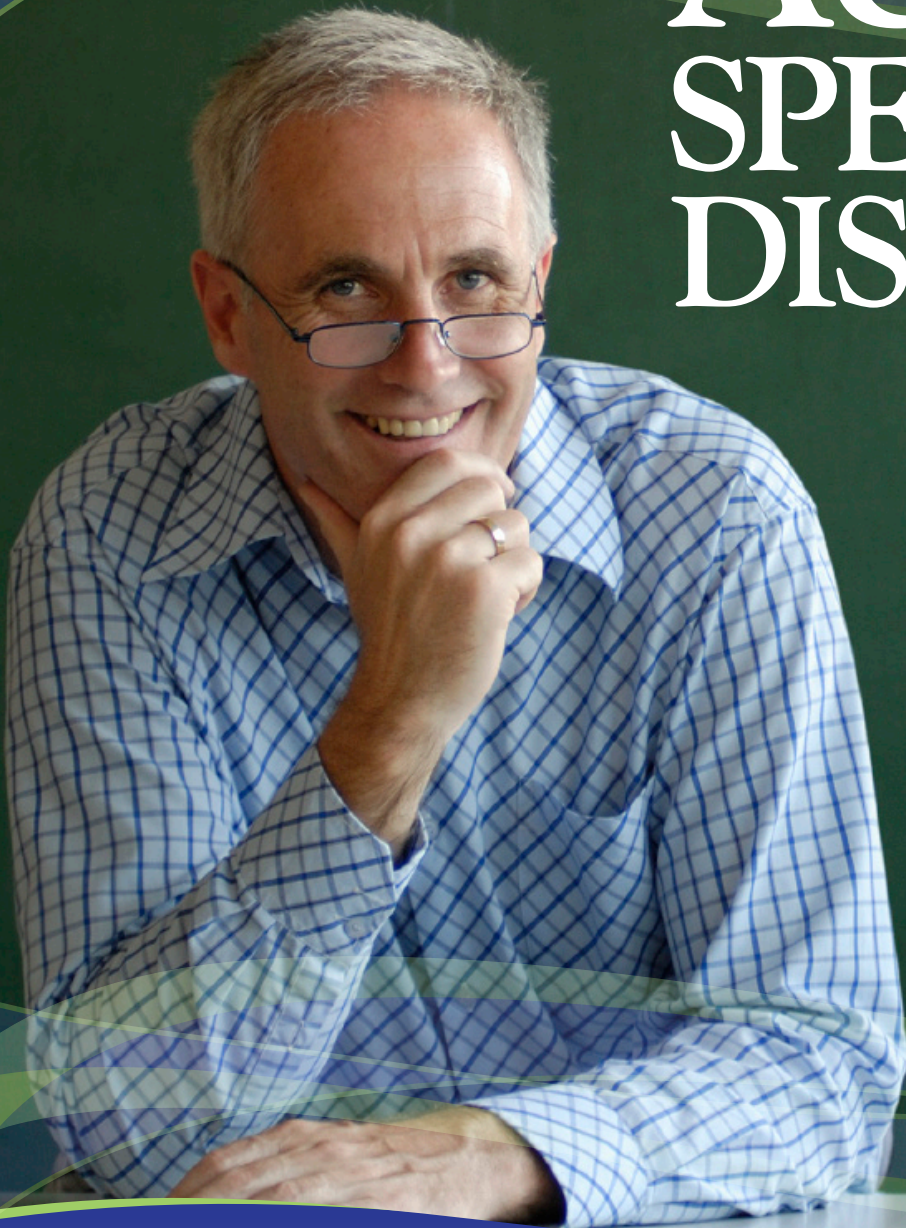


ADMINISTRATOR'S GUIDE  
to Educational Programming for Students with

# AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS



## *Dear School Administrator,*

The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) at the University of South Florida is pleased to provide you with this copy of *A School Administrator's Guide to Educational Programming for Students with Autism*. This guide provides materials and two tutorials that will assist you in addressing the educational needs of students on the autism spectrum who attend your school in both general education and special education classrooms. CARD is a statewide resource with expertise in autism spectrum disorders, providing support to teachers and administrators through consultation, technical assistance and training. As a state funded resource, all services provided by CARD are at no cost to our constituents or professionals.

### **Did you know that CARD-USF:**

- Facilitates a quarterly ESE workgroup meeting with autism program coordinators from each of the school districts. This workgroup provides participating districts with a consistent forum to share issues and opportunities, as well as to provide feedback related to CARD-USF's educational initiatives.
- Collaborates on the development of a yearly training plan with each of the school districts, designed to deliver instruction for teachers and educators pertaining to best educational practices for students with autism spectrum disorders.
- Offers a training day for teachers at the annual statewide CARD conference.
- Sponsors an annual summer institute in partnership with participating school districts.
- Provides regional trainings through our PEPSA project.
- Has developed the Learning Curve (<http://learningcurve.fmhi.usf.edu>), a website just for teachers that showcases creative, evidence-based strategies within classrooms and provides a variety of educational and web-based supports.

Please consider these materials as a package. In it, you will find a guide for school administrators that will identify educational foundations for students with autism, regardless of the classroom setting. You will also find tools for guiding a classroom observer to judge the strength and consistency of the specific indicators of quality educational programming within the classroom setting. Two observation instruments are provided—one for self-contained autism classrooms and the other for general education settings. As such, the observation instruments provide a solid starting point for program evaluation and professional development planning. You will also find files for printing additional copies of the observation instruments. This package of materials can be downloaded from the CARD Learning Curve website.

We hope you will find these materials helpful. CARD-USF is always available to provide follow up assistance upon your request. Thank you for your ongoing efforts to provide quality education for students with autism spectrum disorders.

# ADDRESSING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS FROM AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder with a profound impact on all areas of a child's development, specifically affecting the acquisition of cognitive, social and communication abilities across the life span. Understanding the nature of the disability is important for educators, as is the impact these deficits have on the student's performance in school.

Provided below is a summary of the ways the characteristics of autism spectrum disorders may influence how these students perform in school.

## *Cognitive Characteristics: Motivation, Attention and Memory*

- **Difficulty utilizing contextual information.** As a result, students may present differences in problem solving abilities, skills generalization or synthesis, and the discrimination of relevant from irrelevant information.
- **Teachers may notice** a student's varying dependence on routines, specific prompts and task closure, narrowly defined interests, unusual skills or abilities and limited capacity for self-regulation.
- **Inability to demonstrate learned skills,** particularly in settings outside the original instructional context or as a result of relatively minor changes to the environment.
- **Poor organizational abilities.** These deficits can affect a student's ability to independently complete and submit assignments or homework.

## *Communication Characteristics*

- **Use and understanding of verbal and non-verbal communication.** Students with autism spectrum disorders often experience difficulty interpreting and utilizing verbal and non-verbal information.



- **Interpretation or use of symbols and abstract representation of concepts.** Students with autism spectrum disorders, who experience difficulty understanding abstract concepts, are much more likely to encounter problems with typical classroom instruction and academic content.
- **Sequencing and time concepts.** Successfully learning time concepts and mastering time management skills is linked to adequate language abilities, a core deficit area for students with autism spectrum disorders.

## *Social Characteristics*

- **Social pragmatics**, such as the initiation, timing and completion of interpersonal exchanges, greatly influence a student's success in social learning experiences. Quite often students with autism spectrum disorders struggle in group learning activities because of limited social pragmatic abilities.
- **Interpretation of social situations**, or knowing how to anticipate, interpret and make judgments about a social situation, influences a student's ability to maintain social interactions during instructional activities.
- **Social standing among peers**, the ability to influence the behavior and perceptions of peers is also an important factor in successful learning. It's not uncommon for students with autism spectrum disorders to have difficulties with classmates and peers.

## *Sensory and Physical Characteristics*

- **Physical or medical conditions**. Students with autism spectrum disorders sometimes are affected by physical issues that may impact their learning, including chronic health conditions, medication regimens, special diets, food sensitivities or irregular sleep patterns.
- **Sensory processing differences**. Typically developing students are able to successfully process the auditory, visual and tactile information in a classroom setting and still focus their attention on the relevant aspects of the activity. Students with autism spectrum disorders may have difficulty regulating sensory information, thus, interfering with their learning. It is not uncommon for them to demonstrate differences in arousal levels and self-regulation, which play a significant role in their school success.
- **Poorly developed fine motor abilities**. It's not uncommon for many students with autism spectrum disorders to demonstrate relative weaknesses in handwriting, note taking and keyboarding skills due to motor planning and fine motor difficulties.



# ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Given the diverse range of cognitive, social and behavioral needs of students with autism spectrum disorders, a broad perspective is necessary to address their educational priorities. However, there are common elements of educational programming that should be considered as a foundation for successful outcomes.

- **Individualization.** Students with autism have educational and learning priorities that go beyond the scope of the academic curriculum. Many of these students receive special education services, driven by an individualized plan that articulates their educational priorities.
- **Collaborative Teaming.** Because of the complex educational needs of students with autism spectrum disorders, educational and clinical team members should work together to meet student goals. Families play a vital role in their child's education; evidence of their involvement should be apparent.
- **School and Community Inclusion.** A growing body of educational research continues to demonstrate that the educational priorities of many students with autism spectrum disorders, as well as those of their peers, can be effectively addressed in the context of typical school settings and experiences. Special educational services provide a continuum of supports that adapt to the learning context indicated by the student's individualized educational plan.
- **Positive Behavior Support.** Successful behavior supports are grounded in collaborative teaming, functional assessment and the acquisition of adaptive skills that promote meaningful life outcomes for the student.
- **Systematic and Participatory Instruction.** Behaviors that are characteristic of autism spectrum disorders often reflect underlying skill deficits in cognition, communication and social abilities. An effective educational program therefore incorporates systematic identification of priority skills, embeds targeted instruction into meaningful activities and promotes skill generalization in to new and difference contexts.
- **Data based decision making.** Systematically collected data provides evidence regarding the effectiveness of behavior supports and interventions. This information should be gathered and synthesized on a regular basis and used to monitor educational progress as well as modify instruction when necessary.
- **Visual and Environmental Supports.** Visual learning skills are often an area of relative strength for students with autism spectrum disorders. Therefore an effect educational program will provide visual information regarding routines, expectations and procedures throughout all aspect of a student's school experience.
- **Peer and student to student support.** Learning with and from their peers is particularly relevant for students with social interaction challenges. Because of this, frequent and consistent learning experiences shared between students of all ability levels leads to an appreciation for diversity throughout the entire school community.
- **Social competence as a priority.** An overriding educational goal for all students with autism spectrum disorders is the acquisition of greater social competence, which involves the ability to make appropriate social judgments and decisions, in addition to successfully perform the overt social behaviors that manifest these abilities.

# 10 ISSUES FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS TO ADDRESS

1. Autism spectrum disorders are the fastest increasing area of disability in the United States today. Every student and staff member at your school will come in contact with another student carrying this identification during their educational or professional careers.
2. Students with autism are more similar to other typically developing students than they are different. This recognition is the foundation for building strength based educational experiences that draw all students together into their school community.
3. Teachers of students with autism require additional support. The educational success of students with autism spectrum disorder is a direct reflection of well-informed and successful teachers and staff. School team members working with these students need specialized and ongoing training, relevant materials, and administrative support for their instructional activities.
4. Teaching and skills instruction are powerful interventions. From an educational perspective, problematic behaviors are most often a reflection of skill deficits. Therefore, educators as interventionists have an immediate and enduring impact on the quality of their students' lives.
5. Support is multidimensional. Support should be provided in multiple forms, including curricular accommodations or modifications, behavioral planning, environmental cues and devices, and facilitated support from peers as well as direct supervision from an adult.
6. Students and their learning environments are both mutually adaptable.. While a student with autism spectrum disorder can be supported to adapt to the rules, routines and demands of the school setting, the school environment must in turn accommodate the differences of all the learners within it. This applies to the culture of the school as a community, as well as to the classroom environment and school facilities.
7. Instructional goals are flexible and individualized. The playing field isn't always a level place. Students with autism may often have learning goals that are different from those of other students and require individual supports within the same learning context in order to achieve success toward those goals.
8. Every moment is a teachable moment. Students with autism learn most efficiently when skills are taught in their natural context. Because of this, every person that interacts with them is a teacher; every moment of the school day is a natural opportunity for teaching.
9. Accountability and measurement of performance applies to all students, including those who do not participate in annual standardized academic assessments. Alternative methods for measuring progress, including data collection methods and portfolio assessments will all yield information regarding the student's progress toward his or her individual goals and should be utilized on an ongoing basis.
10. Parents are the child's first teacher. As such, they are knowledgeable about instructional priorities and their child as a learner. Establishing respectful, collaborative partnerships with the families of students with autism is the starting point for successful learning both at school and within the larger community.



## *Florida's First Choice for Autism Support*

### OUR MISSION

The mission of the Center for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) at the University of South Florida is to provide support and assistance that optimizes the potential of people with autism and related disabilities. Our efforts to achieve this mission is exemplified in the four “Components for Caring” that are the focus of our work:

#### *Direct Assistance—*

Providing individualized consultation and coaching to people with autism and related disabilities and their families in natural community settings.

#### *Technical Assistance & Consultation—*

Undertaking activities on behalf of the programs (e.g., classroom, supported living residence, supported employment site, etc.) that serve people with autism and related disabilities.

#### *Professional Training—*

Providing instruction on autism and related disabilities through our workshops, conferences, in-service trainings, and community events.

#### *Public Education and Awareness—*

Developing and disseminating information about people with autism and related disabilities.

As one of seven regional university-based CARD sites, CARD-USF provides its services free of charge to individuals with autism and related disabilities, their families, related professionals, and the general public throughout a fourteen county catchment area in the West, Central, and Southwest Florida regions.

### ENDORSEMENT POLICY:

As a policy, CARD will not lend its name to the endorsement of any specific program, practice, or model that is offered for service to people with autism and related disabilities. We support evidence-based practices in our field. However, the sharing of information and training opportunities are key functions of the CARD program.

Events, activities, programs, and facilities of the University of South Florida are available to all without regard to race, color, marital status, sex, religion, national origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, Vietnam or disabled veteran status as provided by law and in the accordance with the University's respect for personal dignity.





The Center for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) provides support and assistance with the goal of optimizing the potential of people with autism and related disabilities

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*Visit the CARD Learning Curve at...  
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