AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER
COLLEGE CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Having a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in your classroom can be both rewarding and challenging. College students with ASD are generally highly intelligent and eager to learn more about their area of interest, but they struggle socially. Because each student is different, it is important to have a conversation with a student with ASD to get to know him or her better and to learn how best to work with the student. Below are some typical problem areas and suggestions for dealing with situations that might arise in your classroom.

ISSUE #1 – SOCIAL IMPAIRMENT:

- Struggle with eye contact and reading social cues
- Often do not understand sarcasm or jokes
- May speak with an unusual tone such as sing-song or robot-like
- Appear to interact less frequently with other people and the environment
- Tend not to seek to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with others
- May exhibit unusual responses when others show emotion
- May struggle to understand another person’s point of view
- May speak at length about a subject but not engage in the back and forth of conversation

SUGGESTIONS FOR MANAGEMENT:

- Some students with ASD do not look at people while speaking to them. Frequently faces are seen as fragmented information and only confuse their thought processes. Be tolerant of this situation.
- Conversely, some students with ASD might stare inappropriately in an attempt to read faces. This may be an indication that they are experiencing stimulus overload, are stressed, and must stare at the face in order to figure out what is going on with that person.
- Sometimes students with ASD speak as if they know more than they do. This can be interpreted as a power struggle. The best way to handle this is to find out what they do know on the topic, acknowledge their expertise, and then explain what you need to teach them. Students with ASD have a fear of being labeled “stupid” or “less intelligent” than others, so it is important that we do NOT lower their self-esteem in this way or get into a power struggle with them over this issue.
- If a student with ASD monopolizes conversations with questions or comments, suggest the student write down his/her thoughts and make an appointment to meet with you outside of class.
- Do not force group work on a student with ASD; allow an independent project, if possible. Some students with ASD do not feel comfortable in group work situations. If group work cannot be avoided and problems arise within the group, suggest the student with ASD take ownership of one section of the project.
- Speak in plain terms without the use of sarcasm. Jokes or sarcasm generally cannot be understood by a student with ASD. The student may take the comment literally, leading to social or academic mistakes.
ISSUE #2 – REPEATED AND STEREOTYPED PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR:

- Can be drawn to a repetitive movement linked to a sound such as hand-clapping
- May repeat words or phrases heard, called echolalia
- May have repetitive motions or behaviors ranging from obvious to discrete; examples might include hand flapping or walking in patterns
- Tend to have overly-focused interests and a preoccupation with parts of objects
- Prefer routine and schedule; inflexible; may become very upset if something unexpected occurs

SUGGESTIONS FOR MANAGEMENT:

- Keep a routine within your classroom; avoid surprises, pop quizzes, or unexpected changes.
- Allow students to take short breaks. Pacing is calming for some people with ASD.

ISSUE #3 – INTELLECTUAL MATTERS:

- May have average to high intelligence
- Focus on details; struggle to see big picture
- Often have visual-spatial strength

SUGGESTIONS FOR MANAGEMENT:

- Make directions clear, and provide step-by-step instructions in written format.
- Have clearly defined expectations of students.
- Allow extra time for verbal responses in class since those with ASD need time to collect their thoughts before answering. Speech is the often the weakest way in which they process information.
- Students with ASD tend to have excellent visual-spatial abilities. Provide visual supports to promote understanding.

ISSUE #4 – POSSIBLE SENSORY PROBLEMS:

- Over- or under-reaction to certain sights, sounds, smells, textures, or tastes

SUGGESTIONS FOR MANAGEMENT:

- Some students might fiddle with objects, known as “fidget toys,” during class or while speaking to you. This is not meant to be disrespectful. Students with ASD can experience high levels of anxiety, and fidget toys allow students with ASD to channel their nerves while gaining valuable sensory input.
- Allow students with ASD to sit in seats without glare from lights or windows.
- Refrain from bringing unnecessary smells into the classroom (perfume, food, etc.).
- Be tolerant of students with ASD who ask to wear noise-cancelling headphones.

RESOURCES:

AHEAD.org  Autism Speaks  National Institute of Mental Health
Aspergersociety.org  HEATH Resource Center