

Administrators

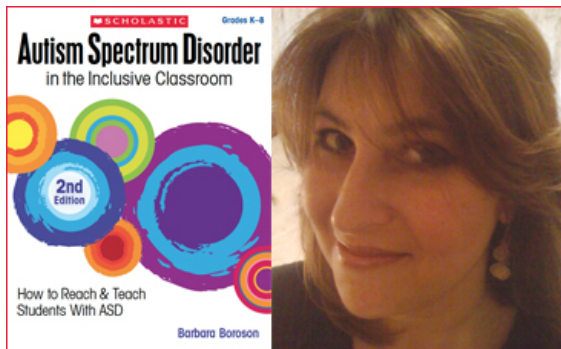
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Who's That Knocking on My Door?



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How to Facilitate an Inclusive Environment for Students on the Autism Spectrum.

By Barbara Boroson

Even as classrooms become more diverse, teachers are expected to bring all students to a common destination. Differentiating for students on the autism spectrum in this seemingly paradoxical context sets a high bar for general educators. With autism affecting one out of every 68 students today, students on the spectrum are being placed in general education and inclusive classrooms in unprecedented numbers. These students commonly bring myriad challenges with them: anxiety; erratic sensory systems; mercurial moods, actions, and reactions; repetitive, rigidly restricted areas of interest and conversation; limited language or social communication; and many other challenges. In a large classroom, the assaults on these challenges can be relentless; these students are easily overwhelmed, and teachers and others reliably come knocking on your door. Here are a few key strategies to help you support your faculty and your students on the spectrum, their classmates, and their families.

1. The Inclusive Classroom: In this era of Common Core and other new, rigorous curricular standards, general educators struggle to guide these uncommon kids toward common goals. For this reason, you may find teachers teaching in uncommon ways. Enlightened teachers of students on the spectrum (especially those teachers who have read my book!) will make frequent use of, for example, interactive visual schedules (as described in Chapter 3); sensory sanctuaries, minimally decorated classroom spaces, and creative seating arrangements (Chapter 4); lessons that incorporate seemingly obscure elements (Chapters 5 and 11), and innovative instructive and adaptive technology (every chapter).

Many teachers around the country share with me that they feel intense pressure from their principals to exhibit a highly decorated classroom with a conventional seating arrangement and tried-and-true instructional strategies. Consider that classrooms can and should be cheerful and inviting without being cluttered or overwhelming. Encourage teachers to aim for clear, calm, and color-blocked. Trust that lessons that reach far outside the box may draw all kinds of different learners *into* the box. Try to support and celebrate the ingenuity of your teachers as you acknowledge that extreme differentiation can occur in unexpected ways.

2. The Inclusive Building: As districts become ever more inclusive, the education of students on the autism spectrum extends beyond the walls of the classroom. Consider that elementary students are out of their all-important comfort zones as soon as they step outside their differentiated classroom, so their anxiety is elevated. Be aware that at all levels music, art, phys ed, and even library demand intense sensory immersion and peer collaboration. When students on the autism spectrum arrive in the cacophonous gym or the pungent, sticky art room, sensory overload can happen instantly. As students decamp to lunch and recess, carefully calibrated staff-to-student ratios fly out the window even as the social and sensory demands skyrocket.

To this end, *all* faculty and staff members should be educated about ASD and given strategies for meeting students' needs across various contexts. Make a point of inviting all special area teachers to team meetings, and share the conclusions and recommendations of team meetings with *all* involved personnel. Consider scheduling [PD sessions](#) specifically geared to the needs of special area faculty and of bus and building staff. Pass around copies of the four reproducible Fact & Tip Sheets included at the back of my book (pp.227–234)—one each for special area teachers, coaches and phys ed teachers, classroom paraprofessionals, and bus and building staff.

3. The Inclusive Community: Believe it or not, the ASD-related challenge that teachers all over the country report as the *most* vexing is not any of those mentioned above. Instead, it's parents. Educators and parents/caregivers of students with ASD often experience the same students very variably. While educators tackle acute academic and social challenges, parents confront chronic practical and painfully emotional challenges. These discrepant perspectives often cause friction between school and home. Moreover, any one child can function dramatically differently in different contexts—a scenario that can result in doubt and distrust between teachers and parents.

School leaders often find themselves caught between these conflicting factions, but are, in fact, perfectly positioned to serve as liaisons. Help your teachers to understand that living with a child on the autism spectrum takes a heavy and never-ending toll on a family in practical, financial, emotional, and other ways. Meanwhile, help parents and caregivers to understand that school is representative of the *real world*, and may therefore be quite challenging. Remind both parents and teachers that with careful guidance and support, school should stretch students gently outside their comfort zones—stretch them but not *stress* them—because that is where the learning and growth happen. Through mutual understanding, parents and professionals become a powerful force in bringing out the best in the challenging children we share.

The challenges of students on the autism spectrum are likely to pervade every aspect of their functioning and every corridor and classroom in your district. Facilitating a truly inclusive environment means bringing everyone on board with practical strategies, personal investment, open minds, acceptance, and an abundance of patience—educational standards that will ultimately benefit us all.

Barbara Boroson is the author of Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom, How to Reach and Teach Students with ASD (Scholastic, 2nd Edition, 2016). She is a nationally recognized keynote speaker and professional development provider with 25 years of experience in autism spectrum education, and is the mother of a teenage son with ASD.