

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO ARE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Facts & Tips for Special Area Teachers

The information on this sheet will help you create a positive learning environment for students on the autism spectrum while they are with you. Thanks for your willingness to learn about and support them!

Students who are on the autism spectrum are quirky, endearing kids who struggle with a wide range of challenges in any or all of the following areas:

Anxiety: Students on the spectrum often have limited coping skills, which can lead to extreme anxiety in unfamiliar situations. They depend heavily on routines and structure, and may cling to certain objects or repetitive interests to help them feel safe.

- ✓ Ask the teacher to help you prepare a visual schedule to create predictability and reduce anxiety.

Rigidity: Students on the spectrum tend to be rigid rule followers. Rules make life more manageable and predictable. *These students very much want to follow the rules but may not understand exactly what the rules are or what they imply.* This same rigidity means these students may get extremely agitated when rules are broken or when something unexpected happens.

- ✓ Use concrete and specific language. Try to make your expectations as clear as possible.

Communication: Many of these students express themselves in unusual ways or have a hard time making their thoughts and needs known. They may also have difficulty understanding your words.

- ✓ Remember that making conversation is a developing skill. Be patient and supportive.

Socialization: These students struggle socially. Interactions may be awkward, one-sided, or nonexistent. Be aware that social challenges make these students very vulnerable to being bullied.

- ✓ Keep a watchful and protective eye out for provocation, bullying, teasing, or other disrespectful treatment by peers.

Sensation: Most students on the autism spectrum take in far too much or far too little sensory input. Hand-flapping, rocking, and similar behaviors are related to sensory challenges.

- ✓ Adapt the sensory environment based on individual needs and teacher input. *Offer options* whenever possible.

Behavior: *All behavior is a form of communication.*

Difficult behaviors indicate that something is wrong. Chances are, a behavioral problem is the result of one of the challenges described above.

- ✓ When students on the autism spectrum misbehave, they need help— not consequences.

Inside/Outside: Some students on the autism spectrum demonstrate obvious, *external* challenges: They may flick their fingers or talk endlessly about a single topic.

- ✓ Don't *underestimate* these students; they may have lots of clever, creative ideas going on inside.

Other students are primarily affected by *internal* challenges: They may appear typical.

- ✓ Don't *overestimate* these students; they may struggle intensely with many challenges that can't readily be seen.

Know Your Student

- Don't reinvent the wheel! Talk with the classroom teacher or case manager to find out what your student's special interests are, how best to engage them, what tends to set a student off, and what makes things better.
- Read the IEP to find out more about the challenges this student faces and what goals have been set.
- Attend team meetings to learn about current stressors and new strategies. If you can't get there, ask for a summary of the discussion and recommendations.

Flip the page for specific suggestions!

Facts & Tips for Special Area Teachers, *cont.*

Perspectives on Art

Break the Mold: Sensory challenges abound in the art room, any of which may be unbearable: the feel of fingerpaint, glue, clay, charcoal, papier maché, or oil pastels; the smell of paints, markers, plaster, pottery dust; the sound of markers, Styrofoam, or wood sanders. Offer choices of medium.

Paint with a Broad Brush: Be aware that fine motor and visual-motor challenges may cause students to grip and press on art implements so hard that they tear the paper or so lightly that their work is illegible. Allow use of various implements and accept alternate outcomes.

Realism Versus Impressionism: Some students on the autism spectrum struggle to differentiate colors, shapes, and other detailed elements of pictures, such as subject versus shadow and figure versus ground. Accept general impressions if details are elusive.

Music Notes

Scale It Back: The sounds of some instruments may be painful to some kids—sometimes. Watch the volume. Headphones, earplugs, and area rugs are effective at making the sound and acoustics manageable for students on the autism spectrum.

Tune In: Sensory discrimination challenges may prevent some students from distinguishing among musical tones and rhyming sounds. Allow flexible types of musical interpretation.

Drum Up Alternatives: Consider fine motor, oral motor, and visual-motor challenges when students play or read music. Offer instruments that require less or different types of coordination.

Library Reference

Brave New World: Moving abruptly from the noisy hallway into the silent library can be very challenging for students on the autism spectrum. Help them shift gears by providing gentle support and allowing them time to make the adjustment.

Great Expectations: Among many students on the spectrum, decoding is far stronger than comprehension. Look for books that pair age-level content with simpler text. Graphic novels can be very accessible to students on the spectrum.

A Series of Fortunate Events: Engagement is one of the greatest obstacles in getting students on the spectrum to read. Take the time to introduce students to a series. Once your student is acquainted with Violet, Claude, Sunny, and Count Olaf (or with Harry, Ron, and Hermione), those characters provide a thread of familiarity that can open up whole new worlds.

Classroom Teacher Notes:

Elaborating on Collaborating

Group work is a special challenge for students on the spectrum. Here's how you can maximize success:

- Give a whole-class lesson on group-work skills including flexibility, negotiation, compromise, tolerating mistakes, problem solving, and recognizing when and how to get help.
- Choose group-mates mindfully.
- Create structure by assigning roles that are suited to individual strengths. Consider positions like media manager, art critic, music critic, efficiency expert, or fact-checker.

For more information, touch base with the classroom teacher or principal (or browse through *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom*).

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SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO ARE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Facts & Tips for Classroom Paraprofessionals

The information on this sheet will help you play a positive role in the school experience of students on the autism spectrum. Thank you for your willingness to learn about and support these kids!

Students who are on the autism spectrum are quirky, endearing kids who struggle with a wide range of challenges in any or all of the following areas:

Anxiety: Students on the spectrum often have limited coping skills, which can lead to extreme anxiety in unfamiliar situations. Visual schedules, routines, structure, and repetitive interests help them feel safe. *Be patient and supportive.* Life on the autism spectrum can be overwhelming. That's why you're here.

Rigidity: Students on the spectrum tend to be rigid rule followers. Rules help make life feel more manageable and predictable. *These students very much want to follow the rules but may not understand exactly what the rules are or what they imply.* This same rigidity means these students may get extremely agitated when rules are broken or when something unexpected happens.

Communication: Many of these students express themselves in unusual ways or have a hard time making their thoughts and needs known. They may also have difficulty understanding your words. Use visual symbols and concrete, specific language to make communication as clear as possible.

Socialization: These students struggle to make friends. Interactions may be awkward, one-sided, or nonexistent. Be aware that social challenges make these students very vulnerable to bullying. Keep a watchful and protective eye out for provocation, teasing, or other disrespectful treatment by peers. Many people don't see past the challenges; help others recognize your student's fabulousness!

Sensation: Most students on the spectrum take in far too much or far too little sensory input. Hand-flapping, rocking, and similar behaviors are necessary to help students cope with their sensory challenges. When they feel overwhelmed, be calm and reassuring. Loud, angry voices will make things worse, not better.

Inside/Outside: Some students on the spectrum demonstrate obvious, *external* challenges: They may flick their fingers or talk endlessly about a single topic. Don't *underestimate* these students; they may have lots of clever, creative ideas going on inside. Other students are primarily affected by *internal* challenges: They may appear typical. Don't *overestimate* these students; they may struggle intensely with many challenges that can't readily be seen.

Behavior: *All behavior is a form of communication.* Difficult behaviors indicate that something is wrong. When students on the autism spectrum misbehave, they need help—not consequences. Be a detective. Look for patterns and warning signs so that you can ease the situations that trigger strong reactions before difficult behaviors erupt.

For guidance on offering meaningful one-on-one support in the classroom, flip the page.

Facts & Tips for Classroom Paraprofessionals, *cont.*

Support for Supporters

On the Front Lines: You are on the front lines of challenging behavior. There will be moments when it is hard for you to stay calm and patient—but it’s crucial that you remain professional. When a student loses control, try not to take her words or behaviors personally. She cannot control herself or learn independently yet. Remember that impulsivity is *part of her disability*. Your student needs to be guided to learn more positive ways of functioning in the classroom and beyond. Be prepared to repeat yourself. This kind of learning takes time.

What’s Up: While the teacher must attend to the needs of many students, you have a uniquely up-close-and-personal perspective to see details the teacher cannot. When you notice small signs of progress or new areas of concern, offer to share them with the classroom teacher.

Backing Off: *The best help you can provide is to gently guide your student toward independence.* Be on the lookout for hot spots—those times when he needs you to help him manage a challenging situation. But also look for times when you can fade your support and let him do his thing, independently.

Don’t worry about “appearing” busy: The teacher and principal understand that you don’t need to be interacting every moment in order to be doing your job well. This doesn’t mean you can zone out. Instead, you need to remain fully engaged and attentive to your student, even from a distance.

Keeping It on the D.L.: Be aware that all personal information about specific students must, by law, be kept strictly confidential. You may not share *any* personal information about students with other building staff, bus drivers, students, other parents, or with your friends and family. Don’t even share the *name* of the student to whom you are assigned.

You can discuss this student only with other school professionals who work with him or her, such as the classroom teacher, principal, or therapists. But take care that such conversations are not overheard by others.

The Rules of Cool: Needing a 1:1 aide can be a tremendous source of embarrassment, especially in upper elementary, middle, and high school. Do your best not to make your student feel singled out and different. Keep your interventions discreet and low key, give him a little space when possible, and offer help to other students when you are available.

Classroom Teacher Notes:

For more information, touch base with the classroom teacher or principal (or browse through *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom*).

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SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO ARE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Facts & Tips for Building Staff and Bus Staff

The information on this sheet will help you play a positive role in the entire school experience of students on the autism spectrum. Thank you for your willingness to learn about and support these kids!

Students who are on the autism spectrum are quirky, endearing kids who struggle with a wide range of challenges in any or all of the following areas:

Anxiety: Students on the spectrum often have limited coping skills, which can lead to extreme anxiety in unfamiliar situations. They depend heavily on routines, structure, and repetitive interests to help them feel safe.

Rigidity: Students on the spectrum tend to be rigid rule followers. Rules help make life feel more manageable and predictable. *These students very much want to follow the rules but may not understand exactly what the rules are or what they imply.* This same rigidity means these students tend to get extremely agitated when rules are broken or when something unexpected happens.

Communication: Many of these students have a hard time making their thoughts and needs known clearly. They may also have difficulty understanding your words.

Socialization: These students rarely understand how to interact with others in socially expected ways. Conversation may be awkward, one-sided, or nonexistent. Be aware that social challenges make these students very vulnerable to bullying.

Sensation: Students on the autism spectrum often have sensory challenges. They may take in far too much or far too little sensory input. Hand-flapping, spinning, rocking, and similar behaviors are necessary to help students to cope with their sensory challenges.

Inside/Outside: Some students on the spectrum demonstrate many obvious *external* challenges: They may flick their fingers, have trouble speaking, or talk endlessly about a single obscure topic. Don't *underestimate* these students; they may have lots of clever, creative ideas going on inside. Other students are primarily affected by *internal* challenges: They may seem typical in appearance or in conversation. Don't *overestimate* these students; they may struggle intensely with cognitive, communicative, emotional, sensory, and other challenges that can't readily be seen.

Behavior: *All behavior is a form of communication.* Difficult behaviors tell you that something is wrong. When students who are on the spectrum misbehave, they need help—not consequences.

Here are some simple ways you can support these kids in your everyday interactions with them:

- ✓ Use concrete and specific language. Try to make your expectations as clear as possible.
- ✓ Be calm and reassuring. Loud, angry voices will make things worse, not better.
- ✓ Remember that making conversation is a developing skill. Be patient and supportive.
- ✓ Praise them for the skills they are doing well and remember that manners may not be a priority—yet.
- ✓ Keep a watchful and protective eye out for bullying or other disrespectful treatment by peers.
- ✓ Above all, be mindful of the enormous challenges these students face at every turn and help them feel safe and supported in our school.

Flip the page for specific suggestions in your area of the school community!

Facts & Tips for Building Staff and Bus Staff, *cont.*

Cafeteria Workers: The cafeteria is sensory chaos: Kids are shouting, chairs are scraping, smells are stewing. The lunch line presents new challenges every day, requiring quick thinking and decision making. The social pressure is intense. And it's all without the support of the teacher and the comfort of the classroom! Be patient and help students through this unrelentingly stressful experience.

Recess Monitors: The playground, which is supposed to be fun, can be a sensory and social nightmare for students on the spectrum. They may need help taking turns with equipment and understanding the rules of games. They often get teased, left out, or bullied, so they need close supervision when they are out among their peers. Keep in mind that you can't recognize bullying from a distance; keep a close eye and ear on peer interactions to be sure that everyone is OK.

School Nurse: The fragile equilibrium of students on the autism spectrum can be easily shattered. Some students have strong sensory reactions and feel discomfort very intensely, even if their symptoms may not seem so bad to you. They're not being hypochondriacs; trust that if they say something hurts, something hurts. But be aware that some students may find it very difficult to communicate clearly what hurts and in what way it hurts.

On the other hand, some students on the spectrum may be less aware of pain and discomfort than others. They can get badly injured but feel nothing. They need to be watched for fever, nausea, dizziness, internal bleeding, and other internal problems, especially following a fall or collision.

Office Staff: Know that it may be a significant achievement for students on the spectrum simply to leave the classroom on their own. Remembering the route to the office, and figuring out what to do when they get to you, may be all they can handle now. Congratulate them on a job well done, even if they don't greet you with a proper "Good morning."

Custodians: You are often the first responders when drinks spill or when vomit happens. These incidents are extremely upsetting to students on the spectrum because their rigid rules and expectations may have been accidentally and dramatically broken. Also keep in mind that some students have difficulty with motor coordination, which may make them especially clumsy. No matter what has happened, be gentle and reassuring and know that the incident is far more troubling to them than it is to you.

Bus Staff: The bus ride poses endless challenges for students on the autism spectrum. It's loud, it's crowded, it's a social minefield, and it's an anxious transitional time between one comfort zone (home) and another (school). You cannot be available to support sensory challenges and social skills while you're driving, but you can encourage vulnerable students to sit near you and allow them to wear earplugs or headphones if it helps them feel better.

Keeping it on the D.L.

Be aware that any information you receive about specific students must, by law, be kept strictly confidential. You may not share any personal information about students with other building staff, bus drivers, students, or with your friends and family.

However, if you observe or are involved in an incident with a student, discuss it with the school personnel who work with a particular child—e.g., his or her teacher, the principal, or the student's aide. But take care that such conversations are not overheard by others.

Classroom Teacher Notes:

For more information, touch base with the classroom teacher or principal (or browse through *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom*).

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SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO ARE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Facts & Tips for PE Teachers and Coaches

The information on this sheet will help you create a positive learning environment for students on the autism spectrum while they are with you. Thanks for your willingness to learn about and support them!

Students who are on the autism spectrum are quirky, endearing kids who struggle with a wide range of challenges in any or all of the following areas:

Anxiety: Students on the spectrum often have limited coping skills, which can lead to extreme anxiety in unfamiliar situations. They depend heavily on routines and structure, and may cling to certain objects or repetitive interests to help them feel safe.

- ✓ Ask the teacher to help you prepare a visual schedule to create predictability and reduce anxiety.

Rigidity: Students on the spectrum tend to be rigid rule followers. Rules make life more manageable and predictable. *These students very much want to follow the rules but may not understand exactly what the rules are or what they imply.* This same rigidity means these students may get extremely agitated when rules are broken or when something unexpected happens.

- ✓ Use concrete and specific language to make your expectations as clear as possible.

Communication: Many of these students express themselves in unusual ways or have a hard time making their thoughts and needs known. They may also have difficulty understanding your words.

- ✓ Remember that making conversation is a developing skill. Be patient and supportive.

Socialization: These students struggle socially. Interactions may be awkward, one-sided, or nonexistent. Be aware that social challenges make these students very vulnerable to being bullied.

- ✓ Keep a watchful and protective eye out for provocation, bullying, teasing, or other disrespectful treatment by peers.

Sensation: Most students on the spectrum take in far too much or far too little sensory input. Hand-flapping, rocking, and similar behaviors are related to sensory challenges.

- ✓ Adapt the sensory environment based on individual needs and teacher input. Offer options whenever possible.

Behavior: *All behavior is a form of communication.* Difficult behaviors indicate that something is wrong. Chances are, a behavioral problem is the result of one of the challenges described above.

- ✓ When students on the spectrum misbehave, they need help—not consequences.

Inside/Outside: Some students on the autism spectrum demonstrate obvious, *external* challenges: They may flick their fingers or talk endlessly about a single topic.

- ✓ Don't *underestimate* these students; they may have lots of clever, creative ideas going on inside.

Other students are primarily affected by *internal* challenges: They may appear typical.

- ✓ Don't *overestimate* these students; they may struggle intensely with many challenges that can't readily be seen.

Flip the page for specific suggestions!

Facts & Tips for PE Teachers and Coaches, *cont.*

Overcoming Hurdles in PE Class

Take One for the Team: Being part of a team is a special challenge for students on the spectrum.

Before breaking into teams, take a few minutes to conduct a whole-class lesson on teamwork. Review important skills like flexibility, patience, negotiation, compromise, tolerating mistakes, problem solving, and recognizing when and how to get help. Choose teammates kindly and mindfully. Create structure by offering positions that play to individual strengths, such as timekeeper, scorekeeper, equipment manager, efficiency expert, or sportscaster.

Run Interference: The sounds of pounding feet and skidding sneakers may be overwhelming to students on the spectrum. Look for signs of discomfort. Offer breaks or, *if necessary*, less intense ways of participating.

Par for the Course: Poor athletic performance may be due to challenges of gross motor, visual-motor, or hand-eye coordination; motor planning; focus; or auditory processing. Offer gentle guidance and optional activities that play to a student's skills.

Lay Out the Game Plan: Sit everyone down quietly to explain or review the rules of a new game. Comprehension will be up when noise and movement and other distractions are down. Also be aware that these students may not have been included in pick-up games in the neighborhood, so they may not know basic rules of common games.

Touch Base: In physical education, adrenaline flows and aggressive instincts surge. This is a socially vulnerable time for students on the autism spectrum. You can't see or hear bullying from the pitcher's mound. Move around the field, the dugout, or the court to listen and look closely for signs of trouble.

And They're Off: Some students on the spectrum have difficulty with balance and stability. Activities that require them to be off the ground or upside down, such as climbing, gymnastics, or yoga, may be dizzyingly disorienting. Be at the ready with extra support or alternative activities, if needed.

Foul! Students on the autism spectrum are rigid rule followers. They've been taught all their lives that it's never OK to push others or to grab a toy from someone else's hands. Suddenly, in competitive sports, *shoving*, *tackling*, and *stealing* are encouraged and celebrated. To kids on the spectrum, that's just WRONG. Teach them that here, in PE class, during specific games, it really is OK.

Classroom Teacher Notes:

Know Your Student

- Don't reinvent the wheel! Talk with the classroom teacher or case manager to find out what tends to set a student off and what makes things better.
- Read the IEP to find out more about the challenges this student faces and what goals have been set.
- Attend team meetings to learn about current stressors and new strategies. If you can't get there, ask for a summary of the discussion and recommendations.

For more information, touch base with the classroom teacher or principal (or browse through *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom*).

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SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO ARE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Facts & Tips for Related Service Providers

The information on this sheet will help you create a supportive therapeutic environment for students on the autism spectrum during their time with you. Thank you for your willingness to learn about and support them!

Students who are on the autism spectrum are quirky, endearing kids who struggle with a wide range of challenges in any or all of the following areas:

Anxiety: Students on the spectrum often have limited coping skills, which can lead to extreme anxiety in unfamiliar situations. They depend on routines and structure and may cling to certain objects or repetitive interests to help them feel safe.

- ✓ Prepare a visual schedule for your sessions to create predictability and reduce anxiety. If necessary, carry a transition schedule with you to and from sessions. Ask teachers to share access to schedule-making resources with you.

Rigidity: Students on the spectrum tend to be rigid rule followers. Rules make life more manageable and predictable. *These students want to follow the rules but may not understand exactly what the rules are or what they imply.* This same rigidity means that these students may get extremely agitated when rules are broken or when something unexpected happens.

- ✓ Use concrete and specific language. Try to make your expectations as clear as possible.

Communication: Many of these students express themselves in unusual ways or have a hard time making their thoughts and needs known. They may also have difficulty understanding your words or instructions.

- ✓ Remember that making conversation is a developing skill. Supplement your words with visual prompts and plenty of patience.

Engagement: Students on the spectrum tend to be deeply focused on specialized areas of interest. This can prevent them from attending to or engaging in your lessons.

- ✓ To boost comfort and familiarity, let them practice new skills and strategies in the context of their special interests before expanding to other topics.

Sensation: Students on the spectrum often use repetitive, self-stimulatory behaviors (“stims”), like hand-flapping or rocking, to regulate an imbalance of sensation in their systems.

- ✓ Creating a calm, soothing therapeutic environment will reduce students’ need to rely on stims. Do not try to prohibit stimming behaviors, as they are important coping mechanisms.

Behavior: *All behavior is a form of communication.* Difficult behaviors indicate that something is wrong. Chances are, a behavioral problem is the result of one of the challenges described above.

- ✓ Ask to be included in team meetings or to receive written summaries of them, so you can learn about relevant stressors and strategies. Remember that when students on the spectrum misbehave, they need help—not consequences.

Inside/Outside: Some students who are on the autism spectrum demonstrate obvious, *external* challenges: They may flick their fingers or talk endlessly about a single topic.

- ✓ Don’t *underestimate* these students; they may have lots of clever, creative ideas going on inside. Other students are primarily affected by *internal* challenges: They may appear typical.
- ✓ Don’t *overestimate* these students; they may struggle intensely with many challenges that can’t readily be seen.

Flip the page to find ideas for your discipline!

Facts & Tips for Related Service Providers, *cont.*

Speech & Language Therapy

That Sounds Familiar: Students on the spectrum often use scripting (i.e., reciting lines from movies, TV shows, commercials) to communicate. They also tend to perseverate on certain topics. Scripting and perseverating are ways of making conversation predictable. Provide and practice an array of expectable responses to varied conversational prompts that can be memorized and performed by rote.

Look Who's Talking: Students on the spectrum tend to communicate more effectively with adults than with peers because adult language tends to be more straightforward and predictable. Their interactions with you are not representative of their overall functioning. Be sure to obtain a clear sense of the challenges they encounter in all contexts.

Power Up: New augmentative and assistive communication devices and apps are being created all the time for minimally verbal or nonverbal students. These tools facilitate interaction and enhance motivation for students on the spectrum. Stay up to date with new technologies in this area.

Occupational and Physical Therapy

Common Sense: As many as 95 percent of students on the autism spectrum face sensory challenges. Be sure that IEP goals address sensory processing skills, and make sensory integration therapy a priority when working with these students.

Share Your Wisdom: OT and PT challenges have a significant effect on these students in the classroom. Share your wisdom and adaptive strategies, devices, and tools with classroom teachers, and champion the use of sensory spaces, rooms, and paths in your school.

Teach and Reteach: Many students on the spectrum have difficulty retaining new information and skills. Be patient if you need to teach, reteach, and practice the same skills many times before they are assimilated into cognitive memory or muscle memory.

Counseling

Whatever Works: Students on the spectrum may not be able to tell you what's on their mind or how they are feeling. Make good use of social stories, as well as aspects of play therapy, art therapy, and drama therapy techniques—at all ages—to facilitate communication and social learning.

Lunchtime Learning: Join forces with speech–language pathologists to offer ongoing social skill groups to students on the spectrum during lunch or after school—even if it's not mandated.

Buddy Up: Recruit typically developing students to volunteer as buddies in classrooms and hallways and during unstructured periods like lunch, recess, and study hall. Create an afterschool club to promote social interaction and build relationships between students on the spectrum and their typically developing peers.

Classroom Teacher Notes:

Generally Speaking . . .

Students on the autism spectrum have significant difficulty generalizing new skills from one setting to another. Here are some ways you can support their efforts:

- Be sure to let students know specifically that the goal is for them to use their new skills *everywhere*, not just in the therapy room.
- While small pull-out sessions may be necessary for focused skill instruction, try to add push-in support whenever and wherever possible to help these students apply their new skills in natural settings.
- Assign “homework” that requires students to practice their new skills at home, in the classroom, and out in the community.
- Let teachers and parents or guardians know what skills you are actively working on so that they can reinforce your directives across contexts.