



## ACCOMMODATIONS AND SUPPORTS FOR SCHOOL-AGE STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Accommodations and supports are designed to minimize obstacles to learning or participating in the educational environment. The accommodations and supports your child receives will depend on your child's needs and the goals set in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan. The list below contains some common ones used with students on the autism spectrum. Many of the supports listed are visual. Often children on the autism spectrum are visual learners, meaning they process information better when it is shown to them. Visual supports can also help children on the spectrum express themselves better.

Make sure to include specifics in your child's IEP about when and how all accommodations and supports are to be used. And make sure you learn how to use strategies that are used at school at home. Many of the tools used at school will also be helpful at home when used in a consistent manner.

*Social Stories™*: Social Stories™ describe an event or situation with the intent of explaining the circumstances, perspectives, and expected behaviors that occur during the event or situation. To be effective, Social Stories™ should be highly individualized. Frequently, they may include pictures or photos of the individuals involved. They can be particularly helpful when preparing for an out of the ordinary situation, such as school picture day or a fire alarm, or when preparing for a new or difficult activity, for example, going to a restaurant, on a field trip, to a party, or to the dentist. Once created, a Social Story™ should be read to the individual many times until the expectations conveyed in the story are well understood. Social Stories™ can be created on an iPad® or other electronic device, which may make them more accessible and/or desirable for some students.

*Picture Schedules*: One of the common features of many individuals on the autism spectrum is the need for routine and structure. Picture schedules provide a visual representation of what is going to happen during the day or within a certain part of

the day (for example, the details of a certain activity). They are helpful in reducing worry over “what comes next” and in helping smooth transitions. To be most effective, teachers and caregivers should check off or otherwise indicate when an activity has been completed (or have the child do it)

*Choice Boards:* Choice boards display a limited number of options for activities. Sometimes individuals on the autism spectrum have difficulty figuring out what to do next. A choice board can help simplify the decision making process and promote independence.

*Visual Communication Systems:* Every individual on the autism spectrum has difficulty with communication, whether or not they are able to speak. A visual communication system uses picture symbols in place of words and can be useful to some degree with all children, regardless of verbal language ability. Two common visual communication systems are the Picture Exchange Communication System™ (PECS) and sign language.

*Behavior Charts/Reward Systems:* Behavior charts and reward systems are a good way to positively reinforce desired behaviors. They target only a few behaviors to influence at a time and then keep track of how many times the behavior is achieved by using tokens, stickers, smiley faces, or another visual reminder of accomplishment. When a certain number of tokens are earned, they can be turned in for a larger incentive. Incentives and goals should be constantly monitored to make sure they remain appropriate and encouraging.

*Computer Use:* Handwriting can be difficult for many children on the autism spectrum. If your child can type faster than he or she can write, it may be a good idea to have your child use a computer to take notes and to complete written assignments. Additionally, computers can be good for organizing materials. Rather than have a folder with handouts, handouts can be emailed to your child or downloaded from a central site, and your child can store them on a computer. A teacher or parent may need to assist the child in coming up with a good organization system for the computer.

*Extra Time:* Students on the autism spectrum may need longer to accomplish certain tasks than their typically developing peers need. For example, extra time may be provided to take tests or quizzes, to turn in homework and/or projects, or even to get to and from class. Some students on the autism spectrum are

dismissed from each class a few minutes early so they can navigate the hallways when they are not so congested. The benefits of early dismissal need to be weighed against the loss of time in the classroom – particularly if the teacher tends to make or explain assignments at the end of class. If it is determined that extra time between classes is needed, an accommodation can be made for how the student is assigned homework (for example, by receiving a sheet that explains the assignment in detail and providing some other time in the day for the student to ask for clarification).

*Organizational Support:* Students on the spectrum can confront a number of organizational challenges at school. These can relate to losing or forgetting things (such as losing homework or papers, forgetting to turn things in, not knowing what homework is assigned, coming to class without needed books or supplies, and forgetting permission slips, lunch money, or gym clothes). Organizational challenges may also relate to organization of thought (as required in writing a paper or figuring out order of operations in a math problem). Checklists, folder systems, color-coded class materials, daily binder checks, assignment notebooks, visual prompts, electronic reminders, and graphic organizers can be used to help, if the student is taught how to use them. Don't try too many new systems at once, however, as this can be overwhelming. Give time for a new system to be learned and become routine before evaluating its effectiveness and trying a new strategy.

*Help with Class Notes:* If your student has a hard time listening and taking notes at the same time, there may be alternatives to classic note taking. Some students are permitted to tape record class, use another student's notes, or use the teacher's outline for the class.

*Homework Modifications:* Some students on the autism spectrum have a reduced homework load or don't have any homework at all. Others receive more time to do long term-projects, or have projects assigned in smaller chunks. Some students benefit from seeing a sample project or paper so they can visualize what is expected.

*Preferential Seating:* Students on the spectrum may be easily distracted in the classroom. Many students benefit from being seated close to where the teacher usually speaks. Others may need to be separated from noisier students or from windows, air vents, or other classroom distractions.

*Timers:* Depending on the child, timers can be a good way to remind a child it is time to end one activity and begin another. Finding a timer that provides a warning before time expires is ideal. Otherwise, the timer may be anxiety provoking and more of a problem than a benefit.

*Communication Book:* Children make the most progress when there is good communication between home and school. One way to ensure this is to set up a regular method of corresponding. Communication books are notebooks that travel back and forth from home and school and include short notes by the teacher and parents. Sometimes they include checklists or rating scales to let parents know how the child is doing in school with respect to particular areas being monitored. Teachers can let parents know about the child's day and provide ways to reinforce learning at home. There should be a place for parents to write about difficulties they are having at home or comment on new strategies or therapies that are working. Everyone is busy, so don't expect pages of detailed information. The purpose of the communication book is not to provide daily progress on IEP goals. It is to promote an open dialogue between parents and educators.

*Fidgets:* A fidget is an item that your child can hold that may help with attention, calming, and focus - or, depending on the fidget and the child, it can be a distraction. Examples include a stress ball, string, or a small car with wheels to turn. Fidgets should be saved for situations in which attention is important and should be taken away after the situation ends. Otherwise, they may become common place and lose their desired effect. Also, it is important to constantly reevaluate the need for and effectiveness of fidgets, and to have more than one option at the ready should a beneficial fidget lose its usefulness.

*Frequent Breaks:* Some students on the autism spectrum are not capable of staying engaged in activities as long as their peers. These children may benefit from breaks outside of the energy of the classroom. Sometimes having a quiet place to go is enough to prepare the student to reengage in the classroom environment. For others, it is the movement - the walk to another part of the school - that is beneficial.

Many of the accommodations listed above are referred to as "Assistive Technology." Assistive Technology is any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Assistive Technology

can be low-tech, including laminated picture schedules, or high-tech, such as the use of an iPad® to create Social Stories™ or otherwise help a child transition between activities.

#### Related Articles:

- [IEP Basics for Families of School-Age Students](#)
- [504 Basics](#)
- [Supports for Students with ASD on Field Trips](#)
- [Picture Exchange Communication System](#)
- [American Sign Language](#)
- [Behavior Intervention Plan](#)
- [Classroom Assessments/Curriculum-Based Assessments](#)
- [Executive Functioning Difficulties](#)

#### Additional Resources:

- [Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)
- [Online Accommodations Bibliography](#)
- [Assistive Technology for Children with Autism](#)
- [Assistive Technology in the IEP](#)
- [Assessment and Accommodations](#)
- [Supports, Modifications, and Accommodations for Students](#)

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