



**Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Overview**  
**Four-Part Professional Development**  
*Moderated by Stacey DeWitt*  
**Co-Founder and President, Connect with Kids Education Network**

**Module Two**  
**Sensory, Communication and Social/Emotional Issues**

Welcome back. We hope you now have a better understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder and the characteristics that can lead to a diagnosis. But what can you expect to experience and look for in students with autism? That's what we will be addressing in the second part of this program: the identification of key behaviors that are often present in students with ASD, including

- **Sensory Sensitivities**
- **Communication Issues**
- **Social and Emotional Issues**

Many children with autism have a more heightened sensitivity to sensory inputs than typical students. These differences in **vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch**, and other sensations can affect the students' ability to concentrate. For example, fluorescent classroom lights may bother a child with autism so much that he or she cannot complete an assignment. Children with autism may also cover their ears or hum to filter out distracting classroom noises.

While you may not be able to alleviate the sensitivities, you need to be aware of them and strive to help the child learn how to handle these everyday experiences if he or she is to function in life. This is an area where collaboration with the parents and the school team can be very helpful.

*"How a teacher or really anybody; a parent or therapist or anybody, can help an individual to connect better and relate better while dealing with these sensory integration issues or sensory motor challenges...a big part of how that can be done well is by developing an understanding of each individual's profile. The fact is all of us; whether we have challenges or not, we all have an individual sensory profile. Some of us love loud, noisy parties and talking with lots of people. Others of us love to sit at the beach with a book and be quiet and withdrawn. Some of us like sky-diving and bungee jumping and some of us like peaceful walks. So we all have sensory preferences. So a big part of learning how to support somebody with autism in learning or growing is getting an understanding of their specific individual profile."*

David Nelson  
Executive Director, The Community School

Educators and parents can work to develop that individual profile by answering these questions:

**What are their preferences?**

**What are the things they tend to avoid or need to avoid?**

**What kind of sensory input can be calming and organizing?**

**What is deregulating or confusing and upsetting?**

Experts tell us that what can be additionally challenging for classroom educators dealing with a number of students is that sometimes those profiles don't match up.

*"Whereas one child really needs a lot of what I would call up-regulating or you know being stimulated more, another might need quiet and soothing or de-pressure or calming and so it becomes challenging to get everybody to the right level of arousal. To be fair, that's a problem for every teacher in every classroom whether you've got disorders or not. So with individuals who are you know with autistic spectrum challenges you just kind of...it's another few degrees of challenge to manage that process."*

David Nelson

Executive Director, The Community School

Each person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder has different communication skills. Some people can speak well. Others can't speak at all or only very little. About 40% of children with an ASD do not talk at all. About 25% to 30% of children with an ASD have some words at 12 to 18 months of age and then lose them. Others exhibit a wide range of communication issues including

- **Delayed speech and language skills**
- **Repeats words or phrases over and over**
- **Reverses pronouns (e.g., says "you" instead of "I")**
- **Gives unrelated answers to questions**
- **Does not point or respond to pointing**
- **Uses few or no gestures (e.g., does not wave goodbye)**
- **Talks in a flat, robot-like, or sing-song voice**
- **Does not understand jokes, sarcasm, or teasing**

People with an Autism Spectrum Disorder who do speak might also use language in unusual ways. They might not be able to put words into real sentences. Some people with an ASD say only one word at a time. Others repeat the same words or phrases over and over. Some children repeat what others say.

*"When you are talking about communication issues in autism, again you've got a wide range of communication ability in individuals who are diagnosed with autism or who self-represent as autism, so you might have somebody who really has quite sophisticated language on many levels. They might have an excellent vocabulary... they might be able to talk voluminously about a wide range of subjects. What really becomes a key issue in communication is...are you communicating pragmatically? Are you connected and reciprocal with another individual?"*

David Nelson

Executive Director, The Community School

Taylor Pennington-Russell has struggled significantly in attempting to connect and communicate with others, as is the case with most students with ASD.

*“Be more intentional about kind of how you’re talking to the person because you know because you know respect them as much as you would respect a normal person so kind of just give them a good amount of respect as far as that goes. We just might process a little slower than others but we can still kind of talk like any normal person. We just have some difficulties that we are working through.”*

Taylor Pennington-Russell, Student

As educators and parents learn more about Autism Spectrum Disorder and learning challenges in general, we believe experiences like Taylor’s may become less common. But for the Pennington-Russell family, they painfully watched as the day in, day out communication challenges at school literally shut down Taylor and his desire to learn.

*“He was very clenched around the act of learning and very defensive about it and very closed off to receiving help for that. So from age 5 or 6 he just began living inside his own little world and it’s painful to watch. But along the way, some years being better than others, he received intervention in school and resources in school ... and some of those worked fairly well for him and helped him learn how to cope and sometimes really not. ... the things that stand out in our minds mostly the interventions that helped Taylor understand that he has purpose and worth...that there’s hope for something good for him.”*

Julie Pennington-Russell, Taylor’s Mother

While there are certainly academic benchmarks, educators know that all students learn better in an environment in which they feel emotionally and physically safe and secure.

*“We might ask a lot of questions so you know kind of be ready to answer them to the best of your abilities and don’t isolate us just because we are different... I want teachers to see me just as capable as anybody else but just learns a little differently and that I can do most things but it’s just I might be a little slower at them.”*

Taylor Pennington-Russell, Student

*“But each student has a problem and the student learns what the problem is and they try to take care of that problem.”*

Logan Roark, Student

**Social and emotional issues** are related to communications problems. All three can be tangled up together and cause significant stress for the student, teacher and parent. Social issues are one of the most common symptoms in Autism Spectrum Disorder.

*“Social and emotional issues are really at the core I think of what people need to be thinking about when they thinking about autism because our core as human beings we are relational beings. We get our meaning and our happiness from being connected to other people and when you are somebody who has challenges in connecting to other people, then that makes it very difficult to move up the developmental ladder, to develop sustainable relationships and ultimately to sort of understand and manage your own feelings.”*

David Nelson

Executive Director

The Community School

People with an Autism Spectrum Disorder do not just have social "difficulties" like shyness. Those social issues can cause serious problems in everyday life. This is Brendon’s story.

*“My son Brendon is fifteen years old and he was diagnosed when he was two-and-a-half with autism. Anybody who knows Brendon knows that he is a really sweet, soft-hearted kid and in*

*eighth-grade, we had numerous calls from school saying that Brendon was a behavior problem, that he was being rude. So we met with the teachers several times and they told us upfront that math and science especially were moving too fast for him and it was really hard for him to keep up. He can process this stuff, he's always had good grades in school you know A's and B's...academically he is fine. But in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, it got to the point where he was really having to work to keep up. And when he's falling behind in class and the teachers are telling him 'hurry up! You have to keep up...keep up; we don't have time for this, keep going.'"*

Mike Fields, Brendon's Father

Brendon's reaction to this stress was to shut down. Teachers interpreted this lack of effort as defiance, that he was intentionally ignoring his teachers, his classmates and his studies.

"So then when they push harder, you know he's no longer able to escape, it's fight or flight. The only other option is he would say 'shut up' or 'leave me alone' so then he would be sent to the principal's office for being rude and we tried to talk to the school multiple times about the difference between "can't" and "won't"...that, you know if it was just Brendon being defiant, that's one thing. But if he is actually struggling and unable to do what they want, that's a completely different matter."

Mike Fields, Brendon's Father

*"What we are missing is that what really creates functional, purposeful, appropriate behavior is being connected and communicative with other people. So focusing on social emotional issues in my view is really the essential thing that parents and teachers ought to be thinking about all the time. Ahh, there's no question that there might be challenging behaviors that need to be addressed in some way but once you lose sight of the under-pinnings that are leading to that behavior then you are going to be struggling against stopping a behavior without addressing the under-lying need."*

David Nelson, Executive Director, The Community School

"My expectations for teachers dealing with children with autism? To embrace the children's differences, to embrace their strengths and understand that people learn in different ways and that even under different situations, different levels of stress. You know Brendon may be able to do something when he is calm and relaxed. When he gets scared or nervous you know he's going to lose some of that ability to process."

Mike Fields, Brendon's Father

Some key examples of social and emotional issues to look for in ASD include:

- **Avoiding eye-contact**
- **Preferring to play alone**
- **Does not share interests with others**
- **Only interacts to achieve a desired goal**
- **Flat or inappropriate facial expressions**
- **Does not understand personal space and boundaries**
- **Avoiding or resisting physical contact**
- **Not easily comforted during distress**
- **Trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about own feelings**

Some people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder might not be interested in other people at all.

Others might want friends, but not know how to develop friendships. Many children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder have a very hard time learning to take turns and share—much more so than other children. This can make other children not want to play with them. People with an Autism Spectrum Disorder might have problems with showing or talking about their feelings. They might also have trouble understanding other people's feelings. Many people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder are very sensitive to being touched and might not want to be held or cuddled. Self-stimulatory behaviors (such as flapping arms over and over) are very common among people with ASD. Anxiety and depression may also affect some people with Autism Spectrum Disorder and all of these symptoms can make other social problems even harder to manage.

Finally, children with ASD often have **unusual interests or behaviors**. They often:

- **Line up toys or other objects**
- **Play with toys the same way every time**
- **Like parts of objects**
- **Are very organized**
- **Get upset by minor changes**
- **Have obsessive interests**
- **Have to follow certain routines**
- **Flap hands, rock body, or spin in circles**

This teacher explains how she was able to connect to a child who was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

*“When I first met Logan, I struggled so much because he didn’t really speak to me and I took it personally you know...I was like I don’t know what to do. I could ask him a question and he wouldn’t even look at me. You know it’s hard for me to just take a step back and realize that that’s what was going on...it wasn’t me. So I had to kind of come at it at a different way and figure out where he was and what he likes.”*

Marianne Burke, MSW  
Counselor

*“I don’t really talk about topics that much since I am more of the quiet guy.... Well...I am interested in learning. Well... I’ve been doing math, counseling, science, language arts and so much more stuff.”*

Logan Roark, Student

*“You know it took a while to establish that trusting relationship but it’s just patience and you know meeting him where he was and then I found out about his mild obsession with My Little Pony. [Natural sound/conversation]. And so we started exploring that together and he just...he was a different person with me. You know having him...giving him the time and attention to talk about what he liked was just amazing. You could see it on his face.”*

Marianne Burke, MSW  
Counselor

In this section we have identified key behaviors associated with ASD so that you know what to expect and what to look for when working with students with autism. Next we will discuss the accommodations that are available to students with ASD and classroom management strategies to consider.