

Open Doors for Autism

As an educator, I believe in inclusion—but I was terrified when my son, who has autism spectrum disorder (ASD), reached middle school age. It was like starting over again. Though elementary school had gone well, life would be much more complicated in middle school. My son would be changing classrooms every 43 minutes and each class would have a different teacher and group of students. I wondered how the school would be able to train all

those teachers and potential peers and worried that there would be students who had never seen him before and would not understand his differences. I was concerned that his new teachers might not be receptive to having a student with high-functioning ASD in their classroom. Could they welcome a child who

required an assistant to keep him on task, had a difficult time staying seated, exhibited extremely unusual speech patterns, yet at the same time managed to complete grade-level school work?

Providing professional development about teaching students with ASD and Asperger's syndrome seems obvious and essential. Still, as I travel the nation consulting and presenting at conferences, I am often dismayed at how many teachers and administrators report that while the number of students with ASD or Asperger's has increased, they "have no clue how to work with them." Principals who understand the importance of providing teachers with information about ASD tell me they have not yet met this need. Likewise, teachers have told me that though they do research online on how to serve this population, they remain unprepared to teach students diagnosed with ASD or Asperger's placed in their classrooms.


Successful inclusion relies on preparing *before* the child arrives at school. A person with expertise in ASD, especially in classroom integration, is required to provide professional development, including best practices and classroom strategies, to school staff. Teachers need this advantage to successfully educate students who might present with a variety of ASD behaviors and to create understanding within a school community.

Student training on ASD is of equal importance to ensure that peers recognize how to develop friendships and be advocates for their new classmates. Students with ASD begin preparation for their new school with a few visits to the new middle school

building. Walking through an empty school building, meeting teachers, and sitting in empty classrooms allows the student to become familiar with the setting. In addition, while school is in session, visiting classes, walking through the lunch line, and sharing a snack with future classmates are all good ways to prepare before the first day of school.

Missing the first few days of the school year also can help students with ASD or Asperger's avoid the initial chaos typical at the start of the school year. Instead, these students can begin school two or three days later, after everyone is in the swing of school and teaching has begun.

The families I have helped face the transition from elementary school have been surprised to find that students with ASD love middle school. The format suits them. Changing classes allows them to get up and walk down the hall to the next class, providing the movement their sensory system requires to be alert. In addition, the changing of peers and teachers provides stimulation to keep their interest piqued and ready for the next challenge. Although transition can be difficult, the routine of the middle school schedule gives students with ASD the comfort they need to learn and be successful.

Though ASD is a complicated syndrome that affects each child differently, many students with ASD can be successfully included in their own community middle school. When teachers and classmates have knowledge of the disability, inclusion works well and benefits all participants. As the population of people living with ASD and Asperger's increases, we can all be assured that we will have more opportunities to know people with this disability. Teaching and developing tolerance and understanding will benefit us all. 

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10 STEPS for Successful Inclusion

- 1 Parents and staff meet to learn about ASD students and share information.
- 2 ASD students practice being at school through short visits to all areas.
- 3 Entire school staff attends professional development on ASD, with extended training for teachers who will directly interact with ASD students.
- 4 All peers of ASD students receive in-service on disability.
- 5 Before the ASD student arrives, the assistant meets the teachers and walks through the student's schedule.
- 6 Teachers, therapists, administrators, and parents meet monthly as a team.
- 7 Agree on a safe space for the ASD student to go to for breaks.
- 8 Locate a space for the ASD student to engage in physical movement.
- 9 Arrange follow-up staff or student development as needed.
- 10 Effective, ongoing communication between staff, parents, and assistant.