

# What PARENTS Want PRINCIPALS to Know About Autism

A parent-teacher explains why students with autism must be treated as individuals.

By *Melanie I. Bloom*



SOMETIMES I feel like saying, “I didn’t sign up for this.” As the mother of twin 10-year-old daughters with autism, each day is fraught with challenges. One of my daughters is high functioning, and the other is on the severe end of the spectrum. On a given day, we will have any number of the following issues before we make it to school.

Rachel wants to wear the same outfit every day and she absolutely can’t stand having her beautifully thick, curly hair brushed. She must wear the same dirty, worn headband. Her sock seams bother her. The tags in her clothes bother her, too. She must bring certain stuffed animals and books with her in the car, usually the ones we can’t find on our way out the door. She takes off her glasses and will not wear them because there is the minutest speck of dust on the lens that she says makes her glasses “dirty.” At any given moment, she might dig in her heels and refuse to get in the car.

Kara has severe acid reflux and

might vomit when she wakes up. She might want to eat, but she might not handle it well if she does. She is extremely sleepy in the morning and hard to get moving because she does not sleep well. Kara gets “stuck” and will request the same things every day. On the drive to school, we pass a number of places that will set her off. She wants to go to the gas station for a certain type of soda. We pass the library that she wants to visit to check out the same books she wants every week, but we can’t because I owe money for damages to DVDs we checked out. Not to mention it is 7:30 a.m. and the library isn’t open yet. We might be delayed because she throws her glasses in random places, and we have to find them before we leave. I have to hear Kara’s blood-curdling scream in the car the whole way to school because she says that the “car screams,” referring to the noise that my tires make on the highway.

I have fought these battles before we even make it to school. By the time I get there, I feel battle worn, but the day is just beginning.

My daughters go to school where I teach. As I have completed the requirements to become a licensed principal, I have also studied how my daughters fare in school, leading me to suggest the following advice for principals.

**Know that autism is a spectrum disorder.** There is a saying, “If you have

met one child with autism, you have met one child with autism.” There are no two alike. My identical twin daughters are at opposite ends of the universe with their patterns of strengths and challenges. What works for one won’t work for the other, and what works one day might not even work the next. Do not assume that one program, one style of teaching, or one environment will work for all. And when it doesn’t work, don’t try to force-fit the child into the program, style, setting, or environment. Study the child and find out what works for him or her. If a motivator that has worked before isn’t successful, retool and try something else. Ask the parents for insight into what motivates their child. Personalize learning for optimum success in reaching these hard-to-reach young children.

**Have all staff members trained in autism.** A 2001 National Research Council report states that most teachers receive relatively little, if any, formal instruction in evidence-based practices for children with autism. Classroom teachers are not equipped to teach children with autism because of this lack of training. It takes special knowledge to know how to respond to behaviors in a way that does not reinforce the negative behaviors, while teaching the children how to do what we want them to do. Use your behavior consultants to provide training to all staff.

**Involve everyone.** It takes all of us



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to help a child succeed. If all staff members greet a child with autism as he or she comes down the hall and wait patiently for a response, eventually that child might be able to initiate the greeting. Some educators are uncomfortable with disabilities and might be unsure of what to do, but they cannot ignore the child. Whether or not a child with autism is in a particular teacher's classroom, all staff have the potential to help the child to reach his or her goals.

**Implement an abilities-awareness program in your school.** Typical children do not understand this disorder.

They are curious and want to understand. When they are given the tools to see how they can assist their classmate, they are willing and eager to do so. When children are empowered to help, it promotes a caring school. Answer their questions honestly and bring in books, videos, and speakers who can help them see that people with different abilities can be successful.

Also, send home a copy of the accompanying *Report to Parents*, "Helping Children Understand Autism," on page 21 so that parents can help their children to further understand autism. (A Spanish ver-

sion is available at [www.naesp.org/](http://www.naesp.org/) Jan/Feb12.)

### **Be careful not to blame the parents.**

We don't know how our children came to be autistic or how best to treat them. Even the experts are still figuring that out. We do the best with what we have available to raise our children. We are embarrassed when our children act out at school. We want to work with you. Finger-pointing or talking about us behind our backs and criticizing our parenting skills only serves to sever our relationships and make it more difficult to develop a partnership that is necessary to effec-

tively meet the needs of our children.

**Do not assume that we are not working with you.** We are sometimes depressed with a situation we feel powerless to control. We are accustomed to having to fight to keep services in place that are working for our children, and we have a different perspective about what these services mean for our children. We are raising our children for the long haul and will be caring for them the rest of our lives. You only have them for a short time, a snapshot of the big picture. When something is working, we don't want to change it unless it's no longer necessary because we worry about repercussions down the road.

**Use data to your advantage.** Share with us what you have learned about our children. Give us something to feel hopeful about. We love to hear the good news and see how much our children are growing. Also, let us know when staff are working on removing a service because our children don't need it anymore.

**Prepare our children for changes in their routine or staffing changes.** If our children are acting out, take a look at what changes have occurred recently and see if you can maintain consistency.

## Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web Resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: [www.naesp.org/JanFeb12](http://www.naesp.org/JanFeb12)

Access the English and Spanish versions of this issue's *Report to Parents*, "Helping Children Understand Autism."

Delve into the book *Educating Children with Autism* from the National Academy of Sciences' Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. The book, which covers **effects and features of educational interventions for young children with autism**, is available online.

Find **materials and information to help students** with autism, ranging from communication to classroom structure and from behavior support to assistive technology.

# NAESP Resources for Unlocking Autism

*Principal's* five-issue Unlocking Autism series informs school leaders about educating students who are on the autism spectrum. Here's a recap of the series to date, as well as articles from the *Principal* archive.

- In **"A Guide to Making the Autism Puzzle Fit,"** Sheila Wagner provides a primer on autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and explains the fundamental components to educating students on the spectrum.
- Janet Fisher's **"Positive Behavior Support for Students With Autism"** explains the neurological development of students on the spectrum and the impact on their behavior, which often interferes with teaching and learning. Fisher uses a case study to demonstrate how response to intervention can address negative behaviors associated with ASD.
- In **"Open Doors for Autism,"** Betty Berger, who is both an educator and a parent of a child with autism, describes best practices for successful inclusion, especially as students with ASD transition from elementary to middle school.
- Belinda W. Crisman describes key factors—such as parental involvement, appropriate placement, and professional learning—to creating a successful inclusion program in **"Inclusive Programming for Students With Autism."**
- The **November/ December 2008 issue of *Principal*** focused on special education and inclusive strategies. Theme articles addressed collaborating with special education administrators, hiring special education teachers, inclusive programming, and block scheduling to provide interventions.

Access these articles at [www.naesp.org/JanFeb12](http://www.naesp.org/JanFeb12)

Part of that process is keeping us updated on the changes so we can prepare our children. Parents will see behaviors at home as a result of changes at school. It helps if we are all on the same page and can help reassure our children.

**Use our children's strengths to help remediate their areas of weakness.** The autistic brain is a strange thing. A child who didn't potty train until age 9 might have learned to read at age 3. Fine-arts capabilities can be extraordinary in children who are highly visual learners. Use music and the arts to help students with autism learn concepts. Find out what the student can do extremely well and use that as a tool to help him or her learn and to gain recognition from peers.

**Never underestimate what our children can do.** They might need one-to-one personnel for safety and to meet the goals for an individualized program, but they don't need those individuals to do everything for them. If independence is a goal, train the assistants in how to scaffold tasks so that the child

has the opportunity to continuously learn and grow. If children with autism are given the opportunity to try, along with the needed support, you will be amazed at what they can accomplish.

In addition, don't talk to children with autism like babies or allow adults and children to do this. There is a real person with intelligence behind the façade that we see. Treat them as people with promise and you will be pleased with the results.

School leaders have the potential to open doors for students on the autism spectrum by providing them with a setting that will enable them to reach their full potential. These are not lost children. If educators truly believe that all children can learn, they need to work to understand this puzzling disorder and to provide an environment that will help children with autism to achieve. □

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