Autism Spectrum Disorders

**Description:**

Autism Spectrum Disorders are characterized by impairment in several areas of development, including social communication, social interaction across contexts, and the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. The recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V) eliminated the term Asperger Syndrome, and uses the term Autism Spectrum Disorder in its place.

**Possible Characteristics:**

**Academic:**
Average or above memory and vocabulary skills
Affinity with computers and other technology
Often good formal essay writing
Memory for facts and attention to detail – encyclopedic knowledge in area of interest

**Speech, Language and Communication:**
Speaks in an overly formal manner
Takes figures of speech literally, difficulty with sarcasm
Has restricted use of gestures, abnormal eye contact, little emotion displayed
Communicates with honesty more than diplomacy

**Social/Emotional:**
Students may have difficulty understanding that other people can have different viewpoints and emotions, which makes peer relationships and social situations difficult to navigate.
Anxiety and sometimes anger as a reaction to a world that is difficult to manage

**Behavior and Interest:**
Strong interest in and discussion of one topic
Aversion to change or spontaneity – change causes anxiety
Literal interpretation of rules

**Sensory Characteristics:**
May have unusual sensitivity to sound, light or touch

**Physical/ Motor Characteristics:**
Lack of physical coordination can mean clumsiness and/or poor handwriting

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Guidelines:

**Develop a relationship:** Help the student identify and nurture his or her own strengths.

**Clearly define course requirements:** Be explicit about dates of exams and when assignments are due. Provide advance notice of changes.

**Be directive and establish rules:** For example, you may need to set limits on participation by only allowing the student to ask or answer 3 questions per class period. Don’t expect the student to automatically generalize instructions. Provide feedback to the student when you observe areas of difficulty.

**Respond to disruptive behaviors calmly and rationally:** If the student gets “stuck” on the topic, avoid arguing. Instead stick to your reasoning and let him or her know politely that the conversation is finished. Meet with the student privately, as needed.

**Plan a group work carefully:** The student may need guidance to stay on task and avoid taking over the group activity. In some situations, it may be helpful to offer an alternative, individual assignment.

**Limit use of metaphors in lecture and discussions to avoid confusion:** Let the student know what behavior is disrupting others. Explain to the student what effect his or her behavior had on others, why it cannot continue, and how to behave appropriately in the group setting.

**Be aware that the student may be highly sensitive to sound, light and/or touch:** Consider contacting Student Disability Services about alternatives such as earplugs, fidget gadgets, and/or providing periodic breaks if needed.

**Provide a quiet place:** Students with autism sometimes deal with anxiety by rocking, “flapping” their arms, or making other repetitive movements. This is often at the end of a day, or when they are in a safe place to relax. If possible, provide a quiet place for the student to go, such as the office of someone the student trusts.