

Autism Spectrum Disorder Newsletter
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Lester B. Pearson School Board

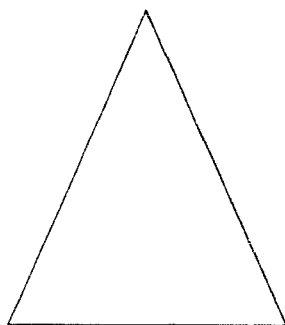
Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders

A student with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a member of your class. You have read the textbook definitions and list of characteristics, but you still feel perplexed by the unique and seemingly complex learning needs this child presents on a daily basis.

As explained by one individual with an ASD, "Autism is not a label, it is a signpost." In order for educators to understand how these students experience the world and how best to teach them, it can be helpful to consider Lorna Wing's model of a triad of impairments. It applies to the entire spectrum of disability, from classic autism to Asperger's Syndrome, and affects all individuals diagnosed with an ASD in terms of their learning and their perceptions:

Triad of Impairments

Language - Communication



Social
Development

Flexible
Thinking and
Behaviour

Other key factors: Sensory Issues, Anxiety

Difficulties in **language and communication, social interaction, and flexible thinking and behaviours** are readily observed in students with intellectual delay or significant behavioural differences. However it is easy to forget how dramatically they impact on more able individuals who have been diagnosed with ASD. Students with precocious vocabulary and great knowledge of facts may have virtually no understanding of figurative language, sarcasm, or humor. Students who are talkative and seemingly outgoing may also operate with a kind of social blindness, which significantly limits their understanding of emotions or the perspective of others. Students who seem bright and academically capable may also become distressed by changes in routine or surprises, or fixate on one topic or way of doing things. This can result in non-compliant behaviour if accommodation strategies, such as breaks or visual schedules, are not put into place.

In addition to this triad of developmental differences, there are two other factors which often affect these students: **sensory issues** and **anxiety**.

Some students may have sensory processing difficulties of a magnitude which require therapeutic activities, recommended by an occupational therapist. Many others, even those who are academically capable, may be overwhelmed by the school environment because of heightened sensitivities to aspects such as noise, lighting, crowding and movement, visual stimulation, and/or smell. These sensory issues can cause distraction, distress, or even fear. Liane Holliday Willey, an author who also has Asperger Syndrome, describes her difficulties, "Bright lights, mid-day sun, reflected lights ...fluorescent lights; each seemed to sear my eyes ... my head would feel tight, my stomach

would churn, and my pulse would run my heart ragged until I found a safety zone."

A propensity for anxiety also affects many students with ASD, who may face new tasks or social demands with anxious resistance or avoidance behaviours. They are easily bewildered by social expectations and emotional contexts, and thus benefit from predictability, routines, and, most importantly, **visual** rather than language-based cues to social and academic expectations.

Understanding these developmental differences and potential difficulties points the way to best teaching practices for students with ASD. Effective classroom strategies include:

1. Use visuals and non-verbal cues.
2. Provide structure with routines and schedules.
3. Support transitions and whenever possible, provide warnings about changes or unusual events.
4. Build in student choices and offer extrinsic incentives to complete tasks or extend "stay put" time in a listening or work area.
5. Give opportunities for breaks or access to alternative, quiet work space.
6. Help with activity level and alertness problems by building in walks or physical activities.
7. Facilitate communication opportunities with peers, as well as adults.
8. Teach to strengths, such as visual modality or memory for factual knowledge, and incorporate special interests.
9. Give options for expression, such as illustrations or charts.
10. Teach about autism: encourage self-awareness and use sensitization activities with peers.

To find out more about understanding and teaching students with ASD, check out the many resources available in the ASD library, catalogued on the www.lbpsb.qc.ca web site, via the *ASD Network* link.

Cathy Pratt Conference

On May 19th, 2005, a number of teachers, aides, and student service professionals from LBPSB attended a one-day workshop presented by Dr. Cathy Pratt, Ph.D. Dr. Pratt is the Director of the Resource Center at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community and an associate professor at Indiana University. The title of her presentation was **Support Strategies for**

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Behavioural Disorders. The feedback from this presentation was excellent.

LBPSB Autism In-Service

On September 23rd, the ASD team is offering a workshop entitled: **Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorders.** It is open to all interested educators, elementary and secondary. Please contact Karen Zey for more information.

A great resource!

The ASD team has purchased 12 copies of "*Cassidy's Adventures – My First Day of School*". These are available for purchase from any member of the team, or from the Special Needs Consultant of your school. The cost is \$15.00. This book is an invaluable tool for sensitization in the classroom. It is a good addition to your resource library, or Kindergarten class library.

"... a much needed book ... carefully written and beautifully illustrated ..."

New Team Member

We are pleased to welcome Catherine Burrell, who joins our team as the ASD Technician. She will be a huge asset to our team!

Autism Spectrum Disorders Team

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Questions or requests to the Center of Excellence from other school boards should be directed to Karen Zey.