Autism Handout

One of the significant disabilities we see in our classrooms is Autism. Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD is most common. This is because the student can exhibit very mild characteristics all the way up to very severe characteristics. Medical and licensed clinical psychologists diagnose autism. Other professionals who contribute to collecting the information needed include; speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, social workers, parents, teachers, and family. Diagnosing autism is clinical, based on the opinion of the examiner. The more information the examiner has, the more accurate the diagnosis is likely to be. There is no definitive test for ASD.

The students who are in the Extended Core Curriculum Program have had services throughout their school years. Many have had special intervention programs within their first three years. In addition, they have limitations in reading, writing, mathematics and reasoning that makes a high school level curriculum too difficult to be of meaningful benefit. These students also require additional support to learn or be comfortable in a regular classroom setting.

You may wonder why they are attending classes that seem to be too difficult for them. It has been shown that naturalistic interventions (PRT) Sherer and Schreibman (2005) lead to better generalization and skill maintenance that isolated structured approaches. The emphasis for our program is not the learning of the content of the course, rather it is learning to participate in a group and learn as much as they can. You will be surprised at how much they can and do learn being in that classroom.

So, now that you are peer tutoring a student who shows ASD characteristics, what are you going to need to do? First and foremost, be a peer and be a tutor. Being a peer means reading the environment as a same age group person. High school students see their world from their social perspective. You know that if you understand all the language, body language, clothing, greetings and social interaction you do all day every day you will belong where you feel most comfortable. You know what to look for and when someone is telling you something without really telling you. These students do not have this social radar. As a tutor, your job is to clearly point out these social cues and help the students react to them appropriately. When they do not, your role is to tell them why and model the correct responses. Remember your role is peer tutor not peer buddy! Buddies are friends; you are an assistant teacher.

You will be given general rules for all students and specific details for the student with whom you are working. For students with ASD, they benefit from clear directions, calm delivery and quiet settings. Their ability to cope with lots of information, lots of noise, lights, and movement is much less than you. WHY?

The most recent research suggests that ASD is a neurological rather than psychiatric disorder. In other words, the way to brain processes and functions results in the ASD characteristics not a mental illness.

Characteristics:

**Lack of capacity to share attention and emotions with other people**

Think to yourself how you would function in your classes and with your friends and community if you could not recognize and match your behavior to the person’s emotions around you. Is everyone excited about an assembly? How did you pick up on that school wide emotion? Now look at your student. How are they reacting to the situation? What can you say to explain why people are acting the way they are? Are some people wearing uniforms? What does that mean? Why are people greeting other people with high fives or hugs? What does it mean when guys chest bump in the hall? Do girls react differently than boys? How?

**You have these answers and your role is to be the reporter. Tell them what you are noticing to regulate your own behavior in this situation.** A great cue could be:

Look at X person/people. They are doing Y because they feel Z. People who are really close friends do A. These people are just in school friends so they do B. With teachers, kids do C.

Report when the student is losing attention to what a group is doing or the teacher. A good cue is: Point to the people sharing attention or the one the student needs to share the attention. We need to keep focusing on the teacher because (s)he is giving us the directions. We are in this group so we have to pay attention to them.

**Poor Executive Functioning**

Think how you would behave if you could not control and carry out your mental assignments. These assignments are; planning and organizing tasks, self regulating your behavior, monitoring your behavior based on feedback you get from your environment, thinking your own thoughts and thinking about things nonliterally such as he is a bear today! This is a huge weakness for students with ASD

For students with ASD the peer tutor can support the students in their mainstream classes by asking the teacher the schedule for the lesson. Write down a quick sequence of the major parts and give it to the students as a visual task organizer. If the student cannot read, pictures or read as you point to the words will work. Once they finish that section, have the student check it off.

Behavior regulation is very difficult. The best support is calm reporting of the behavior you do see and the behavior you need to see. You are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and you need to be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. You are waving your hands. You need to be holding your pencil and looking at the book. Once they do this, say thanks or what ever is the social norm for doing what you asked.

For the non-literal thinking, just say aloud what the meaning is and that is just how people talk in this situation. Or say (s)he said \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ what it really means is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and give the example in a context.

**Theory of Mind or Point of View**

This is when you realize that other people have thoughts and emotions completely separate from yours. Furthermore, you can anticipate how that person is going to act based on the cues you noticed what their thoughts or emotions are at the moment. Students with ASD fail in these situations. The belief is that the hippocampus controls the emotional processing in our brains. The area it interacts with is the prefrontal cortex and limbic system (hypothalamus, pituitary, and amygdala) For these students none of these works well alone and less well together.

How would you act if you could not get other’s perspective or take on things?

As a peer tutor, your role is to be the antennae for the student. You have to do that processing for them and report back on what you picked up and how you are now going to respond based on the clues you noticed.

Again, you calmly report on the clues. Because (s)he said this I can tell they are thinking this. So, you should say/do this. It will be the way to do it in this class. Then when they do it or you model it and they at least pay attention give them verbal praise for their attention.