Life Journey Through Autism:
An Educator's Guide

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ORGANIZATION FOR AUTISM RESEARCH

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Dear Educators,

In the beginning of 2003, OAR published its first guidebook titled *Life Journey Through Autism: A Parent's Guide to Research*. This book serves as an introduction to the world of autism research for parents of children newly diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. Since its publication last year, we have provided nearly 2,000 copies of this resource to parents, families, and professionals free of charge, and we continue to do so. It was always our intent to build on this resource and explore new topics of interest to the autism community.

Since the Parent's Guide was published last year, we have spoken with scores of parents, teachers, and autism professionals about the myriad challenges faced daily by those living with autism and their families. Over and over again, education has emerged as a topic of great concern. As a parent of four children, two of whom have autism, I know how difficult it can be to make sure your child gets the best education possible. Many things must be considered when faced with the prospect of finding appropriate schooling for your child, and the list only grows longer when the child has an autism spectrum disorder. The classroom environment is very different from any other setting and presents numerous challenges, both academically and socially for the student with autism. The task at hand for parents and teachers, then, is to make the transition to this new environment as smooth and problem-free as possible.

To address these issues, we have developed this new guidebook, *Life Journey Through Autism: An Educator's Guide*. It is designed to give teachers and other education professionals an introduction to autism, its characteristics, and some of the methods employed in the teaching of students with autism. Each of these topics could merit an entire volume of its own; therefore, this guide is intended to serve as a starting point for parents and educators as they seek to learn more.

I would once again like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have worked to put this book together. As with the *Parent's Guide*, we at OAR have relied on the knowledge and skills of the team at Danya International to make our vision of an *Educator's Guide* a reality, and I thank them for their outstanding efforts. I would also like to thank the members of OAR's staff and Scientific Council who worked with the Danya team to ensure the Guide would be as complete and informative as possible. A very special thank you also goes out to all the parents, educators, and other professionals who provided comments and feedback that helped us shape the content of the Guide. Your insights proved invaluable as we sought to identify those topics of greatest concern to the community. Thank you.

As you read through the *Educator's Guide*, it is my hope that this resource will help you as you strive to provide the best possible educational experience for the children with autism in your life.

Sincerely,

James M. Sack
President

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INTRODUCTION

Next to parents and immediate family members, few people have greater influence on children than their teachers, especially those who teach children in elementary school. It is an awesome responsibility faithfully carried out by education professionals across the country every day. No doubt, your studies leading to a degree in education and a position as an educator have prepared you well for the challenge of teaching. But are you prepared for teaching children with developmental disabilities like autism in an inclusive classroom, along with your regular students?

In the past 30 years, the prevalence rate of autism has skyrocketed, and it continues to rise. The most recent estimate provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, indicates that autism occurs in 1 out of every 166 births as compared to the 1 in 2,000–2,500 rate estimated in the 1970s.

> Autism is a developmental disorder that occurs in 1 out of every 166 births and affects males more often than females by a 4:1 ratio. This brain-based disorder affects a child's ability to communicate and interact socially and typically becomes evident within the first 3 years of life. The cause of autism remains unknown, and there is no known cure. It presents a lifelong challenge to those diagnosed and their families.

Why the increase? No one knows for sure. Some epidemiologists point to a broader definition of autism and increasing awareness of autism among medical professionals as the key contributing factors. Research on environmental factors that may be at work is also ongoing. All we know with any degree of certainty is that autism is a brain-based disorder that has far-reaching implications for a child's development and, because of this dramatic rise in the incidence of autism, more and more children with autism and related developmental disabilities are being taught in inclusive settings.

The effect of this increase in autism prevalence on education is profound. Since the passage of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, more children with disabilities, including autism, are in the general education classroom. Chances are a child with autism is in your school, if not in your class. As a teacher in this inclusive environment, your goal—as well as your school's—is to foster an environment that supports all learners. To do that effectively requires education, understanding, and patience.

For the child with autism and his or her family, the disorder is a lifelong challenge. School is a challenging environment because it places the child in a setting outside the home where communication and socialization—areas of significant challenge for children with autism—are fundamental building blocks. Thus, going to school is a huge transition for these children; assimilating them smoothly into the classroom and school is your challenge as a teacher.

This guide is the first step in your education about autism. It is not meant to be a comprehensive resource on all aspects of autism—every child you meet with this disorder will be different, and therefore your ways of supporting their classroom experience will be highly personalized. However, this guide can orient you to the main issues in inclusive education for children with autism, providing a framework for organizing your future learning on this topic. More specifically, the goals of this guide are to:

- **Educate you and help you prepare for having a student with autism in your classroom.** The guide begins with background information on the characteristics of autism, a description of the range of behaviors a child with autism might display, and a brief description of educational approaches and relevant legislation.
- **Emphasize the critical importance of communication and collaboration with the parents of your student with autism.** Each child with autism is different. The parents are your best source of information on the child's behavioral issues and the strategies and treatments that are effective. As much as any student you teach, the child with autism will benefit most when the teacher and parents are on the same page and efforts in the home and at school become mutually supporting.
- **Support the creation of an inclusive environment for all the learners in your classroom.** This guide provides suggestions on how to talk to typically developing peers about their classmate with autism and discusses how to organize the classroom to support different learners.
- **Help you collaborate with the team supporting the child with autism:** Special educators, therapists, administrators, and the parents, must work together as a team to maximize the educational experience for your student with autism. This guide emphasizes this collaborative approach to educating the child with autism as well as the importance of the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The heart of this document is a six-step plan you and your team can use to prepare for the inclusion of a child with autism in your classroom. The six steps are simple and highly flexible—think of them as continuing and often concurrent actions. Each of these steps is supported and amplified by the resources provided in the Resource Listing that begins on page 21.

BACKGROUND

What is Autism?

As previously defined, autism is a neurological disorder that typically appears by 3 years of age. The symptoms of autism involve three major areas of development and impact a child's abilities to:

- Engage in reciprocal social interactions with others
- Communicate with others in developmentally appropriate ways
- Participate in a range of activities and behaviors typical of the child's age and stage of development

One of the hallmarks of autism is that the characteristics vary significantly among different children with autism. No two children with autism are the same. Significantly more boys than girls are affected with autism by a ratio of approximately 4:1. Children with autism are found in all cultures and social and economic groups.

Autism is one of five Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) that vary in the severity of symptoms, age of onset, and association with other disorders like mental retardation. Other PPDs include Asperger Syndrome (or Disorder), Rett's Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS).

The term, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), which is frequently used in literature and professional discussion of autism, is not a medical term and is usually used to describe three of the disorders, Autism, Asperger Syndrome, and PDD-NOS, because these three disorders share common characteristics that can be manifested on a continuum from mild to severe. Rett's Disorder and Disintegrative Disorder are very different, both being regressive, although they are "pervasive" in that they affect a child across all developmental domains, and they are developmental in that they occur early in a child's development and affect the course of a child's development. Children with these two disorders usually have **significant** cognitive and developmental problems across all domains. Children with Asperger Syndrome have, by definition, normal intelligence, where children with Autism or PDD-NOS can have a range of intellectual functioning from below to above normal.

This guide specifically focuses on teaching children with autism in an elementary school (K–6) setting. It does not address issues in teaching children with Asperger Syndrome or the other disorders on the autism spectrum. Please consult other resources for information on teaching those children as well as older children and adolescents with autism.

What Does Autism Look Like?

As mentioned above, the core characteristics of autism fall into three categories: differences in reciprocal social interactions, communication, and behavior. The following chart includes some examples of the types of characteristics that a child with autism may exhibit that potentially will impact their participation in the classroom. As emphasized previously, however, every child with autism is unique and may show some, many, or none of these behaviors.

Some Common Characteristics Seen in Persons With Autism
Challenges With Social Interactions:
◆ Challenges interpreting nonverbal language ◆ Difficulty with pretend play ◆ Rigid adherence to rules ◆ Poor eye gaze or avoidance of eye contact ◆ Few facial expressions and trouble understanding the facial expressions of others ◆ Poor judge of personal space – may stand too close to other students ◆ Trouble controlling emotions and anxieties ◆ Difficulty understanding another person's perspective or how their own behavior affects others
Communication Challenges
◆ Often delayed in expressive and receptive language; may not speak at all ◆ Very literal understanding of speech; difficulty in picking up on nuances ◆ Echolalia – may repeat last words heard without regard for meaning ◆ Lack of pretend play
Behavior Differences
◆ Unusually intense or restricted interests in things (maps, dates, coins, numbers/statistics, train schedules) ◆ Unusual repetitive behavior, verbal as well as nonverbal (hand flapping, rocking) ◆ Unusual sensitivity to sensations – may be more or less than typical students ◆ Difficulty with transitions, need for sameness ◆ Possible aggressive, disruptive, or self-injurious behavior; unaware of possible dangers

How Does Autism Affect a Child?

Because of their disorder, children with autism have certain sensitivities and needs that most other children do not experience. Below are just a few examples of challenges that some students with autism may experience:

- **Spoken Language and Communication:** The fundamental problem in communication lies in the inability to recognize that needs, desires, thoughts, feelings, etc., can be communicated as seen by the fact that there is usually no attempt to use other means of communication (e.g., gestures) in the absence of verbal language. Children with autism may have difficulty with spoken language or

recognizing that their thoughts and feelings can be shared or communicated with another. Some will have limited speech, while others may use communication devices, sign language, or written language to communicate. Some children with autism may engage in echolalia—repeating a phrase they just heard—without understanding the meaning or the desired response. Echolalia may also be a way for the student to express frustration, ask for help, or communicate that he or she is not enjoying the activity at hand. The display of echolalia can be immediate or delayed.

- **Need for Sameness and Difficulty With Transitions:** Many children with autism like things to stay the same and have a need for structure in their lives that far exceeds that of typically developing students. Leaving home to attend school, for example, is one of the earliest and most challenging transitions the child with autism will experience. A similar challenge recurs at vacation time, the end of the school year, and at the next "back to school" time. Transitions from one activity to the next may also be challenging for children with autism. Within school, the changes from classroom to other settings—the library, cafeteria, gym, playground, assembly, or special classes—all pose potential challenges for some children with autism. They may get very upset at the slightest change, such as when someone else occupies "their" seat or when a field trip makes them miss a daily class.

> "Other children do not sense that my son is different from them, but I suspect the day will come when they do. I want people to know that my son and other people with autism are thoughtful, caring, interesting people who sometimes need a little more help or support. That's why parents, teachers, peers, and the community should work together to help."
>
> – Parent of a 6-year-old boy with autism

- **Sensory Sensitivities:** Generally, many children with autism have a more heightened sensitivity to sensory inputs than typical students. These differences in vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and other sensations can affect the students' ability to concentrate. For example, fluorescent classroom lights may bother a child with autism so much that he or she cannot complete an assignment. Children with autism may also cover their ears or hum to filter out distracting classroom noises. Naturally, an unexpected fire drill, a noise loud enough to bother the ears of typically developing students, may greatly alarm and/or cause pain in a child with autism. While you may not be able to alleviate the sensitivities, you need to be aware of them and strive to help the child learn how to handle these everyday experiences if he or she is to function in life. This is an area where collaboration with the parents and the school team can be very helpful.

The traits listed above are commonly seen in children with autism but are not exclusive to the disorder. If you observe a child in your class exhibiting similar traits who does <u>not</u> have a diagnosis of autism, you should talk to the child's parents and the school psychologist, counselor, or a special educator about your concerns and consider referring this child for a comprehensive developmental evaluation.

Educational Approaches

Generally speaking, the educational goals for elementary school-age children with autism will include developing cognitive and academic skills, supporting communication and language development, and encouraging appropriate social behavior. As the child grows older, supplementary skills will be added to the child's lesson plans as they become developmentally appropriate. For instance, self-help skills and vocational training are important abilities students with autism should learn as they enter middle and high school.

Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) is an educational approach that is often used successfully for the education of children with autism. ABA is based on the premise that behaviors are learned and can, therefore, be shaped through the systematic application of behavioral principles. Discrete Trial Teaching is a method that incorporates the principles of ABA and is used to teach new skills by breaking them down into small parts and providing multiple opportunities to learn or practice the skills. Corrective feedback is provided, and correct behaviors or responses are reinforced. The reinforcement systems set up by teachers of children with autism are highly personalized. The rewards may be very concrete and involve things that interest them, such as tokens or time to play with a favorite toy. These tangible rewards should always include the delivery of praise, smiles, or other positive social gestures.

Children with autism may not learn what the appropriate behavior is for different situations as easily and quickly as their typical developing peers. ABA is a concrete and clear way for children with autism to learn behaviors they will need in the classroom and later in life. It is important to stress that, early in the child's program, he or she should be taught how to observe and imitate the behavior of others, besides that of the instructor. This type of learning experience, *observation learning*, will prepare him or her for learning outside the controlled learning environment, where more natural learning opportunities occur.

As a teacher working with a student with autism, you will find it helpful to use positive reinforcement techniques to promote the child's progress toward communication, academic, and social goals. You will be an important part of a comprehensive team supporting the student with autism both at home and in the school. In addition to the child's parents and you, this team will include special and general education teachers, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, educational aides, school psychologists, and social workers. Also, other people may be working with students outside of school—therapists to work on problem behaviors, speech/language therapists to address communication difficulties, and psychiatrists or neurologists to manage medications and medical problems. Families of students with autism could also be participating in therapy to support the child, as well as engaging in ABA to reinforce skills at home. The education and treatment of a child with autism has many facets.

It is important to have frequent communication within the in-school team about progress and struggles the student is having. The team should also regularly consult the family for their perspectives on classroom issues, and the outside therapists and medical professionals concerning their areas of expertise. The perspective and thoughts of these additional professionals and family members should serve as a great help in brainstorming ideas for adaptations and accommodations for the student with autism.

SIX-STEP PLAN

Following the six-step plan, detailed below, will help prepare you for the entrance of a child with autism in your classroom, as well as foster inclusion throughout the school. The steps are as follows: (1) educate yourself; (2) reach out to the parents; (3) prepare the classroom; (4) educate peers and promote social goals; (5) collaborate on the implementation of an educational program; and (6) manage behavioral challenges.

Step 1: Educate Yourself

As the person responsible for the education and behavior management of all your students, including a child with autism, you must have a working understanding of autism and its associated behaviors. Different behaviors are very much a part of autism. When children with autism do not respond to the use of language or act out in class, it is typically not because they are ignoring you, trying to clown around, or waste class time. These behaviors may be more related to their autism, and they may be having difficulty interpreting language and expressing their needs in socially acceptable ways. It is important to find ways to create a comfortable environment for your students with autism so that they can participate meaningfully in the classroom.

> "Students with autism benefit from organization and structure. The teacher who has invested in providing an organized and structured environment for the student will not only provide a better learning environment, but also feel more relaxed and competent."
>
> – Autism program specialist

Learning about autism in general and about the specific characteristics of your student will help you effectively manage this behavior and teach your class. You have already started your education by reading this guide. The following pages include a list of characteristics common to children with autism that often affect their classroom performance and success. It will be important to specifically ask families if their child struggles with any of these characteristics and what types of adaptations and accommodations have worked for them in the past. Communication with the family is covered in more detail in Step 2.

Your education about autism will evolve throughout the year as your relationship with the family and the student develops, and your knowledge about autism and skills in dealing with its impact on the classroom grows. Maintaining an open stance to learning, working closely with the parents and school team, and trying new things will help you to succeed in the long term. A list of resources is provided at the end of this guide.

Step 2: Reach Out to the Parents

No words can sufficiently emphasize the vital importance of developing a working partnership with the parents of your student with autism. *They are your first and best source of information about their child and autism as it manifests itself in that child's behavior and daily activities*. Ideally, this partnership will begin with meetings before the school year. After that, establishing mutually agreed-upon modes and patterns of communication with the family throughout the school year is critical.

Your first conversations with the family should focus on the individual characteristics of the student, identifying strengths and areas of challenge. The family may have suggestions for practical accommodations that can be made in the classroom to help the child function at his or her highest potential. In these conversations, it is critical to establish a tone of mutual respect while maintaining realistic expectations for the course of the year.

Building trust with the parents is very important. Communication with families about the progress of the student should be ongoing. If possible, schedule a monthly meeting to discuss the child's progress and any problems he or she may be having. If regular telephone calls or meetings are hard to schedule, you can exchange journals, e-mails, or audiotapes with families. While the information you exchange may often focus on current classroom challenges, strategies employed, and ideas for alternative solutions, do not forget to include positive feedback on accomplishments and milestones reached. Families could respond with their perspective on the problem and their suggestions for solutions. Families can also support you from home in your social and behavioral goals for your student with autism.

> "If you open the lines of communication with parents at the beginning, they will perhaps be more open to trying new ideas that you might have for their child. I can be a better teacher by learning from my students with ASD and working with their parents."
>
> – General education teacher

Open, ongoing communication with families of students with autism creates a powerful alliance. Be aware that some families may have had negative experiences with other schools or teachers in the past. You will have to help them work through that. If you make the effort to communicate with the family about the progress of their child and listen to their advice and suggestions, they will accept you as their child's advocate and thus be more likely to give you their complete support.

Appendix A in this guide contains a worksheet with suggested questions to ask during your initial meetings with the parents. Also included is an example of a journal that can be used for teachers and parents to communicate with each other daily or weekly regarding the child's performance and progress.

Step 3: Prepare the Classroom

Having learned about your student with autism's individual sensitivities and characteristics, you now have the information you need to organize your classroom appropriately. There are ways that you can manipulate the physical aspects of your classroom and ways you can place children with autism within the classroom to make them more comfortable without sacrificing your plans for the class in general. The following table provides advice about how to set up your classroom to address the particular behaviors, sensitivities, and characteristics of your individual student with autism.

Tips for Preparing Your Classroom

Characteristic	Classroom Adaptation
Need for sameness and difficulty with transitions	◆ Define classroom areas: Create individual work areas, free time areas, and open areas for discussion using bookcases, cabinets ◆ Keep classroom consistently organized ◆ Choose designated seat for student ◆ Keep daily schedule in one place in classroom ◆ Develop a visual agenda to help the student understand the agenda in advance
Problematic or acting-out behavior Comment: As you get to know your student, you should also be analyzing the function of the behavior. If escape is the function, then you would not want to allow the child to "escape" without having accomplished something first or communicating appropriately the need for some self/down time. Preferably, a "break" area should be used prior to a blow up.	◆ Have a recreation area or playground nearby for student to let off steam ◆ Identify a home base area to escape classroom stimulation for a while
Easily distracted by sights and sounds	◆ Seat student in low traffic area of classroom ◆ Use carpeting ◆ Face desks away from windows and doors ◆ Designate a home base area to escape classroom stimulation for a while ◆ Teach child when he or she can and cannot use computer; some teachers cover the computer to indicate it's not time to use it ◆ Seat students away from toys and books ◆ Help child to learn how to handle distractions over time
Sensitivity to touch Comment: In some cases, younger children with autism still like to be touched. The parents will be able to help you understand their child's sensitivity in this regard.	◆ Avoid touching student initially ◆ Teach tolerance to touch

Characteristic	Classroom Adaptation
Sensitivity to smells (Wet shoes of classmate, hand lotion, musty locker, hamster cage, rubber cement)	◆ Avoid using perfumes or heavy lotions ◆ Seat student near open door or open window in rooms with strong smells (art room) ◆ Ask custodians to order and use unscented cleaning supplies
Sensitivity to sounds (Air conditioner, shuffling of feet, scratching of pencils, certain tones of music)	◆ Move student away from sounds ◆ Use soft voice when possible ◆ Have student use earplugs or comfortable headphones (when appropriate) ◆ Install carpeting or carpet remnants ◆ Put material under desk legs ◆ Prepare student for sounds (before bell rings, fire drills) ◆ Gradually teach tolerance to sounds
Sensitivity to light, particularly fluorescent lights	◆ Lower levels of light ◆ Turn off overhead lights ◆ Try different colors of light ◆ Have student use sunglasses or baseball cap ◆ Move student's seat from reflections on wall ◆ Use bulbs that do not flicker

Of course, there are practical limitations on how much you can modify the physical characteristics of your classroom. Nonetheless, even a few accommodations to support the child with autism may have remarkable short- and long-term benefits. A schematic in the back of this guide provides a visual representation of the "ideal" classroom for a child with autism. Be sure to modify these suggestions based on feedback from the child's parents so that they are appropriately tailored.

Step 4: Educate Peers and Promote Social Goals

Perhaps the most common myth about children with autism is that they do not have the ability, motivation, or desire to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with others, including friendships with peers. This, for the most part, is not true. There is no doubt that children with autism have social deficits and communication or language delays that make it more difficult for them to establish friendships than typically developing children. However, with appropriate assistance, children with autism can engage with peers and establish mutually enjoyable and lasting interpersonal relationships. It is critical that teachers of children with autism believe this to be true and expect students with autism to make and maintain meaningful relationships with the adults and other children in the classroom. Clearly stated social skills, behaviors, and objectives should be part of the IEP and assessed regularly for progress.

As the teacher of a child with autism in a general education classroom, the most important task you have is to create a social environment in which positive interactions between the child with autism and his or her typically developing peers are facilitated throughout the day. This will not happen without your active support.

> "Kids with autism can and do want friends. But friendship means something totally different to my son with autism. Although he's curious about people, he doesn't know how to make the first move. So that means being friends with someone with autism also means being patient—and sometimes trying over and over again before you get a response."
>
> – Parent of an 8-year-old boy with autism

Perhaps the most powerful tool to creating a positive environment and increasing positive social interactions between the child with autism and his or her peers is to **educate the typically developing peers about the child's disorder**. Research shows that typically developing peers have more positive attitudes, increased understanding, and greater acceptance of children with autism when provided with clear, accurate, and straightforward information about the disorder. When educated about autism and specific strategies for how to effectively interact with children with autism, they are more likely to have frequent and positive social interactions with them.

A useful resource for teachers desiring to educate students about autism and prepare them for a child with autism joining the class is *AutismVision: Creating Classroom Connections*. This is a multimedia intervention that educates typical children about autism and promotes positive social interactions toward children with autism through an educational video and various group exercises and activities. Resources like this serve to encourage more accepting attitudes about the child with autism, which in turn will promote social interactions and help students feel more comfortable in the general education classroom. Information for how to obtain *AutismVision* is included at the end of this guide.

Teaching Points About Autism for Elementary School Students

- Children with autism are first and foremost *children*; they are like your typical students in many ways.
- They experience the world very differently. Sights, sounds, tastes, and feelings that seem normal to us might be scary and overwhelming for a child with autism. Conversely, they may not recognize danger or experience fear like your typically developing students do.
- Children with autism need and want friends.
- Understanding autism is the key to creating connections.
- Children with autism have their own way of communicating—it's almost like a different language.
- Autism is NOT contagious; no one catches it. Nor does anyone die from having autism.
- Children with autism do have feelings and often understand more than they can express. No one should ever tease or make fun of someone with autism.
- When a child with autism feels included, everyone in the classroom can learn and grow!

In addition to educating peers, teachers should promote acceptance of the child with autism as a full member and integral part of the class, even if that student only attends class for a few hours a week. It is also important to create an atmosphere in which teasing, name-calling, and intimidation are not allowed. Because children with autism have difficulties in socialization and in understanding language (slang) and social cues, they can easily become targets of bullies or other insensitive people. Bullying should *not* be tolerated in any school environment.

Many of the social interactions occur outside the classroom in the cafeteria and on the playground. Without prior planning and extra help, students with autism may end up sitting by themselves during these unstructured times. To ensure this does not happen, you may consider a rotating assignment of playground peer buddies for the student with autism. The student will then have a chance to observe and model appropriate social behavior of different classmates throughout the year. This “circle of friends” can also be encouraged outside of school.

Step 5: Collaborate on the Implementation of an Educational Program

The next key step in your preparations will be to participate in the development and implementation of an educational program for your student with autism. It is critical to develop this plan based on the assessment of the child’s current academic skills and his or her educational goals, as defined in the IEP.

A Brief Legislative History

Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 and reauthorized it in 1990 as IDEA. This legislation guarantees that all students with disabilities will be provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). It also states that students with disabilities should be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE), where they can make progress toward achieving their IEP goals, meaning that as much as possible, children with disabilities should be educated with children who are not disabled. Finally, it states that students with disabilities must have an IEP, which describes the student’s current level of functioning, his or her goals for the year, and how these goals will be supported through special services. IEPs are an important focus of the six-step plan, and they are discussed in greater detail below.

Because the challenges associated with autism affect many key aspects of development, the impact of the disorder on education and learning is profound. Therefore, children with autism are considered disabled under the IDEA guidelines and are legally entitled to an IEP plan and appropriate accommodations from the school to help them achieve their developmental and academic goals.

Individualized Education Programs

IEPs are created by a multidisciplinary team of education professionals, along with the child's parents, and are tailored to the needs of the individual student. The IEP is a blueprint for everything that will happen to a child in school for the next year. Special and general education teachers, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists, and families form the IEP team and meet intermittently to discuss student progress on IEP goals.

Before the IEP team meets, an assessment team gathers information together about the student to make an evaluation and recommendation. The school psychologist, social worker, classroom teacher, and/or speech pathologist are examples of educational professionals who conduct educational assessments. A neurologist may conduct a medical evaluation, and an audiologist may complete hearing tests. The classroom teacher also gives input about the academic progress and classroom behavior of the student. Parents give input to each specialist throughout the process. Then, one person on the evaluation team coordinates all the information, and the team meets to make recommendations to the IEP team. The IEP team, which consists of the school personnel who work with the student and families, then meets to write the IEP based on the evaluation and team member suggestions.

> "The IEP contains information about the student's strengths and needs, as well as goals and objectives based on these areas of need. Regular monitoring of student progress not only helps to evaluate whether the student is making progress toward these identified goals, but also helps the teacher to examine the effectiveness of the curriculum and the strategies used to teach the student."
>
> – Autism program specialist

IEPs always include annual goals, short-term objectives, and special education services required by the student, as well as a yearly evaluation to see if the goals were met. Annual goals must explain measurable behaviors so that it is clear what progress should have been made by the end of the year. The short-term objectives should contain incremental and sequential steps toward meeting each annual goal. Annual goals and short-term objectives can be about developing social and communication skills, or reducing problem behavior. Appendix D provides more information on writing objectives and developing measurable IEP goals for learners with autism.

As a general education teacher, you will be responsible for reporting back to the IEP team on the student's progress toward meeting specific academic, social, and behavioral goals and objectives as outlined in the IEP. You also will be asked for input about developing new goals for the student in subsequent and review IEP meetings. A student calendar, which may be customized for an individual student and used to document the child's progress toward each specific, measurable goal, is included in Appendix E. This resource can decrease the time spent documenting the student's performance in a comprehensive manner.

Step 6: Manage Behavioral Challenges

For students with autism, problem behaviors may be triggered for a variety of reasons. Such behaviors may include temper tantrums, running about the room, loud vocalizations, self-injurious activities, or other disruptive or distracting behaviors. Because children with autism often have difficulties communicating in socially acceptable ways, they may act out when they are confused or fearful about something. For example, your student with autism may start pacing the room when the normal daily routine is disrupted, as their way of expressing confusion at what is going on in their environment. The child with autism may also begin jumping because this movement distracts him or her from a bothersome noise.

The most important thing you can do to help reduce the frequency and intensity of these behaviors is to decipher the cause and learn to distinguish the child's behavior stemming from autism from the deliberate misbehavior requiring disciplinary action. Think about the characteristics of autism that we have been discussing and how they might be affecting the behavior in question. Look for patterns in these behaviors—Do they happen around the same time of day or when a certain activity is occurring within the classroom? Does the child with autism seem unusually tired or sleepy on days when they tend to act out more frequently? Communicating with families and other team members and observing the behavior in the context in which it occurs is essential to examining the behavior.

The next step is to test the hypotheses about why the behavior occurred. For example, let's say that you notice that every time the bell rings, your student with autism starts making loud vocalizations. You may think that the student is upset by the unexpected noise. You could test this theory by giving the student a gentle tap on the shoulder each day 2 minutes before the bell is going to ring to prepare him or her for the noise. If that does not work, your next hypothesis could be that the noise hurts the student's ears. You may want to request that the bell not ring in your particular classroom. Instead, you could set a lower and less jarring alarm to let students know when it is time for recess. If that solution does not work, you can develop and test alternative hypotheses.

In addition, teachers should use consistent, positive behavioral reinforcement techniques to promote positive and pro-social behaviors of the child with autism. The student's IEP should contain concrete and explicit positive behavioral goals, as well as a wide range of methods for promoting these goals. For example, a behavior goal may be for the student to engage in small group play in the classroom for 5 minutes three times a week without having an outburst or other inappropriate behavior. When the student does this, he or she should be rewarded with a lot of verbal praise, concrete incentives (e.g., tokens for time playing with favorite toy), or some other predetermined reward. Another possibility would be to set up a visual system, making it abundantly clear to the child that he has accomplished something important. It is critical that the student's parents and IEP

team help determine the incentive system that you will use to shape the child's positive behaviors.

Teachers may choose to ignore other negative behaviors or give predetermined consequences. The key is to be consistent with how you react to the behaviors over time and to use as many positive strategies to promote pro-social behaviors as possible. In addition, when a problem behavior does occur, it may help for the student to go to a quiet area of the classroom. This less noisy and familiar environment may help the student calm down. Or, if an educational aide is in the classroom, perhaps the student could be escorted to a playground or a recreational area to let off steam.

Pulling It All Together

The six-step plan, discussed above, presents a constructive framework for how to approach the inclusion of a child with autism in your classroom. Just as every child with autism is different, so is every school environment. It is quite likely that there will be constraints—environmental, interpersonal, financial, and administrative—on the ways that you can implement the approaches suggested in the guide. The table below lists some common barriers you might encounter over the course of the school year, as well as suggestions for dealing with them.

Potential Solutions for Success

Challenge	Potential Solutions
Frustrated, uncooperative, or angry parents	Parents of children with autism have had to learn a lot about autism on their own and, in many cases, have had to fight for their children in various settings. You may find them wary, guarded, defensive, and perhaps combative, depending on their past experiences with schools and teachers. If you experience this challenge, it has nothing to do with you. Recognize that the frustration you are seeing revolves around those prior negative experiences. You will win them over by demonstrating your willingness to learn about autism and your positive approach to teaching their child. ◆ Try to remain neutral and diffuse the situation. ◆ Reassure the parents that you have their child's best interest in mind and that you are doing as much as you can, given your other obligations to the rest of the class. ◆ Increase communication and be particularly mindful to listen to and discuss the parent's concerns. If the situation does not improve, do not hesitate to call in a neutral third party to moderate the discussion; the other team members should work with you to respond to the parents' concerns.

Challenge	Potential Solutions
Unsympathetic administrators	Developing an IEP and appropriate accommodations for a child with autism is the school's legal obligation. That does not mean that either is easy to accomplish or that they command the attention of your school administrators, who must contend with many, and often competing, priorities: ◆ As one of the best approaches, emphasize that the accommodations you make now will save time and provide a benefit in the long run. ◆ Possibly mention the additional positive outcomes that you anticipate from making these accommodations: decreased stress for you, a more supportive learning environment for the other students in the classroom, and new learning opportunities for everyone. Again, the other team members can help you create an alliance to actualize these changes.
Time constraints	Today's school day and classroom curricula present very real time constraints, but there are ways to simply incorporate information about autism and to support your student during the course of a normal day: ◆ Possibly conduct peer education about autism as part of a disability awareness week or through oral and written assignments in various subject areas throughout the year. ◆ Use teachable moments in the classroom to reinforce acceptance. ◆ In your professional pursuits, look for relevant training opportunities that will satisfy your continuing education or professional development requirements while at the same time advancing your knowledge and skills related to teaching children with autism and related developmental disabilities. ◆ Do not try to do it all yourself; learn to delegate, when appropriate, and rely on the team members, particularly the educational aide, to help you enact small changes in the classroom.

Your classroom is already a diverse place, including many students with varying backgrounds, talents, difficulties, and interests. With the increasing inclusion of students with autism, the challenges associated with managing a diverse classroom into today's educational environment will grow.

Despite the challenges, your hard work makes a difference in the lives of *all* the children in the classroom. It is clear, though, that children with autism may need more help and support than some of your typically developing students. The investment of time and energy in the strategies listed above can pay off tenfold—not only for the child with autism, but also for all the young learners in your school community.

You will benefit as well. As you learn more about children with differences and how to support their inclusion in the classroom, you will become a mentor to other educators who may be facing this challenge for the first time. Many of the skills that make you a powerful educator will help you succeed in the tasks ahead of you. Your curiosity will fuel your education about autism; your communication skills will help you create a meaningful alliance with the parents of the child with autism in your class. Most of all, your collaboration skills will help you work as a key part of the team that will support the child with autism throughout the course of the school year. Your patience, kindness, and professionalism as an educator can make the difference in a young person's life!

> "I learned a lot from my first experience teaching a child with autism, and it has benefited not only how I teach students with autism, but also how I work with all my students."
>
> – General education teacher

RESOURCES

Books

Ernsperger, L. (2003). *Keys to success for teaching students with autism: An easy to follow guide for teachers*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, Inc.

This book features information on creating an effective classroom environment for children with autism, developing curricula, managing problem behaviors, and more.

Janzen, J. (2002). *Understanding the nature of autism: A guide to the autism spectrum disorders* (2nd ed.). San Antonio: Therapy Skill Builders.

This book presents information on autism and its impact on learning, and also provides strategies for education.

Kluth, P. (2003). *You're going to love this kid*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

This book provides valuable information on teaching students with autism and including them in the classroom. Chapter 1 defines autism and common characteristics of students with autism. Chapter 4 describes specific ways to collaborate with family members. Chapter 5 provides strategies for organizing the classroom for students with autism. Chapter 6 reviews ideas on helping students with autism develop social relationships in the classroom. Chapter 9 provides positive and supportive methods for managing behavior in the classroom. Chapter 11 includes strategies for developing a lesson plan for a student with autism.

Koegel, R. L. & Koegel, L. K. (1995). *Teaching children with autism*: *Strategies for initiating positive interactions and improving learning opportunities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

This book provides research-based strategies and information for including children with autism in the classroom. Specific chapters provide helpful information, such as: Chapter 1 describes autism and various educational intervention strategies; Chapter 9 highlights the importance of social relationships; Chapter 11 discusses the history and legal issues in the development of IEPs; and Chapter 12 describes ways parents can collaborate with educators.

Kranowitz, C. S., Sava, D. I., Haber, E., Balzer-Martin, L., & Szklut, S. (2001). *Answers to questions teachers ask about sensory integration* (2nd ed.). Las Vegas, NV: Sensory Resources.

This book describes sensory integration difficulties and provides checklists and tools to use with children who struggle with these challenges.

National Research Council. (2001). *Educating children with autism*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

This book provides a detailed overview on educating children with autism, including recommendations on strategies, programs, and policies. Chapter 3 discusses the important roles of parents in working with educators; Chapter 6 provides an overview of theories behind social difficulties in children with autism and strategies to target social goals; and Chapter 10 offers intervention approaches for problem behaviors in students with autism.

Sewell, K. (2000). *Breakthroughs: How to reach students with autism*. Verona, WI: Attainment Company, Inc.

This book offers a detailed overview for teachers of children with autism. Several chapters are particularly helpful in relation to the topics presented in this guide. Chapter 4 provides classroom set-up ideas, and Chapter 9 describes the IEP process in detail.

Simpson, R. L. & Myles, B. S. (Eds.). (1998). *Educating children and youth with autism: Strategies for effective practice*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

This book provides teachers with methods for incorporating children with autism into the classroom environment, with easy-to-apply strategies and approaches.

Stainback, S. (1996). *Inclusion*: *A guide for educators.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Experienced educators from the United States and Canada discuss strategies to handle behavioral and learning problems using real-life models.

Wagner, S. (1999). *Inclusive programming for elementary students with autism.* Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, Inc.

This book offers exercises and strategies to make inclusion comfortable for the student with autism, as well as his or her teachers and classmates.

Weiss, M. J. & Harris, S. L. (2001). *Reaching out, joining in: Teaching social skills to young children with autism (topics in autism)*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.

This book provides methods of teaching social skills to children with autism.

Web sites

For general information about autism, many autism and disability organizations exist, from small local support groups to broad-based national organizations across the country. You can find them using standard search procedures. Below is a partial listing of national organizations that have made education of children with autism and developmental disabilities a priority and whose Web sites provide useful information to families living with autism. In addition, you can find many excellent organizations at the statewide and regional level that can help families with information, resources, and lists of local schools. They are too numerous to list here but can be found through searches on the Web or through information provided by some of the organizations listed here. At the end of this list, we have also provided several useful Web sites specifically about IEPs.

MAX Foundation
www.maxfoundation.org
P.O. Box 22
Rockville Centre, NY 11571
1-516-763-4787

The MAX Foundation promotes special education awareness. Their Web site provides a comprehensive listing of major autism organizations and informational autism sites.

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)
www.nichcy.org
P.O. Box 1492
Washington, DC 20013
1-800-695-0285

This national information center provides information on disabilities and disability-related issues. This is a site rich with resources, including conferences, state organizations, and information.

Organization for Autism Research (OAR)
www.researchautism.org
2111 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 600
Arlington, VA 22201
1-703-351-5031

OAR focuses on promoting applied research and feedback on research to the autism community. It also publishes a series of community-friendly guides related to autism to include: *Life Journey Through Autism: A Parent's Guide to Research* and *Life Journey Through Autism: An Educator's Guide.* Future guides will include: *Life Journey Through Autism: An Educator's Guide to Asperger Syndrome* and *Life Journey Through Autism: A Guide for Transition to Adulthood.*

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Autism Site
www.nichd.nih.gov/autism
This site's goal is to provide easy access to the most current information about NICHD research projects, publications, news releases, and other activities related to autism and similar disorders.

Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communications Handicapped Children (TEACCH)
www.teacch.com

The TEACCH program is located at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. This Web site offers information about autism as well as various educational approaches.

AutismWeb
www.autismweb.com/education.htm
This Web site provides an overview of different educational and treatment approaches for children with autism.

IEP-Specific Web sites

Council for Exceptional Children
www.cec.sped.org

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has numerous books about autism and developmental disabilities and IEPs, along with information on professional development and training for teachers.

Schwab Learning
www.schwablearning.org

This Web site provides information on IEPs and managing children with autism in the classroom.

Wisconsin FACETS
www.wifacets.org/links/iep.htm

The Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training and Support (Wisconsin FACETS) site offers general information on IEPs as well as publications specific to IEPs and autism.

Wrightslaw
www.wrightslaw.com

This is an in-depth Web site dedicated to providing information on special education law and advocacy issues for children with disabilities.

Multimedia

AutismVision: Creating Classroom Connections. Silver Spring, MD: Danya International, Inc. Available at www.danya.com/autismvision.asp.

This is a multimedia intervention, including a video and facilitator's guide, educating typical children about autism and promoting positive social interactions toward children with autism.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

The following worksheet provides a reproducible template to use when working with families of children with autism. It includes suggestions for important questions to ask families as you prepare for a child with autism in the classroom.

Important Questions to Ask Families

This worksheet should be used as a template to communicate with families of students with autism. It should not be viewed as an endpoint in itself. It is meant to begin the discussion of classroom issues and challenges between educators and families.

1. What are your child's areas of strength?

   _____
   _____
   _____

2. What types of things work best for your child in terms of rewards and motivation?

   _____
   _____
   _____

3. Does your child have any balance, coordination, or physical challenges that impede his or her ability to participate in gym class?

   If yes, describe: _____
   _____
   _____

4. How does your child best communicate with others?

   ☐ Spoken language ☐ Written language
   ☐ Sign language ☐ Communication device
   ☐ Combination of the above: _____

5. Does your child use echolalia (repeating last words used without regard for meaning)?

   ☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Frequently

6. Do changes in routine or transitions to new activities affect your child's behavior?

   ☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Frequently

   If yes, what types of classroom accommodations can I make to help your child adapt to change and transitions?

   _____
   _____
   _____

7. Does your child have any sensory issues that could be an issue in class or at schools?

☐ Yes ☐ No

A. If yes, what type of sensitivity does the student have?

☐ Visual ☐ Auditory
☐ Smells ☐ Touch
☐ Taste ☐ Other: _____

A. Describe in more detail: _____

_____

C. What kinds of adaptations have helped with these sensitivities in the past?

_____

_____

8. What behaviors related to autism am I most likely to see at school?

_____

_____

_____

A. Are there triggers for these behaviors?

☐ Sensory sensitivity ☐ Change in schedule or routine
☐ Social attention ☐ Escape a boring task
☐ Other: _____

B. In your experience, what are the best ways to cope with these challenges and get your child back on task?

_____

_____

_____

9. Is there anything else you think I should know about your child?

_____

_____

_____

10. What is the best approach for us to use in communication with one another about your child's progress and challenges?

☐ Telephone calls – Phone number: _____
☐ E-mails – Address: _____
☐ Audiotape exchange
☐ Other: _____

APPENDIX B

The following reproducible worksheet provides a daily or weekly template that teachers and parents can use to communicate about a child with autism and his or her performance and progress.

Daily/Weekly Journal

Date: _____

Student's Name: _____

Overall rating of the day/week (please circle): 1 2 3 4 5

Poor → Excellent

Things that went well in class this day/week:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Things that could have gone better:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
   _____
   _____

_____

Teacher's Signature

Parent's suggestions and advice about things that could have gone better:

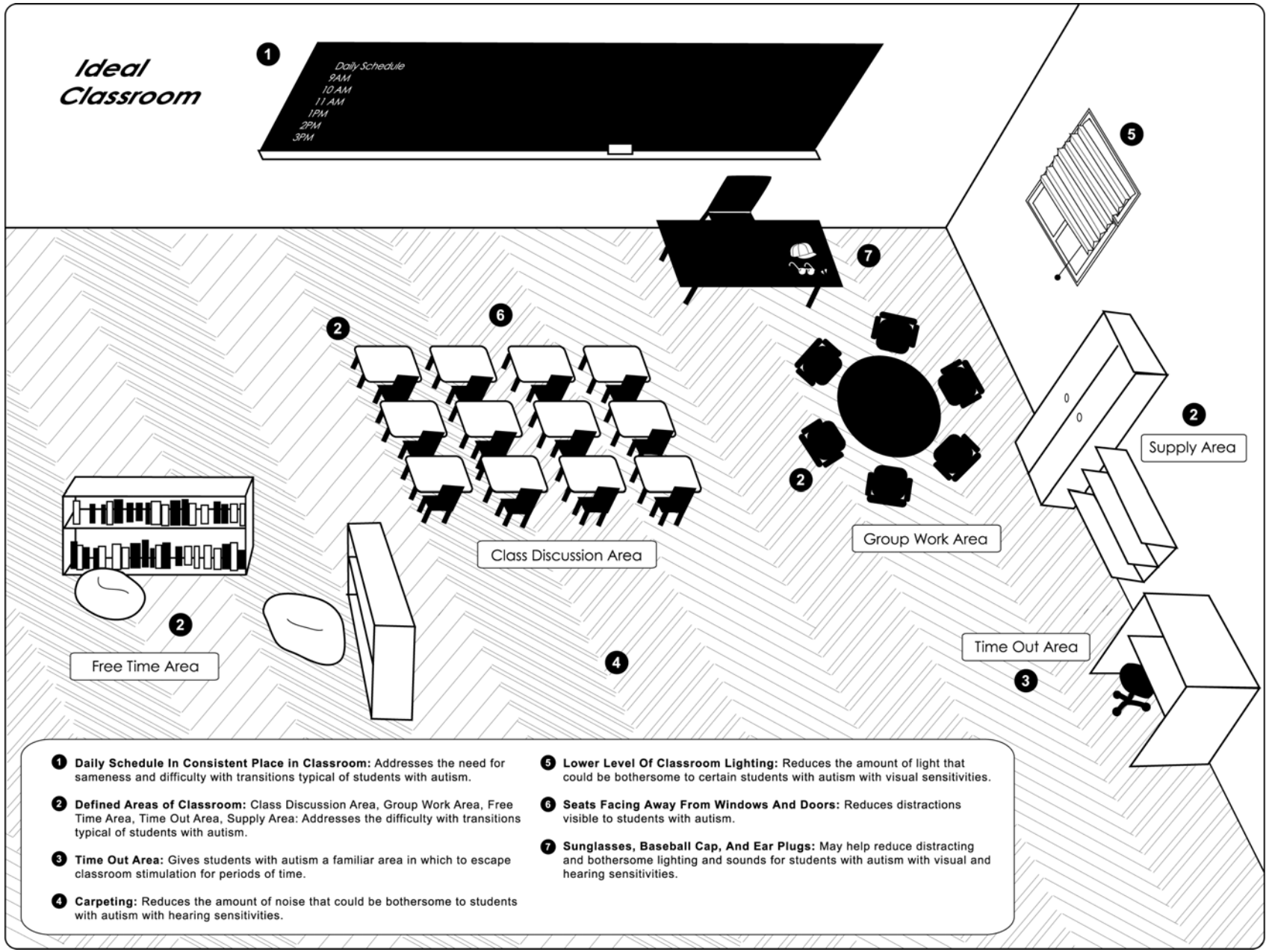
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

_____

Parent's Signature

APPENDIX C

The following schematic illustrates a visual representation of the “ideal” classroom for a child with autism.



1. **Daily Schedule In Consistent Place in Classroom:** Addresses the need for sameness and difficulty with transitions typical of students with autism.
2. **Defined Areas of Classroom:** Class Discussion Area, Group Work Area, Free Time Area, Time Out Area, Supply Area: Addresses the difficulty with transitions typical of students with autism.
3. **Time Out Area:** Gives students with autism a familiar area in which to escape classroom stimulation for periods of time.
4. **Carpeting:** Reduces the amount of noise that could be bothersome to students with autism with hearing sensitivities.
5. **Lower Level Of Classroom Lighting:** Reduces the amount of light that could be bothersome to certain students with autism with visual sensitivities.
6. **Seats Facing Away From Windows And Doors:** Reduces distractions visible to students with autism.
7. **Sunglasses, Baseball Cap, And Ear Plugs:** May help reduce distracting and bothersome lighting and sounds for students with autism with visual and hearing sensitivities.

APPENDIX D

The following is an introduction to writing clear, measurable IEP goals for a student with autism.

Developing Objective and Measurable IEP Goals for Learners with Autism

As mentioned previously in this guide, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a very important tool to help your student with autism achieve his or her full potential in your classroom. Federal rules and regulations indicate that every IEP must have six components, including:

- Statement of the student's current level of performance
- Statement of annual goals, including short-term instructional objectives
- Appropriate objective criteria and evaluation procedures and schedules for determining (at least annually) whether short-term objectives are being met
- Statement of the specific educational and related services (e.g., speech, OT/PT, transportation) to be provided to the student
- Projected dates for the start of the services, along with how long they will be provided
- Statement identifying the extent to which the student will be able to participate in general education classes, and any modifications or accommodations necessary to enable that participation

As a general education teacher, your greatest area for input in the IEP process will be in two areas: (1) You will participate in the development and implementation of individual, specific educational goals, and objectives; and (2) You will complete an ongoing assessment of student progress toward meeting these milestones.

Developing goals and objectives that are clearly stated, objectively determined (based on student's need), and accurately measured is essential to success. While goals may be more broadly stated (*In Math, Jim will learn addition and subtraction using carrying and borrowing.*), the objectives associated with the goal present the clear steps by which this goal might best be attained (*When presented with 10 double-digit addition problems involving carrying, Jim will complete all problems with 90 percent accuracy within 10 minutes. Jim will be able to complete this task at this level for 2 consecutive days.)*. Such clearly defined objectives are generally referred to as **behavioral objectives**.

In general, a good behavioral objective must:

- Identify the learner
- Identify the specific skill or behavior targeted for increase
- Identify the conditions under which the skill or behavior is to be displayed
- Identify criteria for competent performance

Each of these components will be discussed in turn below.

Identify the Learner

In most cases, it will be a simple matter to identify the learner (e.g., "Jim will…" or "Susan will…"). However, more than one learner may be identified in a behavioral objective (e.g., "Jim and Susan will…"), and this needs to be clearly stated.

Identify the Specific Skill or Behavior Targeted for Increase

In identifying the specific skill or behavior targeted for increase, you are, in effect, clearly stating exactly what the learner is expected to be doing when the objective is met. This requires a precise description of skill in terms that are both observable and measurable. In the previous example, the overall goal was stated as: *In math, Jim will learn addition and subtraction using carrying and borrowing*. This is a general statement with little specificity or measurability.

On the other hand, in the second example given, the behavioral objective is stated as: *When presented with 10 double-digit addition problems involving carrying, Jim will complete all problems with 90 percent accuracy within 10 minutes. Jim will be able to complete this task at this level for 2 consecutive days.* In this case we know:

- **Where** the task is presented (in the classroom)
- **How** many problems are presented (10)
- **What type of problems** are presented (double-digit addition with carrying)

In writing clear and measurable behavioral/educational objectives, it is important to use those verbs and related descriptors that are observable and measurable. Examples are given below:

Observable Verbs	**Nonobservable Verbs**
to write	to conclude
to point to	to appreciate
to name	to be aware
to jump	to discover
to count orally	to learn
	to develop

Identify the Conditions Under Which the Behavior is to be Displayed

A good behavioral/educational objective should include, when appropriate, conditions for performance, such as:

- What prompts the behavior: *When presented with the verbal direction, Jim will…*
- A list of required materials: *Using the math workbook, Jim will…*
- Characteristics of the environment: *During school assemblies, Jim will…*

In this way, myriad aspects of the individual instructional interaction can be presented in as consistent and productive a manner as possible.

Identify Criteria for Competent Performance

In this case, the definition of "success" is clearly stated: 90 percent accuracy in a 10-minute time frame, for at least 2 consecutive days. Once this objective is achieved as stated, Jim is to be considered competent at the task and ready to move on to the next objective. A solid IEP goal should always have similarly clear criteria, allowing team members to objectively determine success.

Summary

Creating an IEP for a child with autism is both an art and a science. Using clear language to write achievable objectives is the first step to success. The resource listed below provides more information on this important part of the educational process.

Reference

Alberto, P. A., & Troutman, A. C. (2003). *Applied behavior analysis for teachers.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

APPENDIX E

The following document is a useful and reproducible calendar that an educator can use to document a child's progress toward specific goals, in particular, goals listed in an IEP.

IEP Calendar

Student's Name: _____

IEP Goal #1: _____

IEP Goal #2: _____

IEP Goal #3: _____

Date	Progress Notes