Autism Transitioning: Finishing the Puzzle

Tips and tools of the trade for transitioning students with high functioning autism from the middle school setting through 12th grade
LAURIE BECK

• Autism Support Teacher at Houston County High School, Warner Robins, GA., 5 years
• Itinerant Autism Teacher for 2 years. Worked PK-12
• Taught Special Education 18 years
• 1st Autism student (diagnosed) 9 years ago
• LOVE MY JOB!

STEPHANIE JUSTEN

• Autism Support Teacher at HCHS, 2 years
• Interrelated Teacher 8 years (Literature)
• MID Teacher 3 years
• Taught SPED for 13 years
• I asked to work with these wonderful students!

Personal Information
• Not everything that steps out of line, and thus “abnormal”, must necessarily be ‘inferior.’  *Hans Asperger (1938)*

• People with high-functioning autism or Asperger's syndrome do not have the delayed language development that's typically found in people with autism. In addition, people with high-functioning autism have average or above-average intelligence. However, they may show other behaviors and signs similar to what's seen with other types of autism. These include:
  • A delay in motor skills
  • A lack of skill in interacting with others
  • Little understanding of the abstract uses of language, such as humor or give-and-take in a conversation
  • Obsessive interest in specific items or information
  • Strong reactions to textures, smells, sounds, sights, or other stimuli that others might not even notice, such as a flickering light
  • Unlike people with other forms of autism, people with high-functioning autism or Asperger's syndrome want to be involved with others. They simply don't know how to go about it. They may not be able to understand others' emotions. They may not read facial expressions or body language well. As a result, they may be teased and often feel like social outcasts. The unwanted social isolation can lead to anxiety and depression.

• Average age of diagnosis between the ages of 8-11

**HFA/Aspergers**
ICE BREAKER

Let’s get uncomfortable.
Referring to our students...

Boys = John  Girls = Jane
• You speak with a British accent even though you were born and raised in middle Georgia
• You refuse to put on clean underwear in favor or shredded ones
• The led in your pencil breaking sends you into a fit of rage
• If the sight of a substitute teacher causes you to bang your head on the desk
• If you become incensed when you learn that Ancient Icelandic is NOT an option for your foreign language

You might be on the spectrum...
• You use connected highlighters to create a light saber in order to fight off the Japanese
• If you tell your male PE coach that your breasts are chaffed from doing pushups
• If you will get into a physical and/or verbal altercation over who gets to sit in the rolling chair
• If 50% of your lunch tray is covered with black olives and jalapenos on a daily basis
• If you use a sock on your hand to ensure that you avoid touching anything with a heart on it

You might be on the spectrum...
Main Piece

Overview of the Autism Support Program
• 39 Autism students served at HCHS in our program.
• 2 full time teachers.
• 2 Autism Support Classrooms with Sensory Rooms
• 4 full time paraprofessionals for our program alone.
• Caseloads are 19 and 20 each
Classroom Make Up
HFA/Asperger students don’t like open wide spaces. We have worked the arrangement of the furniture to make the larger room feel more comfortable and less “intimidating”.
Our students feel as though they are part of a group. For many this is the first time they have had this opportunity in the school setting.
Because many of our students have sensitivity to light, we have had special blue filters placed on our fluorescent lights. This helps with their ability to see the flickering as well as creates a more calming environment in which they can work.
Each of our Study Skills classes has an organizer with each student’s folder. It is easy to locate and keeps the clutter to a minimal.
Our sensory rooms are available to our students whenever they self advocate and ask for a break from the stressors they encounter throughout the school day. We keep sensory items such as stress balls, bean bags, weighted balls and fidgets for the students to use if necessary. These rooms also allow us a private place to talk and discuss behavioral issues they may have encountered in a class.
- Solitude (being alone in a safe place such as the child’s bedroom) can serve as a restorative method for children with HFA
- Children need a place to feel safe and secure, a place where they can calm down.
- This is not a place of punishment but one where the child can regroup.
Paraprofessionals Put Puzzles Pieces Together
Each paraprofessional keeps a notebook divided up by periods. They write down current assignments, upcoming projects, tests or quizzes.

Progress monitoring is done weekly on the attached sheet so we can use this to complete information for IEP’s and parent conferences.
• Having paraprofessionals out in the building throughout the day is how we are able to keep a handle on what our students are doing in their classes.
• 39 students × 7 teachers = Too much for 1 person.
• They are in individual classes helping with labs, tests, transition, organization and discipline.
• Overworked and underpaid!!
• Allows us to have the documentation needed to monitor IEP goals and objectives in their classes.
• Try to show our appreciation daily for their work with our students.

We are a Team
An Important Piece

Opportunities for transition from middle school to graduation
• Attend IEP meetings for the 8th graders that will attend high school the next year
• Make early connections with parents
• Maintain communication with Itinerate teachers
• Priming is a non conscious form of human memory, which is concerned with perceptual identification of words and objects. It refers to activating particular representations or associations in memory just before carrying out an action or task.
  • Class schedules
  • Locker schedules
  • Change in daily routine
    • Pep Rallies (ear plugs are a great tool!)
  • Drills
  • Change in environment (classrooms, buildings)
Schedules are such a help to our students that we make sure that we have them posted throughout the room. We include ALL schedules including activity, Bear Paws, and even tutoring so they will have access to this information.
• Know your teachers
• Location, Location, Location
• Shortcuts and tips for students
• Communication with counselors
• Let the students know where you can be found

Scheduling-
Making it all fit together
• We even post our expectations for Study Skills classes.
Class to Class Transitions

- Maps of the school
- Paraprofessional escorts
- Avoiding crowds
- Daily routines

Morning Routine

Get out supplies:
- Pencil
- Binder
- Agenda
- Books for class

Follow Directions:
- Put Book bag on chair
- Sit at desk
- Write down homework
- Raise hand to ask questions
- Sit quietly
Due to their lack of motor skills many of our students don’t like to use their lockers. We provide a space for them to leave their textbooks.
Lockers can be particularly difficult for our students because they are in tight spaces and require “time constraints” between classes.
Transition Plan In Action

- Career Pathways
- College vs. Tech School
- Career Academy Options
- Clubs and Organizations
- Jobs within the School

Finishing the Puzzle in 4 years
Changing Bodies

• Use of Social Stories
• Blunt Discussions, hints do not work
• Parent Support
• Keep a log!!!
• Email, phone calls, and whatever it takes
• Begin with positive communication
• Follow up on important situations
• Facebook!
  www.facebook.com/justenhchs

Communication with Parents
Life outside of the puzzle

- Open discussions about Autism
- Autism makes you who you are
• Driver’s License
• Vocational Rehabilitation Services
  • 11th grade IEP Meeting
• Disability Coordinators at post-secondary schools.
• Roosevelt Warm Springs
  • Excellent resource for our students.

Transition
To succeed in a postsecondary school environment, students with disabilities need self-advocacy and self-determination skills to:

- Understand their rights and responsibilities
- Understand their disability-related needs
- Be able to advocate for needed supports and accommodations
• ASD students often can not communicate their needs effectively or correctly due to their difficulties with language and reaction to stressors.
• Teaching our students to ask for help has to be done through role playing and modeling.
• Transferring this skill to their post secondary and employment experiences is vital.
Everything we do in our classes is to help our students be more successful in their classes and ultimately prepare them for the real world. We tell them daily…

“There isn’t a Mrs. Beck or Miss Justen in the real world.”
• If you are 20 years old and your mom still threatens to call Santa Claus
• If Literature class drives you to drop to the floor, pull off your shoes/socks, and sniff your feet
• If you can name every single football statistic known to man and call recall every lap of the NASCAR
• When putting a hoodie on inspires you to become Autisman!
• If you want to change colleges because they don’t offer Wi-Fi for your Nintendo 3D

You might be on the spectrum...
• If ANY amount of work deduces you to tears
• If you truly believe that you are not part of this world but master of your castle in Mind craft
• If the phrase, “Do you need a pencil?” sparks a racial debate
• If the jacket you wear each day could land you a spot of the reality show *Hoarders*
• If you did not laugh at ANY of these comments, you are 100% on the spectrum!!
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