

Deciphering Students with Autism



Guiding
Exceptional
Parents

Sarah C. Wayland, Ph.D.

Impression	Possible Reasons
<p>UNCARING AND/OR RUDE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has difficulty understanding social cues (especially nonverbal cues like posture, gesture, facial expressions, and tone of voice). • Doesn't pick up on social expectations or norms of classroom behavior. • Isn't aware that his/her classroom behavior disturbs classmates (e.g. noises, movements, sprawl of books). • Doesn't notice (and thus doesn't respond to) social invitations. • Has difficulty understanding that other people have different experiences and opinions. • Doesn't realize that everyone doesn't know what he or she knows. • Finds eye contact distracting – cannot listen while maintaining eye contact. • May be impulsive (as part of co-occurring ADHD diagnosis). • Isn't always aware of how others are feeling, until their response becomes unmistakable. • Has sensory challenges (over- and/or under-sensitivity) that make it hard to attend to other people. • Wants to be part of the group, doesn't understand how to participate appropriately, so does it in unexpected ways.
<p>AWKWARD IN SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has difficulty initiating social interactions. • Doesn't pick up on norms of social interaction. • Isn't always aware of how others are feeling, until their response becomes unmistakable. • Talks too much on topic of interest because of inability to read the signs of listener's boredom or irritation. • Misunderstands what other person said because of subtle language issues. Examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Very literal interpretations, often concrete in nature; ○ Difficulty processing complex sentences; ○ Difficulties understanding pronouns; ○ Difficulties with words that have more than one meaning; ○ Doesn't know meanings of common words; ○ Trouble with verb tenses, plural markers, etc.; ○ Trouble with words indicating sequence (first, next, then, etc.) ○ etc. • Sticks to familiar topics because subtle word finding issues make unfamiliar topics more challenging. • Conversations are at a faster pace than the student can process. Especially true when more than one other person is involved. Students respond either by withdrawing, or by trying to control the interaction. • Sticks to familiar topics when slow processing speed makes it hard to shift quickly in response to others' comments. • Has difficulty <i>quickly</i> understanding and absorbing what someone said. • Unsure how to repair communication breakdowns.
<p>OFF-TOPIC CLASSROOM COMMENTS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has difficulty determining the main topic of discussion. • Is deeply curious about details that may not matter to others, while missing the big picture. • Wants to be part of the group, but doesn't realize it is important to stay on topic.
<p>INTROVERTED/ ANTI-SOCIAL</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with autism are introverted, extroverted, and everything in between. Personality type varies just as much as it does in the non-autistic population. • Is discouraged and disengaged as a result of repeated social failures. This looks like introversion. • Has difficulty quickly understanding what someone said. This can look like a lack of desire to interact.

Deciphering Students with Autism (continued).

Impression	Possible Reasons
DISORGANIZED, LATE, LAZY, LACKS FOLLOW-THROUGH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has poor time awareness. • Has difficulty prioritizing. • Has difficulty breaking big tasks down into smaller, more manageable chunks. • Poor fine motor skills make written work look sloppy. • Has difficulty holding spoken directions in mind and forgets what to do.
DOESN'T FEEL EMOTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feels emotions as strongly (and sometimes more strongly) than non-autistic people, but <i>outward</i> expression appears flat. An autistic person may be quite unaware of how his or her own body language is perceived. • Has a default "logical" response to situations that others might find overwhelming. • Doesn't understand the emotional reasons for a behavior. • Doesn't understand why people would feel as they do. • Has sensory challenges that lead to an <i>under-reaction</i> to environmental sensations (sounds, lights, smells, etc.).
OVER-REACTS EMOTIONALLY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has an emotional response to a trigger that a non-autistic person may not understand or notice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Misunderstands confusing or complicated social situations – can sometimes lead to perception of being bullied or teased ○ Has sensory challenges that lead to an <i>over-reaction</i> to sensory inputs (sounds, lights, etc.) • Isn't always aware of his or her own feelings, until they become overwhelming. • Has difficulty letting go of a thought.
STUBBORN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has difficulty coming up with a new strategy when needed. • Has difficulty modifying or delaying a task when needed. • Has difficulty letting go of a thought. • Has difficulty transitioning from one activity or expectation to another. • Has difficulty understanding that other people see things differently. • Has subtle language comprehension issues that lead to misunderstanding. • Cannot do what you are asking, but doesn't know how to tell you that.
LACKS COMMON SENSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has difficulty making connections between events that others see as related. • Doesn't recognize the similarities between situations, so doesn't learn from past mistakes.
BEHAVES ODDLY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs to move in certain ways to maintain self-regulation (e.g., fidgeting, or pacing, tics, among others) • Isn't aware of where his or her body is in space, so bumps into things and people, or stands too close or too far away.
EXCELS AT MATH, ENGINEERING & COMPUTERS (STEREOTYPE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People on the autism spectrum can be brilliant, cognitively challenged, and anything in between. Intelligence varies just as much as it does in the non-autistic population. • Preferences vary just as much as in the non-autistic population. • People with autism are usually passionate about their interests and driven to explore those interests deeply.
NOT INTERESTED IN SPORTS (STEREOTYPE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest in sports varies as much as it does in the non-autistic population. • Plenty of people on the autism spectrum are excellent at sports, but some may have challenges with motor coordination. • Team sports that require quickly coordinating with others can be very difficult.