



Tips to Consider When Including a Student with ASD in Art, Music, or Physical Education

Contributed by [Kim Davis](#)

It is no surprise that when planning classes for students with ASD that art, music, and physical education are always listed. In a way it is wonderful that these classes are chosen, but on the other hand, they can often be challenging for both the teacher and the student on the spectrum. Teachers may feel ill prepared to have a student on the autism spectrum in their class and for the students themselves, even just the environments for each class can be challenging. So are there some simple initial steps that can be taken to make it better for both parties? While teaching and learning is not usually a simple matter when autism is part of the equation, there are some basics that can alleviate some of the initial challenges for everyone.

Simple Steps

Learn About Autism

When a teacher realizes that a student with an autism spectrum disorder will be on the class list, instead of worrying, begin to learn about autism. One way is to visit the website of the Indiana Resource Center for Autism at www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca and read the many articles available about issues in autism.

Another easy way to learn is to watch videos that discuss autism spectrum disorder. Many are listed on the IRCA website and they cover a wide range of topics and can be obtained from the library at www.iidc.indiana.edu/cedir.

Within each school there are special education teachers who can share information about this disability. They would also know the specific students that you would be receiving into your classes.

Learn About the Individual

There are general characteristics of ASD that will manifest in each individual with the diagnosis. However each characteristic can appear a little different in each person. Every person with autism is unique, yet similar so it is vital to get to know their idiosyncratic behaviors, such as appearing as if they are not paying attention when they really are fixating on topics or being clumsy and uncoordinated. There are articles on the IRCA website that can guide you in getting to know the individual's strengths, interests, preferences as well as fears and frustrations (Davis, 2003), to realize there may be many sensory issues (Davis & Dubie, 2004), communication issues (Vicker, 2004; Vicker, 2000; & Vicker, 2004) and social challenges (Bellini, 2003, & Bellini, 2004). As you get to know the individual it will be easier to decide what strategies would be most useful in your particular setting.

Understand Environmental Issues

"The art, music or physical education environment can be very overwhelming for students on the autism spectrum. These students may become over stimulated by sights, sounds, touch, movement, smells, temperature and/or size of the class (Fogarty, 2002)." Just think of these spaces and how sensory can be bombarded which can cause disruptive or withdrawn behaviors that can impact that student's participation in class. A gym can have loud heat blowers, whistles, or athletic signal horns. It can be so open that it appears to have no boundaries, or perhaps

even have the smells of food when it is used for lunch. The art room can also be filled with many varied materials, textures and smells as well as crowded space. Music rooms by nature can be loud, also filled with interesting materials and objects and other distractions. Understanding autism and how it may impact your student can be the first step in thinking about your classroom environment.

Create a Predictable and Visual Routine

Routine is part of any school class, including art, music and physical education. Of the three disciplines, PE may be the class with easy routines, while music and art may be more open-ended. Therefore, providing students with some additional assistance would be prudent.

Providing a visual agenda either written on the board or on a picture schedule that is also reviewed at the beginning of class daily can alleviate anxiety or confusion for the student. Warning students with ASD of any changes to the routine prior to them occurring is also a wise strategy. Even if you think the student is doing well and can get along without the visual agenda, keep providing it for them. Many times challenges do occur when this support is removed.

Giving Instructions

When giving directions to your class, remember to be as direct, calm, clear, and concrete as possible. Avoid abstract comments such as 'save your breathe' or 'shake a leg' because students with autism are literal thinkers and those types of comments are very confusing for them. Tell them what it is they have to do as simply as possible.

Even though there may be a great deal to accomplish in your class time, build in extra time for them to think and avoid giving too much information too fast. Many times teachers try to explain everything at the beginning of class and then let the students go to do the tasks; this can prove difficult for some students with ASD. It may be better to give those students portions of the instructions accompanied with visual or gesture demonstrations or cues. Many students with ASD are visual learners and their learning is greatly enhanced through visual supports.

As you are teaching, know what you are expecting of the student. In other words, what are the specific goals for that student in your specific class? Are there art, music or physical education specific goals or are there generic goals that can be practiced in your setting? For instance a goal such as working with peers or staying on task for a certain amount of time could be goals that might be achieved in any setting. Be sure to see the student's IEP so you are familiar with the annual goals and objectives. That will give you more direction for your class and the participation of the student.

Help the student know class expectations or what to do at the beginning of class, during class and at the end. Are there specific routines they need to know? In art class does each student have a drawer that contains their materials and do they get their materials as they come in or after you have taken attendance and given the day's instructions. In music, are there assigned places for them to stand to await instruction or should they begin to warm up as soon as they enter the room for chorus or band. In physical education, how much time do they have to change clothes. Do they have to shower, or are their squads for them to join? These routines may be easy for most students to learn, but students with autism need to be carefully instructed to learn each step in all classes. Many times if they 'misbehave' it may be that they have not been taught the proper way to behave or the routine to follow.

Watch for signs of escalating behaviors and frustrations. In all of these classes with all of the sensory issues, multi-task activities and the amount of student directed time that may be involved, students with autism may become

frustrated, confused or upset easily. Be aware of the triggers for each student and provide breaks as they are needed.

Peer Support

One of the most natural ways to support a student with autism is to use their peers. Since social interactions are challenging for most people with autism, it is wonderful when teachers can facilitate positive interactions with classmates. In all three of these class situations, peers can be used to help students with autism learn skills. Peer support can be a very powerful teaching technique. If you can use the students in your classes who are respectable to lend a hand to students with autism you will be increasing the awareness of the typical students to learn about autism while also providing a social situation for the student with ASD. It is a win- win situation.

Barb Fogarty, of MSD of Lawrence Township, has provided the following class specific ideas. These ideas are simply beginning thoughts. Every class and every student is different and therefore new ideas may be necessary. The tips listed above along with these class specifics ideas may just be enough to start you on a successful journey in teaching a student on the autism spectrum.

ART

- Pre-warn student if this is a multi-step project.
- For multi-step projects mark on a calendar dates of the specific steps of the projects, when the project will be completed and when the student will be able to take the project home.
- Remember that it is very difficult for some students with autism to stop a project before it is completed. Try giving several verbal warnings or give them a directive such as "color one more flower" and "put your picture on the _____. " Show them the calendar and say, "they can finish the project and take it home_____."
- Allow students to draw or doodle with art materials if you are giving long directions or demonstrations.
- Have a designated art drawer of drawing paper or other art materials that students can access if the direction/demonstration is long or if the student finishes the project early.

MUSIC

- For students who have difficulty with constantly touching musical instruments, put a visual 'stop' or universal NO sign on the instruments.
- If possible, allow students at the end of the period as a reward, to play a musical instrument for a few minutes.
- Give these students music to take home and practice before a concert/music presentation.
- Tape the choreography of the concert/music presentation, so they can take it home and practice.
- Mark on a calendar when rehearsals and concert/music presentations are going to happen.
- During rehearsals, when students are not practicing, allow them to move around or take a break.

PE

- If students change clothes for PE, have these students change 5 minutes prior to the other students.
- Adapt rules to be very simple and basic.
- The space in the gym for PE may need to be modified for some into smaller areas for students who have difficulty with large spaces.
- Students may need physical assistance to understand terms such as throw, catch, kick and others.
- Team sports will be very challenging due to the pace and complexity. Consider the goal in each sport—it could be simply running with the team.

- Team play may be a difficult concept as it is more social. Working as a team may need to be explained, perhaps through videos, pictures, or with social stories.
- Instead of competition, teach physical fitness through the use of fitness machines, such as treadmills, stair steppers, and weights.

These tips are only the beginning. Getting to know about the individual is the best way to gather information to assist you in setting up your classroom and activities. If you have ideas that have worked in these classes, please send them to Kim Davis at IRCA at davisk@indiana.edu.

References and Resources

Davis, K. (2003). Reframing our thinking and getting to know the child. *The Reporter*, 8(3), 22-27.

Davis, K. & Dubie, M. (2004) Sensory integration: Tips to consider. *The Reporter*, 9(3), 3-8.

Vicker, B. (2004). Comprehension of the message: Important considerations for following directions. *The Reporter*, 9(2), 6-8, 19.

Vicker, B. (2000?). *Social communication and language characteristics associated with high functioning, verbal children and adults with autism spectrum disorder*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Resource Center for Autism.

Vicker, B. (2004). *Selected bibliography: Communication literature related to autism spectrum disorders*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Resource Center for Autism.

Bellini, S. (2003). Making (and keeping) friends: A model for social skills interaction. *The Reporter*, 8(3), 1-10.

Bellini, S (2004) Living in fear: Anxiety in adolescents with autism spectrum disorders. *The Reporter*, 9(3), 1-2.

Fogarty, B. (2000). *Tips for Art Teachers, Music Teachers and Physical Education Teacher on Working with Students on the Autism Spectrum*. Unpublished manuscript.

Davis, K. (1990). *Adapted Physical Education for Students with Autism*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.

Groft-Jones, M. & Block, Martin, E. (2006). Strategies for teaching children with autism in physical education. *Teaching Elementary Physical Education*. 17(6), 25-28.

Davis, K. (2007). Tips to Consider When Including a Student with ASD in Art, Music, or Physical Education. *The Reporter* 12(3), 7-10.