



School Safety Specialists: General Strategies

School safety specialists will likely encounter or work with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or related behavior, social, or communication difficulties. Being aware of the characteristics and common challenges associated with ASD and also being familiar with strategies for working with individuals with ASD can help minimize potential risks and difficulties while increasing the likelihood that interactions will be handled successfully for all of those involved.

The following are basic strategies for interacting with individuals with ASD:

- ❑ Accept limited eye contact and do not consider the person deceitful or disrespectful.
- ❑ Be sure the individual knows you are speaking to him/her before you begin giving instructions. You can do this by saying the individual's name before speaking.
- ❑ If an individual appears to be highly anxious due to a crowded space, accompany him/her to a less crowded space or stand between the individual and the source of anxiety.
- ❑ Speak in simple sentences and concrete language, such as "*Stand up now*" instead of "*Can you move over here?*" (Avoid figurative language, slang expressions, or sarcasm.)
- ❑ State rules positively. Tell the student what to do rather than what the individual shouldn't do. For example, "*Keep feet on the floor,*" instead of "*No climbing on the seats.*"
- ❑ Give one simple instruction and allow time to process before giving another. Allow extra time for the individual to process each instruction (10-15 seconds) before giving another.
- ❑ Rephrase what you have said if the student doesn't seem to understand instead of simply repeating the same instruction, question, or command. For example if you say: "*Show me...*" and you don't get a response, try saying "*Point to...*"
- ❑ Given that individuals with ASD generally understand visual information better than verbal, consider communicating by modeling actions, using cue cards with pictures, and/or writing.
- ❑ Stay calm and avoid threatening behavior or language. Remember that raising your voice will not help understanding. Model calming body language and avoid rapid movement and gestures.
- ❑ Give 2-3 simple and realistic choices to encourage cooperation.
- ❑ To encourage a particular behavior, give specific, positive praise when the individual is engaging in it. For example, Johnny repeatedly gets up from a chair and walks around while you are trying to speak to him. When you see that he is sitting down, quickly give praise such as, "*Awesome job sitting on the chair, Johnny.*"
- ❑ Avoid stopping repetitive behaviors unless they are self-injurious or may cause injury to yourself or others. These behaviors may help them reduce their anxiety.
- ❑ If teachers, parents, or caregivers are present, ask their advice for how to work with the individual.

Fesler Hall (IUPUI Campus)
1120 South Dr., Ste. 302
Indianapolis, IN 46202
Phone: 317.274.2675
Fax: 317.274.3885
hands@iupui.edu
www.HANDSinAutism.org

The HANDS (Helping Answer Needs by Developing Specialists) in Autism® Interdisciplinary Training & Resource Center is located within the Department of Psychiatry at the Indiana University School of Medicine. Support for the foundational development of the HANDS in Autism® Center has been provided through a combination of federal and state funding as well as private philanthropies. To learn more, please contact Naomi Swiezy, Ph.D. HSPP, Director, at nswiezy@iupui.edu or find us at www.HANDSinAutism.org.



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