

# Supporting 2e Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Twice-exceptional (2e) students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have high abilities and may also have challenges with social interactions; executive functioning; repetitive, inflexible behavior; or social-emotional wellness (e.g., depression, anxiety, perfectionism, adaptive functioning, and coping with day-to-day problem solving). Each student with ASD is unique and may require individualized accommodations and interventions. Awareness of some of the common challenges experienced by students with autism can help schools and teachers provide appropriate supports.

## Social Interactions

Engaging in social interactions requires accurately recognizing the emotions of self and others, then responding in a socially acceptable manner. This process can be challenging for a student with ASD across a variety of situations, such as during instructional time, unfamiliar or unstructured situations (e.g., transitions, lunch, recess, extra-curricular activities), and when working in groups. Proactively addressing social skills can lessen social-emotional and academic impacts.

### Approaches:

- Make the classroom a respectful and safe learning space that promotes inclusion and sensitivity to differences.
- Utilize strengths and interests in structured, cooperative learning experiences.
- Provide explicit, step-by-step directions and strategies to build skills in using social interactions (e.g., age-appropriate social stories, role playing, practice reading and labeling facial expressions and body language, perspective-taking). Capitalize on teachable moments and provide feedback to the student after a social interaction occurs.
- Create opportunities for social connection through lunch bunches, clubs, and buddy programs. Proactively practice having social conversations by using conversation starters and teaching turn-taking.

## Response to Environmental Stimuli

Twice-exceptional students with autism may struggle with cognitive flexibility, which may result in difficulty planning, organizing, completing tasks, and social-emotional regulation.

### Approaches:

- Teach students strategies to support planning and organizing (e.g., practice routines, time management skills, use charts and calendars, agreed upon nonverbal signals and prompts, model new skills and provide frequent feedback).
- Consider options for students who need support processing environmental stimuli (e.g., during lunch, PE, assemblies).
- Allow students breaks for self-regulating behaviors, such as fidgeting, pacing, listening to music, or discussing their "off topic" interests.
- Positive behavioral support, combined with non-punitive, predictable responses and encouragement, are essential for these students who are working hard to maintain emotional control.

## Need for Predictability/Rigid Thinking

Twice-Exceptional students with ASD may be inflexible in their thinking and may have difficulty coping with unexpected events such as changes in schedules.

### Approaches:

- Understand that inflexibility may be related to anxiety, not stubbornness. Look for collaborative solutions that prevent power struggles.
- Some students with autism may benefit from direct, explicit teaching of flexibility skills.
- Visual aids with schedules and prompts can help students with transitions and upcoming stressful events.
- Provide positive feedback when students demonstrate flexibility.

## Anxiety

Twice-exceptional students with ASD may experience anxiety, which can affect classroom performance as profoundly as a learning disability. Potential sources of anxiety may include a perceived lack of control over the environment, changes in routines, difficulty processing stimuli in the environment, phobias, fear of failure, and past traumatic experiences at school and with peers. Awareness of potential sources of anxiety and building a student's ability to cope and self-advocate are key for ensuring a student is available for learning.

### Approaches:

- Teach students skills for adapting to change and solving day-to-day problems as they occur (e.g., changes in schedules, assemblies, fire drills).
- Provide strategies to support transitions (e.g., timers, visual schedules, visual or verbal cues)
- Build student capacity to recognize and respond when feeling anxious (e.g. self-regulation techniques, deep or slow breathing).
- Teach students skills to proactively seek assistance and self-advocate.

Severe anxiety may lead to chronic absenteeism, school phobia, school refusal, or dropping out (US Dept. of Ed, 2013-14). Parents and schools should be alert to changes in the 2e student's emotional state and address them as appropriate. School psychologist, school social workers, and school counselors can provide parents with referrals to outside agencies when necessary. Parents may also wish to consult with their insurance providers and community agencies to find resources.

*For additional information, see Mental Health and Resiliency on the FCPS website.*

## RESOURCES

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2018). *Executive skills in children and adolescents: A practical guide to assessment and intervention*. New York: Guilford Press.

Hughes-Lynch, C. E. (2010). *Children with high-functioning autism: A parent's guide*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Silverman, S. (2014). *School success for kids with high-functioning autism*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.