

# 8 Things Support Staff Absolutely MUST Understand About Students with ASD

As a therapist, consultant and speaker I've trained lots of support staff. Here are some key concepts that they have benefited from understanding about those students with ASD.

1. **These students generally understand what they SEE better than what they HEAR** - They tend to be VISUAL learners. Try to SHOW them more than you TELL them. That's the beginning of being a really good communication partner.
2. **Just because a student is verbal. . .it doesn't mean he understands** - It is very common for people to think that verbal students understand more than non-verbal students. That simply is not true. Sometimes the students with the most challenge are those with "high functioning autism" or Asperger's. They can experience significant difficulty understanding the meaning of language and the social actions of others. Then they encounter problems because their communication partners don't realize what they don't understand.
3. **He DOESN'T understand everything you say** - Even though it can seem like it, he doesn't. There are many reasons students do what we want. They learn routines, they watch what others are doing and they pay attention to the visual cues in the environment. Assuming students understand everything increases your frustration and cancels a lot of important teaching opportunities.
4. **There is always a reason for a behavior problem** - The problem for us is that the reason may not be very obvious. When dealing with behavior situations it's important to be very observant . . .like a detective. Watching for patterns of behavior or "triggers" for behavior problems helps to figure things out. Very often, communication challenges are at least a part of the problem. Either students don't understand something or they can't express themselves well. Sometimes students try to communicate in other ways, but when their communication attempts fail, they use behaviors to try to get what they want.
5. **What students communicate may not be exactly what they mean** - Students who experience significant communication challenges may not have the words or the method to communicate what they really want. If I give a student a choice between chips and a cookie, he may choose one of those. But if he really wanted cake, he won't be happy with what he chose. If he doesn't have a way to let me know why he is unhappy, he may show me with behavior.
6. **Sensory differences can be misunderstood** - Students with ASD can be more sensitive or less sensitive to sensory input than other students. Sometimes their inappropriate reactions to situations are rooted in those sensory issues. For example, if you are trying to be friendly and put your arm around a student who is sensitive to touch, that may cause an outburst instead of a "bonding moment."
7. **Visual strategies work** - Even if you think a student understands what you are saying, don't abandon your use of visual supports. The visual tools help students focus their attention, remember things, stay on task, organize their thinking and achieve greater independence. Giving students information in a visual way is a really important technique to use. Using visual strategies is not about what you feel like doing, it's about what helps a student become more successful.
8. **How a communication partner communicates directly affects the student's success** - It's interesting how students can "get along" with some staff better than others. One of the reasons for that can be that one person is a better communication partner. Here's what good communication partners do:
  - Get the student's attention before communicating to him
  - Speak slowly and clearly
  - Match the amount of your verbal output to the students ability to understand
  - Support your communication with visual strategies as appropriate
  - Develop visual supports to give information
  - Be a good detective to identify why the challenges are occurring



Understanding a few keys to the "mystery" of autism will help support staff achieve success with the students they work with.

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