

Does My Student Have Autism? A Guide for Teachers

By Emma Shanahan

It's a couple months into the school year. The kids in your class know where to put unsharpened pencils, how to ask to go to the bathroom, and what to expect day to day. You have a strong sense of each child's personality, strengths, and weaknesses. And you've noticed which students are not flourishing in the typical classroom structure and need specialized attention. But what do you do if you suspect your student has autism, and they don't have an IEP?

Autism covers a broad spectrum of abilities and needs, and requires a big investment of time from multiple professionals to identify. All educators are experts on children, but many are unsure how to move forward when they think a student has autism. Here's how to navigate the process of getting your student the support they need.

Solving the Case: Does My Student Have Autism?

Many veteran teachers have told me they have trouble explaining why they suspect a student has autism, but they "know it when they see it." It is valid to have a professional opinion about the needs of a child you spend upwards of four hours a day with. It is also critical to stay far away from an unofficial diagnosis – not because autism is something to be afraid to claim, but because something else could be going on.

Autism and ADHD, for example, share overlapping symptoms and similar genetic causes. A language impairment or developmental delay can account for deficits in communication, emotional regulation and social skills. A teacher once came to me about a child who was not responding to her name and was overwhelmed in noisy environments. She also had a brother with autism. Despite initial red flags, we found that she actually had a hearing impairment. The takeaway is to trust your instincts, but stay open-minded during the process of diagnosis.

Collecting Data: You are the Student's Advocate

As a teacher, you are this child's advocate during special education referral. Special education eligibility works like a funnel – you collect information on the student, and then the special education teacher uses that information to make a compelling case for the school psychologist to start testing. Remember that the special education teacher and psychologist look at a lot of referrals and can elect to move slower on certain cases. A referral for autism, which covers a huge range of symptoms, will be met with skepticism if you do not have evidence to support your concerns.

The solution is to be prepared before reaching out. Track a specific behavior by putting math counters in one pocket and moving them to your other pocket each time the student displays the behavior. Record video of the student if this is allowed within the limits of your school's policy. Collect journal writing samples. The more evidence teachers give, the faster special education teachers can move forward.

Communicating with Parents

You cannot give a diagnosis to your student's parents. Not only because a professional has not diagnosed the child, but because the revelation of autism can be traumatic. Talking to parents of a child you think may have autism is a minefield, and it's normal to feel hesitant out of concern for saying the wrong thing. Focus only on specific observations with a plan for intervention.

“Andre isn’t making friends” is vague and worrisome compared to “Andre is speaking in small group discussion once per session, so we’re working towards him speaking three times. Please ask him how discussions are going.” Engage the parent, and keep the dialogue open so that they aren’t blindsided when meetings start.

It’s impossible to misspeak if you only communicate facts. Don’t downplay information for parents who deny their child may need specialized support, but keep a compassionate mindset. Autism changes the future parents have imagined for their child, and that change is a difficult reality to handle. Also, parents truly may not see the same issues at home that you do at school, because some children with autism function better in their comfortable, familiar home environment. Balance your concerns with praise so that parents trust your perspective.

In the complete inverse, a parent may insist their child has autism without supporting documentation. Compassion is still key – needing to create an answer for why their child is developing differently than their peers is understandable. If a parent asks you if you think their child has autism, the only true answer is “I’m sorry, but I don’t have an answer to that question for you. I know how important this is to you, so let me put you in touch with our school’s special education teacher. They’ll give you more information.” Defer to the special education teacher, who knows the exact language to communicate with parents.

Bridging the Gap

The time between referral and services starting for a student is a frustrating time for teachers that can take as long as four months in some school districts. In the interim, it can be unclear what you are allowed to do for your student. Always act on what you see, not what you suspect. If a child has difficulty transitioning between activities, make a [picture schedule](#) to hang near their desk, and use “first this, then this” explanations. If they fidget or play with things on their desk, get them a [sensory toy](#). If they have difficulty interacting socially, have a patient student be their peer mentor.

If the child is not developing at the same rate as their peers, use [Stages Learning Materials Academic Readiness Intervention System \(ARIS\)](#). The kit has award-winning picture cards, manipulatives, lesson plans, and digital lessons. The lessons cover language, pre-academic, motor, social and self-help skills typically not covered in the classroom. ARIS is designed to be used by general education teachers and specialists in tutoring sessions, small groups, or centers.

Change the environment to meet the needs of the student by adding strategies in, not taking pieces away. Modifying student materials, grades, and setting are only legal with an IEP. Do not hesitate to make alterations to how a child accesses their classroom, because investing more time in their needs initially will pay off in the long run. In fact, documenting the strategies you try acts as more evidence for why that child should have an IEP.

The educational community is learning more and more about autism each school year, and it’s ok to feel overwhelmed by the possibility that one of your students may have autism. As long as you stay objective, collect data, communicate with parents, and meet your student’s individual needs, you are doing everything you can as a teacher, and your student’s time at school is better for it.