

Understanding the Neurodivergent Student: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects a student's ability to communicate and interact, which can impact learning, participation, and behavior. It's important to note that because it represents a spectrum of ability, no two students present the same way.



Facts About Autism

1 in 31

students has ASD.¹

4x

The share of U.S. students identified with ASD has nearly quadrupled since 2000.²

↑ 11.3%

The number of students identified with autism rose 11.3% between 2023 and 2024, the fastest-growing disability category under IDEA.³

40%

The increase in the autism category accounted for 40% of the total increase in 2024, with autism accounting for nearly 15% of all school-age students with disabilities.³

While the incidence of ASD might appear to be on the rise, these numbers reflect the good news that *awareness* is on the rise, with more educators and families recognizing the signs and symptoms. This means more students are able to access the services that promote success.





Key Traits of an Individual with ASD⁴

While no two students are alike, understanding the most common traits can help catch signs that might otherwise be missed.

The two areas impacted are:

- Challenges with social communication and interaction skills
- Restricted and repetitive behaviors or interests

Ways ASD may manifest include:

- Difficulty sharing conversations or taking turns in dialogue
- Atypical sharing of interests or emotions
- Misunderstanding of what others are thinking or feeling
- Making repetitive body movements to self-regulate, such as rocking or hand-flapping
- Extreme distress in response to even small changes in routine or plans
- Intense focus on very specific, narrow topics or interests
- Strong attachment to particular objects
- Sensory differences, such as unusual sensitivity to light, sound, touch or texture

Students with ASD may also present numerous strengths, such as:

- Strong memory
- Intense focus
- Attention to detail
- Creative thinking

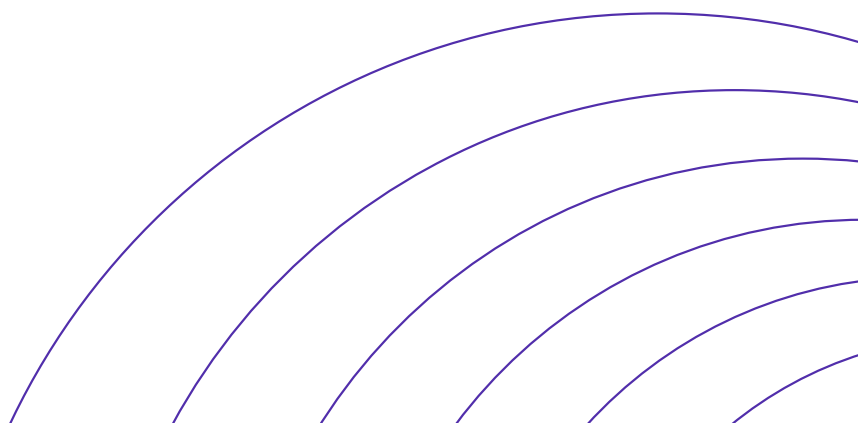


Supports that Help Students with ASD

With nearly 70% of neurodivergent students spending the majority of their day in the regular classroom³, educators and practitioners are increasingly creating inclusive spaces that benefit all children.

Consider these simple modifications:

- Flexible seating, such as beanbags, wobble stools or standing desks
- Quiet zones, where students can retreat if they're becoming overwhelmed
- Modifications to reduce noise, such as carpeted floors and noise-canceling headphones
- Visual schedules and advance notice to help with transitions





Resources to Help Students with ASD

Wondering how you can better support students with ASD?

Here are some resources to consult:



Podcasts featuring neurodivergent individuals, such as *Two Sides of the Spectrum*



Research institutes like the *International Society for Autism Research (INSAR)*



Non-profit organizations like *Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)*



Professional associations like the *National Association of School Psychologists*, the *American Speech-Language-Hearing Association*, and the *American Occupational Therapy Association*



Industry leaders offering professional resources and tools like *Pearson*

“For years, the common language of *disability* suggested something broken that needed to be fixed. But now we understand that these are *differences* to be understood and supported.”

Kara Canale

Certified school psychologist and clinical assessment consultant at Pearson



Sources:

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/autism/articles/prevalence-varies-across-us-communities.html>
2. <https://www.cdc.gov/autism/articles/prevalence-varies-across-us-communities.html>
3. <https://www.k12dive.com/news/these-3-charts-show-how-special-education-enrollment-keeps-growing-IDEA-autism/812897/>
4. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-symptoms>