It Takes a Village: Supporting Students on the Spectrum

Dr. Linn Jorgenson, Ed.D.
Assistant Dean of Students/
Director of Office of Disability Services

Jane Bennett, MA, CRC, CRP
Associate Director, ODS

Kristina DeSantis, MA, CRC
ODS Disability Specialist

University Life Professional Symposium 2013
Being Green

this is normal
Meet Sam
ASD – Current Trends

- 1 in 88 people in the U.S. diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Centers for Disease Control study, 2012)
- Rapid increase in college enrollment of young adults on the spectrum
- George Mason University Office of Disability Services:
  - Total students registered: 920
  - ASD (2012): 91
  - ASD (2011): 54
  - ASD (2010): 10
DSM-V (May 2013)

- Autism, Asperger’s disorder, pervasive developmental disorder (not otherwise specified) and childhood disintegrative disorder will be consolidated within the overarching category of ASD.

- The change signals how symptoms of these disorders represent a continuum from mild to severe, rather than being distinct disorders.
Diagnostic Features of Autism Spectrum Disorders

**LANGUAGE**
- Mute/Nonverbal
- Echolia
- Unusual Speech Pattern

**SOCIAL**
- Isolated
- Passive
- Interested but Atypical

**SELF STIMULATORY BEHAVIOR**
- Body
- Objects
- Obsessions
Increasing Complexity of Cases: Co-Morbid Diagnoses

- Three or more diagnoses are becoming increasingly common among ODS students
- Anxiety (clinical or non-clinical) is almost universal among students with ASD
ASD – Neurodevelopment

• Diagnosis of an ASD is associated with suboptimal right brain development.

• Right brain functions include:
  • Nonverbal communication
  • Auditory interpretation
  • Ability to regulate one’s own emotions, and interpret others’ emotions
  • Empathy
  • Avoidance, fear, anger
  • Attention
  • Impulse control, inhibition
  • Sense of smell and taste
  • Spatial awareness, posture, balance, gait
  • Immune system regulation (prevents body from overreacting)
  • Digestion and heartbeat

ASD – Neurodevelopment

Presentation of right brain deficiency includes:

- Unusual social skills, making inappropriate comments (unintentionally)
- Delayed and poor gross motor skills
- Odd gait, poor muscle tone, spatial awareness, posture
- Picky eaters
- Strength with numbers, but struggles with higher level abstraction
- Adept at reading words, but not interpreting
- Poor attention, compulsive, anxious, impulsive
- Somatic and environmental complications (food allergies, poor digestion, asthma, rapid heartbeat)

ASD – Neurodevelopment

Other diagnoses associated with right brain deficiency:

- Autism Spectrum Disorders (Autism, Asperger’s syndrome, Pervasive developmental disorder)
- ADHD/ADD
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Tourette’s syndrome
- Oppositional defiant disorder
- Conduct disorder
- Developmental coordination disorder

Strengths

- Intelligent
- Superior knowledge in specific areas
- Friendly
- Supportive of others
- Follow rules/guidelines when set
- Excellent memory
- Pays attention to detail
- Punctual
- Reliable
General Challenges

- Difficulty with transitions and change in routines
- Understanding non-verbal forms of communication
- Facial expressions, body language
- Poor eye contact/conversation skills
- Understanding unstated rules or expectations
- Concrete style of thinking
- Unaware of how their behavior affects others
- Self advocacy
- Making friends, setting boundaries
Academic Challenges

- Classroom behavior (interrupt, put head down, disruptive, leave unexpectedly)
- Self directed learning
- Group work, presentations
- Note taking and writing
- Motivation and Initiation (too focused on interests and get distracted)
- Goal setting, planning long term projects
- Time management (meeting deadlines)
- Organizing work
Support Needs in Higher Ed

- Social Skills
- Organizational Skills
- Time Management
- Communication Skills
- Self Advocacy
- Stress Management
- Campus Life
- Transition support
- Identifying Safe Zones
Who is Involved?

- Student Housing
- Learning Services/CAPS
- Office of Student Support and CM
- LGBTQ
- Career Services & Advising
- Alcohol, Drug and Health Ed.
- Registrar
- Student Accounts
- Academic Integrity
- Student Health
- Student Conduct
- Sexual Assault Services
Tools for interactions

- Establish trust to decrease conflict
- Build rapport
- Be direct
- Be clear about times and reasons for office visits
- Be willing to re-explain information as concrete as possible
- Provide written instructions
- Limit use of metaphors, idioms, sarcasm, double meanings
- Set boundaries
- Help student adjust to college culture
Dealing with Behavioral Issues

- Sort through details to try to get the person’s perspective
- Assume that the person did the best they could with the information they have
- Search for the missing information
- Be consistent and specific
- Model and role play appropriate behavior
Academic Accommodations

- Priority seating
- Audio record lectures
- Note taker
- Access to presentations or instructor notes
- Extended time on exams
- Reduced distraction environment for exams
- Use of computer with word-processing
- Assistance with group work
Student Successes

- Social Involvement
- Better understanding of social norms
- Major/Career changes that better meet their skills & talents
- Internships and work experience
- Improved communication with faculty/staff
- Retention/Graduation
Issue: Difficulty with group work

Challenges

• Struggle with developing group and rapport with team
• Rigid/inflexible
• Difficulty seeing others point of view
• Understanding unwritten rules of behavior
• Difficulty with non-verbal language
• Executive functioning deficits

Strategies

• Assigning group members
• Assigning group roles
• Clarify expectations—academic and behavioral
• Monitor group interactions and mediate as necessary
• Consider offering an alternative approach

Adapted from Laurie Ackles’s presentation Understanding Students on the Spectrum www.rit.edu/ssp presentation
Issue: Monopolize conversation or goes off on tangent

Challenges
• Intense narrow interests
• Inability to read social cues

Strategies
• Set clear boundaries
• Provide direct feedback

Adapted from Laurie Ackles’s presentation “Understanding Students on the Spectrum”
www.rit.edu/ssp
Issue: Outbursts or Argumentative

Challenges
- Hypersensitivity
- Inability to understand rules of social interaction
- Sensory Integration
- Concrete thinking
- Rigid/inflexible
- Overwhelmed
- Change in routine

Strategies
- Short break from situation
- Provide direct feedback
- Set clear boundaries
- Allow use of stress balls, ear plugs, sunglasses
- Inform ahead of time of changes

Adapted from Laurie Ackles's presentation “Understanding Students on the Spectrum”
www.rit.edu/ssp
Autism Spectrum Disorder – A Guide to Understanding

Strengths
- Intelligent
- Superior knowledge in specific areas
- Friendly
- Supportive of others
- Follow rules/guidelines when set
- Excellent memory
- Pays attention to detail
- Punctual
- Reliable

Characteristics in the classroom
- Resistance to change
- Difficulty expressing needs
- Repetitive verbal behavior
- Preference for being alone
- May not like to interact
- Little or no eye contact
- Hypersensitivity to sounds
- Literal thinking style
- Outstanding memory in specific topics
- Disruptive behavior

Challenges
- Understanding non-verbal forms of communication
- Facial expressions, body language
- Poor eye contact/communication skills
- Understanding unstated rules or expectations
- Concrete style of thinking
- Unaware of how their behavior affects others

Tools for interactions

- Personal Interactions
  - Establish trust to decrease conflict
  - Be clear about times and reasons for office visits
  - Be willing to re-explain information as concrete as possible

- Classroom Interactions
  - May need to set limits on participation – i.e. allow student to answer 3 questions per class period
  - Limit use of metaphors as they are often misunderstood
  - Safety Concerns - discuss evacuation procedures ahead of time
  - Loud Noises - students may be distracted by others making noises or they may be disruptive to others unintentionally
  - Group Work - student may need to be monitored by professor in order to avoid being off task or taking over group activity. Avoid having students self-select into groups. Whenever possible it may be helpful to offer an alternative approach where the student can select to work on an individual basis
  - If Conflict Arises - explain to student what effect they had on others, why the conflict arose and how to behave appropriately in a group setting

- Setting Boundaries
  - If the student is disruptive to others meet with student privately. Let the student know what behavior is disrupting others and help them understand why it’s disruptive to others.
  - Give reasons for your requests to help the student understand your point of view
  - If student continues to get “stuck” on the topic avoid arguing, instead stick to your reasoning and let them know that the conversation is done
Resources

- Office of Disability Services
  SUB I room 2500
  http://ods.gmu.edu
  ods@gmu.edu
  703-993-2474

- Amy Duffey, Access Consultant
  aduffey@gmu.edu
  703-993-2474

- Faculty Guide on Teaching Students with Disabilities
  http://ods.gmu.edu/documents/Faculty_Guide.pdf