

*Been There
Done That*

***Finally Getting
it Right***

A Guide to
Educational
Planning for
a Student
with Autism



Lessons from a Mother and Teacher

by Jennifer Krumins

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HAPPY NEW YEAR

We should not live in the clouds, on a superficial level. We should dedicate ourselves to understanding our brothers and sisters.

Mother Theresa

Welcome to a New School Year!

It's September. For parents, students and teachers alike, this month brings with it the excitement of a new year and a fresh start as well as the anxiety and concern of the unknown. Parents may question: Who will be the teacher? Will he know and understand autism? Will my thoughts and concerns be heard and valued? Students may wonder: Will the teacher like me? Will I be able to succeed? And teachers question: Will I be able to reach this child? Will I have the support of the parent? Will I have a team to help me or will I be on my own? The angst of a new year is felt by everyone involved and sleepless nights are common in late August!

But, there is a hope of new learning, mutually respectful relationships, common goals and collaboration. The success of a new year has everything to do with how each person involved approaches it. This book is an attempt to bring together parents, teachers and professionals for the sake of providing a sound educational plan that is centered on the child with autism. To do this, each party must bring with them an attitude of respect, openness and integrity. Positive attitudes, respect, collaboration and flexibility must be the glue that holds the team together so that together the team can raise the child to new heights. The child is the reason for everything we do. The road will not be easy. We will have to actively listen with our hearts to the ideas and perspectives of others. Parents bring a keen knowledge of their child. Parents are too often left on the sidelines; watching others plan for their child. Teachers bring years of experience teaching many children (sometimes thousands) as well as professional training. We cannot discount their perspective. We will need to use our skills as problem solvers, analyzers organizers and team players to implement a plan that will bring the child's Individual Education Plan to life every single day in the classroom! We will need to leave our personal agendas out of the mix and we will need to keep a big picture of the child at the centre of our work! Educational planning for a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder must be authentic rather than generic; it must be ongoing rather than static; and it must reflect the individual's disability and the curriculum requirements. When we keep the plan individual, real and dynamic we are well on the way to making this school year a success!



Parents and teachers have much to offer. We will need to use our skills as problem solvers and organizers to implement a plan that will bring the child's Individual Education Plan to life every single day in the classroom!



What Does Autism Spectrum Disorder Look Like in the Classroom?

The term Autism Spectrum Disorder is a term that describes a range of symptoms that exist within the umbrella of Autism. Autism is a life long, neurological disorder that has a profound impact on the way a child behaves, communicates, learns and relates to the people in his world and the environment. Even the concept of a “spectrum” can be misleading because it makes one believe that there is a clear cut separation of each of the disorders that fall on the Autism Spectrum Disorders continuum. This is not the case because each and every child presents a myriad of symptoms that often change over time and sometimes symptoms will vary on a given day! As non –medical as it sounds, individuals seem to have days where their autism is more evident than others! Every parent of a child with autism knows that some days their children are more “off” and harder to figure out than others. To complicate matters even more, individuals with autism often exhibit “splinter skills;” a child might not know his name but he may be able to count to 100.

Autism is not always visibly noticeable, especially in those individuals that have more language skills and a more social nature. Metaphorically, autism is much like an iceberg: some children will exhibit odd behavior or social interactions but these are just the “tip of the iceberg.” Too often people may be deceived because the real issues of cognition, communication, sensory integration and behaviour will hide beneath the “surface.” It isn’t until we ask the student to change a routine, explain, organize, and analyze a problem or to respond to a request that the deficits of autism become more glaring. The severity of the autism is not always apparent and yet it can be devastating. It is this range in severity, complexity and the changing nature of autism that makes parenting and teaching these children both a joy and a challenge! To illustrate the impact of autistic thinking I will share a story about my son’s walk to school. It must be noted that our son does not look or act “autistic” to the people that know him. One morning my husband agreed to allow our son to walk to school rather than take the school bus. The school was a 15 minute walk straight north so my husband agreed to forego the usual “practice sessions” that Kieran does before he tries something independently. A few minutes after he left home, my husband left in his car to “shadow” Kieran’s walk. Much to his surprise, Kieran was no where in sight! With his stomach in his throat Ivars began scouring the neighborhoods to find our son. A few minutes later he located Kieran walking west! Upon questioning about where Kieran was headed, our pre teen logically answered that he was headed towards school; he was following the bus route! Ah, those are the moments when parents are once again reminded that autism has a sneaky way of affecting one’s thought process! Our son was being quite logical; even if it would have been a 2 hour walk to school!

This story illustrates that even the most high- functioning, most even mannered individuals can be quite impacted in their thinking. As parents and teachers, we have to “dig” below the surface to really see how our child sees the world and how he approaches life and learning. Both parents and teachers need to be especially vigilant when assuming that a student is capable of higher level, abstract thinking.

Students with autism do not come to school to be cured. To educate means to draw out and to build on abilities; to teach skills that will facilitate independence and self esteem. Like all children, students with autism need their parents and teachers to teach them how to use their strengths in order to use their strengths to build bridges for their weaknesses and to grow more independent. And so beware; if you are looking for a clear cut, one size fits all explanation of a child with autism you might as well save your energy. Start putting your efforts into learning as much as possible about each individual child with autism and planning for that child based on his own interests, needs, and strengths. Students with autism WILL progress when programs, resources and goals are matched to their unique needs and strengths.



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In spite of the complex nature of Autism, there are some general sets of symptoms that the Diagnostic Statistical Manual – IV have outlined that give us parameters in planning for a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The “triad” of impairments that are required for a diagnosis of Autism are:

- 1) Impairments in communication
- 2) Impairments in social interaction
- 3) Patterns of behavior, interests and/or activities that are restricted, repetitive, or stereotypic

Although not part of the diagnosis, the sensory issues of the child are of great importance to parents and educators and so they are included here:

- 4) Unusual responses to sensory experiences
- 5) Anxiety