

Preface

This book is born from the experience of raising a son diagnosed with autism and informed through research and 34 years of experience teaching in public schools. In other words, it is written from the heart of a father combined with the expertise of a veteran educator.

Allow me to share a personal story. Back in 1991, when our 4-year-old son Steven started preschool, we did not know much about developmental disabilities and just assumed Steven was “different.” The differences, we would later learn, were symptoms of autism, but back then, we did not or could not see the signs—not until our next-door neighbor Ken, an Air Force doctor, called out from next door to my wife, Laura, “There’s something wrong with Steven! He’s not normal!” This unfortunate comment across our conjoined yards served as a wake-up call that led us to a pediatric psychiatrist and the diagnosis of Asperger syndrome. At first, we struggled to understand and accept this label. Our initial sense of concern for our beautiful boy brought tears and heartache.

Over the years, Laura and I researched autism, attended conferences, and welcomed a parade of therapeutic specialists into our home. The initial feelings of uninformed dread were gradually reshaped by countless positive and joyful experiences with Steven. Our perceptions evolved, replaced with optimism. We learned, as we hope you will learn, that a person is far more than the diagnosis he or she carries.

One highlight from Steven’s early years will illustrate what I mean. We enrolled Steven in Suzuki violin lessons and over the next three years watched him develop into an amazing violinist who performed violin pieces by Bach and Mozart. Some of our proudest moments came while watching Steven perform in front of his classmates at school assemblies. I learned from these early experiences the power of guided practice.

Steven, as of this writing, just celebrated his 23rd birthday and is a sensitive and caring young man. He graduated from high school, attends college, and is in search of a girlfriend. He is everything a parent wants in a grown son. He is loving, integrity centered, affectionate, and very reliable. When Steven gives you his word, you can be sure he will keep his promise. His future truly looks bright.

Why this book? Despite research studies that continue to warn of the detrimental effects of uninformed support for students with developmental disabilities, teachers who have little experience with autism are held

responsible for supporting students with complex needs in general education settings.

Traditional methods of instruction may not work for students with autism. Many of these students benefit from informed academic, social, and behavior support. Without support, many will risk failure and rejection.

Too often, when things go wrong, the student, rather than the support system, is blamed. Considering these consequences, training and support for the general education teacher is urgently needed. The National Research Council (2001) indicates that “personnel preparation remains one of the weakest elements of effective programming for children with autistic spectrum disorder” (p. 225).

Despite increasing awareness of autism, surprisingly few evidence-based resources exist to help teachers understand and support adolescents with autism in middle and high school general education settings. Most available literature focuses on younger students or is generalized to reach all disability categories. Clearly, this book is a welcome resource that addresses the needs of this large and diverse population of adolescents and young adults.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Teaching Adolescents With Autism is written for general education teachers, support specialists, administrators, parents, and others interested in learning research-based interventions for adolescents with autism and other developmental disabilities. The reader will gain a thorough understanding of the social, sensory, cognitive, and behavioral challenges students with autism experience. The book is well grounded theoretically, featuring a generous collection of practical strategies designed to help the teacher successfully support a diverse group of students across a variety of settings. The intervention strategies presented will benefit nondisabled students as well.

We present a book that is organized and visually interesting. Each chapter offers numerous research-based strategies, insights, and resources to support chapter objectives. Important concepts are reinforced with bulleted lists, tables, figures, and photographs. Personal examples support important concepts in a tangible way. Quotes and anecdotes are sprinkled in to impart bits of wisdom and brevity.

The substance of the book contains an abundance of information that will increase understanding and improve support practices in several overlapping areas of concern. The “how” is supported throughout with the “why.” We believe that every introduced support strategy needs to be tied to the relevance of the practice.

The teacher will learn how the combination of environmental, psychological, physiological, and social stressors characteristic of middle and high school can impact the student and what can be accomplished to improve conditions for the student. Strategies are introduced that promote a welcoming and comfortable classroom setting with an emphasis placed

on meaningful participation, peer support, and friendship development. Emerging research in the field of social development for students with autism continues to stress the importance of nondisabled peer engagement as a critical component in reducing autistic symptoms. The book's emphasis on natural peer support is woven throughout the text.

An entire chapter is devoted to adaptations. The teacher will learn how to utilize a variety of support strategies to improve access to instructional content across settings and subjects. Specific adaptations are included for every major subject area, as well as general adaptations that apply across all content areas. The author introduces the teacher to the acronym "SPECIAL" translated to reinforce the idea that good adaptations should be Simple, Practical, Explicit, Community building, Independence promoting, Age appropriate, and Logical and meaningful.

Attitude is everything. The teacher must believe in the capacity of students with autism to achieve . . . not easy in a society that unfairly characterizes persons with disabilities as tragic or lesser human beings "suffering" from their diagnosis. The book dispels misperceptions about these students by discrediting inaccurate descriptors like "less fortunate," "needy," and "challenged" that continue to perpetuate this view. By doing so, unfair stereotypes about the nature of disability are cast aside in favor of increased expectations for the person behind the label.

Each chapter concludes with a summary followed by suggested readings for further study. The reader is directed to the book's extensive resource section for further information and support. Also, an Instructional Assistant Inclusion Support Guide is available online at www.corwin.com/adolescentautism.

The knowledge base that supports the book's content is extensive. The author draws from current and emerging research in the fields of autism, inclusive education, instructional methodology, learning theory, behavior, communication, and peer intervention strategies.

The authors, educators, and researchers most frequently cited are leading experts in the field, including Simon Baron-Cohen, Kathy Doering, Mary Beth Doyle, Nancy French, Uta Frith, Kathy Gee, Michael Giangreco, Jean Gonsier-Gerdin, Temple Grandin, Ann Halverson, Norman Kunc, Robert and Lynn Koegel, Philip Strange, Emma Van der Klift, and Brenda Smith Myles.

The book also includes heartfelt insights based on the author's extensive experience as an autism specialist, inclusion coordinator, and father of a 23-year-old son diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. Featured throughout the book are personal stories of students the author and his staff have supported over the years. These stories add a personal dimension to the values and practices consistently reinforced throughout the book.

From his dual perspective of educator and father, the author places a high value on the importance of understanding each student as a unique individual beyond the diagnostic label. It is a capacity-based perspective that strives to challenge students with ASD to reach their full potential. These values are reinforced with a generous array of pictures and vignettes that convey powerful messages about each person's potential to grow and develop.