



Working with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Competency

The educator addresses the needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and works collaboratively with stakeholders to provide high-quality instruction and support students' transition needs.

Key Method

The educator uses research-based methodologies, reinforcement systems, communication supports, and interventions to create a learning plan for a student with autism.

Method Components

What Is Autism?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects how individuals communicate, interact socially, and experience the world around them. Autism encompasses a wide range of strengths, needs, and experiences—there's no single way autism presents itself in individuals. Current estimates suggest that approximately **1 in 31 children** are identified with autism.

Autism isn't a disease or a single condition; rather, it reflects differences in neurological development that can influence communication, social interaction, sensory processing, and patterns of behavior. These differences may create both challenges and unique strengths, such as strong attention to detail, deep interests, or alternative ways of thinking and problem-solving.

Diagnostic criteria for autism are outlined in the **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)**, published by the American Psychiatric Association. The DSM-5 organizes autism into **three levels** based on the amount of support an individual may need to navigate daily life and learning environments. These levels aren't labels of ability; they're descriptors that help guide support planning.

Level 3—Requiring Very Substantial Support

Students at this level experience significant differences in social communication and interaction that greatly affect daily functioning. They may use few words of intelligible speech or rely primarily on alternative forms of communication. Initiating interaction is limited, and coping with changes in routine can be extremely challenging. These students typically require intensive, consistent support.

Level 2—Requiring Substantial Support

Students at this level demonstrate marked differences in social communication and interaction, even when support is in place. They may use simple sentences, have highly focused interests, and show noticeable difficulty with flexibility and transitions. Changes in routine or shifting attention can cause distress, and ongoing support is needed to help them engage in learning and social contexts.

Level 1—Requiring Support

Students at this level may appear more independent but still experience meaningful challenges with social communication and flexibility. Without support, they may struggle to interpret social cues, respond appropriately in conversations, or form peer relationships. Difficulties with transitions, changes in routine, or shifting tasks can interfere with functioning, even though targeted support and accommodations often help significantly.

Perspectives on Autism

Although the DSM-5 defines autism in a linear model, many autistic advocates, clinicians, educators, and researchers use a “spectrum wheel” to illustrate the strengths and needs across areas such as:

- Communication
- Sensory processing

- Executive functioning
- Emotional regulation
- Social interaction
- Adaptive living skills

This wheel model offers a more holistic view and avoids framing autism as “more” or “less” severe.

Implications for Educators

To effectively support students with autism, educators must understand each student’s **individual strengths, needs, communication styles, and sensory preferences**. Thoughtful planning, consistent routines, and respectful interactions allow educators to design instruction that supports access, reduces barriers, and promotes meaningful participation in learning.

Communication, Triggers, and Interventions

Autism is often described as a social communication disorder. A student’s communication style—whether it is verbal, minimally verbal, nonverbal, or supported through alternative and augmentative communication (AAC)—plays a significant role in their access to instruction and in how they communicate understanding. Differences in expressive and receptive language, pragmatic skills, eye contact, or turn-taking can either support engagement or create barriers when instruction relies heavily on typical communication expectations. When educators recognize diverse communication styles and provide appropriate support, students with autism can participate more fully in their education.

Many students with ASD are affected by sensory overload, such as loud noises, bright lights, crowded spaces, or sudden changes. Students who rely on predictable routines may become distressed by schedule changes, unfamiliar staff, or events like fire drills. Transitions must be anticipated and planned.

There’s no single “right” way to support students through difficult transitions. Visual schedules, timers, comfort items, and clear pre-teaching can all help prepare students for changes. Providing reliable communication tools—such as technology, visual charts, or communication boards—helps students focus on learning and reduces frustration.

ABC Chart

ABC charts are tools for collecting observed student behavior over time. The data helps teams understand why behaviors occur and is used to inform a behavior plan. ABC refers to:

- Antecedent: The event or action that occurs just before the behavior
- Behavior: The observable behavior
- Consequence: The response or outcome that follows the behavior

By identifying patterns in antecedents, behaviors, and consequences, educators can focus on why behaviors occur rather than simply reacting to them. For students with autism, recognizing triggers, sensory needs, and environmental factors is essential for creating supportive interventions that reduce frustration and increase success. ABC data collection helps teams make informed decisions, develop proactive behavior plans, and teach replacement skills that support communication, self-regulation, and positive participation in the learning environment.

An example of an ABC chart might look like:

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Teacher asks the student to put away the iPad.	Student refuses and moves away from the teacher.	Teacher repeats the request.
Teacher gives the student to the count of 10 to put away iPad.	Student refuses and turns away again.	Teacher finishes counting down from 10.

Reinforcement Survey

A reinforcement survey is a tool used to identify the items, activities, interests, or experiences that are motivating and rewarding to a student. These surveys help determine what reinforcers are most meaningful for an individual student and are commonly used in behavioral support planning.

Reinforcers matter because behaviors followed by positive outcomes are more likely to occur again. A reinforcement survey helps educators avoid guessing what motivates a student and instead base support on the student's preferences. Reinforcers may include:

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- Preferred activities
- Sensory experiences
- Toys or objects
- Social praise
- Technology
- Movement breaks
- Favorite topics or hobbies
- Extra choices or privileges

For students with autism or other disabilities, reinforcement surveys are especially useful because motivators may differ significantly from those of their peers. Some students respond strongly to verbal praise, while others prefer visual rewards, routines, sensory input, or highly specific interests.

Reinforcement surveys should be used because they:

- Increase student motivation and engagement
- Support positive behavior interventions
- Help teach replacement behaviors and new skills
- Reduce challenging behaviors by increasing success
- Build stronger relationships between educators and students
- Ensure behavior plans are individualized and meaningful

The information gathered can be used to develop effective behavior intervention plans (BIPs), classroom support, token systems, or instructional strategies. Because student interests and preferences can change over time, surveys should be updated periodically so reinforcers remain effective.

Best Opportunity for Learning Plan

Students with autism learn best in consistent and predictable environments and situations. Because many different settings, activities, and adults interact with a student during the day, it's important to develop a plan that outlines the best opportunities for learning. Consider the setting where you work most closely with the student and develop a plan that's practical and useful in that environment. The learning plan should be shared with other educators and parents or guardians so that support wraps around the student throughout the school day. Using ABC data and reinforcement surveys helps teams avoid labeling autistic students as "problem kids" and instead redesign environments and supports.

Best Practices for Students in the Classroom

Autism presents differently for each student, so there's no single strategy that works for every student. However, some strategies help create classrooms where students with autism are more comfortable, regulated, and ready to learn. These strategies include:

- **Be calm and positive:** Model predictable, calm behavior and create a classroom environment where all students know what to expect.
- **Know the characteristics of autism:** Learn general features of autism and how they show up for your students so you're prepared to support them.
- **Learn about your students:** Gather and read information about students' likes, fears, needs, and strengths from families, previous teachers, and the students themselves.
- **Promote a welcoming environment:** Explicitly teach, model, and practice social skills with all students so peer interactions are supportive and inclusive.
- **Teach understanding:** Pair the student with autism with positive peers/role models and provide structured opportunities for small-group work and supported social interaction.
- **Ensure organization:** Plan where students will sit, how they access materials, and how they move through the room to reduce confusion and anxiety.
- **Consider sensory needs:** Select seating, materials, and manage noise levels with sensory sensitivities in mind.
- **Establish and maintain routines:** Organize and communicate routines clearly. Alert students to schedule changes as early as possible.
- **Provide visual support:** Use schedules, routines, expectations, and other visuals to support understanding.
- **Use descriptive praise:** Name specific behaviors. For example, "I like how you pushed in your chair" rather than general statements like, "Good job, class."
- **Explain expectations:** Many learners with autism respond better when they understand why rules and routines are in place.

These strategies aren't all-inclusive, but integrating them into your instruction can help support students with autism. Designing classrooms for diverse needs benefits your current student with autism and those who will join your classroom in the future. Building welcoming environments

and peer understanding helps counter stigma and bullying, which autistic students often face.

Supporting Rationale and Research

Banda, D. R., & Grimmer, E. (2008). Enhancing Social and Transition Behaviors of Persons with Autism through Activity Schedules: A Review. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 324-333. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/23879794?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Bauminger, N. (2002). The Facilitation of Social-Emotional Understanding and Social Interaction in High-Functioning Children with Autism: Intervention Outcomes. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 32(4), 283-298. Retrieved from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12199133/>

Boyd, B. A., Baranek, G. T., Sideris, J., Poe, M. D., Watson, L. R., Patten, E., & Miller, H. (2010). Sensory Features and Repetitive Behaviors in Children with Autism and Developmental Delays. *Autism Research*, 3(2), 78-87. Retrieved from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3071028/pdf/nihms-245637.pdf>

Dubie M. & Pratt, C. (2022). Observing behavior using a-b-c data. Retrieved from <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/articles/observing-behavior-using-a-b-c-data.html>.

Lei, J., Charman, T., Leigh, E., Russell, A., Mohamed, Z., & Hollocks, M. J. (2022). Examining the relationship between cognitive inflexibility and internalizing and externalizing symptoms in autistic children and adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Autism research : official journal of the International Society for Autism Research*, 15(12), 2265–2295. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2826>

Resources

Articles

[Autism in the classroom: Strategies for success](#)

[Understanding Types and Levels of Autism: A Full Guide](#)

[Autism Spectrum Wheel Explained - apricott ABA](#)

Videos

[9-year-old's heartfelt video on life with autism](#)

[Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence \(ABC\) Chart | Special Connections](#)

[Autism Angel — Carly Fleischmann](#)

[Understanding the Antecedent Behavior Consequence \(ABC\) Data Model](#)

[What It's Like To Have Autism: Experience Sensory Overload For Yourself](#)

[Observing Behavior Using A-B-C Data: Articles: Indiana Resource Center for Autism](#)

Tools

[Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence \(ABC\) Chart](#) -Download this document for your use. You can print or complete online.

[Best Opportunity for Learning Plan Template](#)-This link will create a copy for you to complete or print.

[Student Reinforcement Survey](#)

[Student Reinforcement Survey](#)

Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

To earn the micro-credential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3 and a proficient score for all components in Part 2.

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Part 1. Overview Questions (Provides Context)

250 - 500 words

Please answer the following contextual questions to help our assessors understand your current situation.

Please don't include any information that identifies you to reviewers.

- What's your current position in your school, and what role do you have when working with students with ASD?
- Describe how the needs of students with autism are currently being supported in your school or classroom.
- How do you plan to use the knowledge you gain from this micro-credential?

Passing: All questions are answered completely and clearly describe the educator's role with students with autism, the current support in place for students with autism, and the educator's goal for earning the micro-credential.

Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this micro-credential, please submit the following **four artifacts** as evidence of your learning.

Please don't include any information that will identify you or your students to reviewers.

Artifacts 1-3 should focus on one student you work with.

Artifact 1: ABC Chart

Submit an ABC chart for one student with autism. Include at least three events, which may occur over multiple days. Each entry should be fully completed (Antecedent, Behavior, Cause). See the Resources section for examples and guidance.

Artifact 2: Reinforcement Survey

Submit a completed reinforcement survey for this student. You may use a survey from the Resources section or a tool used in your school. You may complete it with the student, a parent or guardian, or another teacher.

If a survey already exists, make a copy and remove all identifying information.

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Artifact 3: Best Opportunity for Learning Plan (BOLP)

Use the ABC chart and the reinforcement survey to create a BOLP that demonstrates your understanding of this student's learning needs.

This document should clarify:

- The most successful environment(s) for this student
- Communication methods and concerns, and at least one example of a successful interaction
- Transition methods and concerns, including either:
 - One specific transition and a plan for that transition, or
 - A description of the approach that supports the student across transitions during the day
- Reinforcements, rewards, and strategies that support daily learning
- A plan for addressing disruptive behavior(s) identified in the ABC chart
- Interventions or communication methods that aren't appropriate for this student
- How you will share the plan with other stakeholders to support the student

You may use the template in the Resources section or create your document with these sections clearly labeled.

Artifact 4: Classroom Plan Analysis

Create a document that identifies three additions or changes to your classroom or instruction to support students with autism. These changes don't need to be specific to one student.

Your document should:

- Describe three adjustments in your setting or instructional practice
- Include a description of instructional changes or pictures showing the before/after classroom setting
- Explain how this change supports your current or future students with autism

Part 2. Rubric

	Proficient	Basic	Developing
Artifact 1: ABC Chart	Six sections of the chart are complete and contain factual, specific, and non-biased information. Antecedent and Behaviors are clearly explained or described. The consequences of each interaction demonstrate thoughtful consideration and appear to be a result of the behavior.	Four or five sections of the chart are completed with factual, specific information. Information seems specific and devoid of bias or opinion. Antecedent and Behaviors are explained, but not in great detail. Consequence and/or function sections may be incomplete.	Chart lists a minimal amount of information completed over a minimal amount of time. Information may be biased or opinionated. Some sections of the chart may not be completed. Consequence seems unrelated to the behavior.
Artifact 2: Reinforcement Survey	The survey is completed and identifies a minimum of five preferences or rewards.	The survey is completed and identifies three to four rewards.	The survey may be partially completed or doesn't contain rewards.
Artifact 3: Best Opportunity for Learning Plan	All sections of the plan are completed thoroughly. The seven points below are addressed:	All sections of the plan are completed but may not contain examples where instructed. Five or six points below are addressed:	Some sections of the plan are completed and may not contain examples where instructed. Fewer than five points below are addressed:

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	- Most successful environment(s) for this student - Communication methods and concerns and an example of a successful interaction - Transition methods and concerns - Reinforcements/rewards and strategies that will support the student's ability to learn - Method to handle disruptive behavior(s) - Interventions/methods of communication that aren't appropriate for the student - How the plan will be shared with other stakeholders	- Most successful environment(s) for this student - Communication methods and concerns and an example of a successful interaction - Transition methods and concerns - Reinforcements/rewards and strategies that will support the student's ability to learn - Method to handle disruptive behavior(s) - Interventions/methods of communication that aren't appropriate for the student - How the plan will be shared with other stakeholders	- Most successful environment(s) for this student - Communication methods and concerns and an example of a successful interaction - Transition methods and concerns - Reinforcements/rewards and strategies that will support the student's ability to learn - Method to handle disruptive behavior(s) - Interventions/methods of communication that aren't appropriate for the student - How the plan will be shared with other stakeholders
Artifact 4: Classroom	Submits a slide deck or document that shows	Submits a slide deck or document that shows three	Submits a slide deck or document that shows fewer

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Plan Reflection	adjustments to the classroom/instruction to create a more supportive environment for students with autism. Includes three specific examples of changes made. Includes description of changes to instructional practice or pictures of the before/after classroom setting. Each of the three includes supporting information showing how the classroom meets best practices for students with autism.	adjustments to the classroom/instruction to create a more supportive environment for autistic students. Includes three examples of changes made. Includes either a photo or description of instructional shifts of the classroom before and after. The explanation(s) don't clearly demonstrate how these changes support students with autism.	than three adjustments to the classroom/instruction to create a more supportive environment for autistic students. Includes only the after condition of the classroom with either a photo or description of instructional shifts. The explanation is unclear or missing.
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Part 3 Reflection

Suggested word count: 250-400

Use the word count as a guide when writing your personal reflection on this micro-credential. For tips on writing a good reflection, review the following resource:

[How Do I Write a Good Personal Reflection?](#)

Please don't include any information that will identify you to reviewers.

1. Reflect on your experiences completing the ABC chart. What roadblocks did you encounter, and how did you resolve them?
2. What have you noticed in your students as a direct result of completing this micro-credential? Provide specific examples from your classroom practice.

Passing: Reflection provides evidence that this activity has positively impacted both educator practice and student success. Specific examples are cited directly from personal or work-related experiences to support claims.