

Questions About Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

1 What Is ASD and How Do the Core Areas of Impairment Affect Students in a Traditional School Setting?

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurobiological impairment that impacts a child's development. The disability can be present from birth, with some of the symptoms being recognized by twelve months of age. These earliest symptoms include limited eye contact or failure to look at the eyes and faces of others, limited response to their name and to the social gestures of others, and impaired imitation of both sound and actions.¹ Other children with ASD appear to have a typical pattern of early development with a fairly sudden onset of symptoms and a loss of skills, including loss of words, eye contact, and play skills. This regressive subtype often becomes symptomatic between eighteen to twenty-four months of age.

The average age of diagnosis for Autistic Disorder is three years of age, but often individuals with fewer autistic symptoms, such as those with Pervasive Developmental Disorder–Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), or those with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), considered the highest functioning on the Autism Spectrum, are diagnosed much later. The average age of diagnosis for Asperger’s Syndrome is eight to twelve years of age and is very often a second or third diagnostic label given to a child with the disability. Disorders such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), or other Behavioral Disorders, including Conduct Disorder (CD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), are often assigned first, typically by professionals who lack an understanding of ASD.

Autism is referred to as a “spectrum disorder” because of the wide variability of functioning seen in individuals with the disability. The core areas that are impaired in ASD are communication and socialization skills. An additional area that is affected is restrictive and repetitive patterns of behavior. People with ASD may engage in self-stimulating behaviors such as spinning or rocking or repetitious routines such as lining things up or insisting that things be done in a very specific order. Children with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) are often highly verbal, but tend to use unusual language and may perseverate on one specific topic or have an intense area of interest. Children with classic Autistic Disorder have a delay in the development of spoken language and often use *echolalic* or repetitive speech or they may remain nonverbal, having no way to communicate basic needs and desires except through their behavior.

It is generally accepted that children with ASD face varying levels of challenges processing sensory information.² The literature reports that people with ASD process sensory experiences differently from people who do not have ASD.³ It is estimated that around two-thirds of children with ASD also have significant

sensory processing issues that impact their ability to function in one or more life-skill domains. Many with ASD experience a high sensitivity to touch, sound, light, or movement that results in behavioral refusal and avoidance of a variety of situations and activities. Most children develop a set of protective responses, including covering their ears, actively moving away from or avoiding people, or avoiding highly stimulating settings. Some develop coping skills to get through “overstimulating” activities, but may eventually act out or become exhausted by their efforts. This exhaustion looks like complete shutdown, where the individual will not respond even to activities they know how to perform.

Impacts in Traditional School Settings

Traditional school settings are usually highly active and interactive environments. People with ASD face many challenges tolerating and coping with the sensory stimulation. They are also challenged with recognizing, interpreting, and responding to social situations; understanding all the facets of the academic task demands; and processing a great deal of verbal communication. For students with ASD, traditional school settings may feel like being in rush-hour traffic in a strange city, on a rainy day with the dog barking in the backseat. While this is possible, it is also exhausting!

People with ASD have high verbal skills and average to above-average intelligence as measured on standardized IQ tests. They tend to have relative strengths in many academic areas, including decoding (many are hyperlexic or self-taught readers), math calculation (some becoming brilliant mathematicians, engineers, or physicists), and other academic areas that require memorization or implementation of rules and procedures. These same individuals have extreme impairments in using and understanding nonverbal communication, in recognizing and responding to their emotions or the emotions of others, and in taking other people’s perspectives and

responding in socially appropriate ways. They may also be highly rigid in their thinking and behavior and respond inappropriately to a change in routine or a new expectation.

Although individuals with ASD may have excellent vocabulary skills, they also tend to interpret language literally. This often results in problems interpreting what other people mean in their everyday speech. For example, the teacher might say, “Everyone take your seat.” The student with ASD might respond with “Take it where?” This is not noncompliance or sarcasm. The student with ASD interprets the instruction in the literal sense and may make a mistake in his attempt to follow the teacher’s direction. Teachers who do not understand the nature of this disability might misinterpret the student’s behavior and assume that the student is being willful, oppositional, or comical. The more frequently these “miscommunications” occur, the more anxious the student may become. He may spend a great deal of time during the school day attempting to interpret the teacher’s instructions or the comments and slang words or phrases used by peers.

Academic areas that require mental flexibility, problem solving, prediction, and perspective taking are a struggle for individuals with ASD. Many do very well in school until the curriculum shifts at around third grade. Up until that point, the focus of learning is on facts and procedures, which are a relative strength for these learners. At around third grade, students are expected to engage in more complex learning, which includes making predictions, making inferences, and solving complex problems. Once this shift occurs, many students with ASD begin to fall behind or become increasingly frustrated with school and homework.

Challenges in Middle School and High School

Another shift that is very challenging for those with ASD occurs in the late elementary grades and middle school. Teachers begin to

expect students to maintain the organization of their own work space, materials, and assignments.

In the early grades, teachers provide a high level of organizational structure and support. This is accomplished through classroom design, such as having learning centers where materials are all prepared in advance and ready for students to use when they arrive at the center. Teachers also provide a highly predictable and structured schedule that includes regular routines each day, homework packets that are broken up over the week, regular standing tests, and activity times. The teachers will lead their students through complex assignments like book reports by breaking them into manageable chunks, providing explicit step-by-step procedures, and listing student expectations. These strategies provide students with ASD the physical, temporal, and cerebral organizational structure that they need to succeed. Given that students with ASD lack the hardwired organizational skills, also called *executive functioning capabilities*, to manage their own physical and cerebral organization, the highly structured environment, predictable schedule, and orderly presentation of assignments are critical for students with ASD.

In contrast, when students reach the later elementary grades and middle-school years, the teacher's expectation is that the student has the ability to manage his own physical space and assignments. The teacher assumes that the student has developed the skills to organize his desk, locker, backpack, and his own assignments such as homework, reading, research, reports, and test preparation without additional teacher direction. Teachers also expect the student to manage his own time by using downtime for studying, organizing himself, and preparing for upcoming events or assignments. School can quickly become overwhelming for a student with ASD or for any student who does not have highly developed organizational skills or the executive functioning capabilities to manage

these organizational processes. Executive functioning will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, Question 13.

Impacts of Fine and Gross Motor Challenges

Many students with ASD struggle with motor coordination, including the gross motor skills that are required for sports and P.E., as well as the fine motor skills that are required for handwriting. The expectation that students in traditional education programs will participate in group sports puts social and performance pressures on those with ASD who struggle with social skills and motor coordination. Physical education classes and recess can be very stressful times for students with ASD. These are also time periods where students with ASD can be victimized or teased relentlessly for their lack of physical prowess or for their quirky behaviors.

The fine motor demands of writing that are expected in traditional schools and the rigid nature of the schedule, where a great deal of written output is expected within a short period of time, are also a high source of stress and oftentimes failure. When provided with an alternative form of output, such as keyboarding or dictation, students with ASD can perform quite well. These accommodations may be challenging to access or implement in a traditional school setting. Even if they are available, many with ASD do not want the stigma of using the necessary accommodations in the traditional school settings because these accommodations set them apart from their peers and make them feel “different.”

Emotional Impacts

Adolescents with ASD are at high risk for depression and anxiety. Many of these students are bright enough to recognize they are different, and it becomes hard to focus on their strengths when all they may see in a traditional school setting are their social, academic, or physical weaknesses. While on the surface, individuals

with ASD may simply appear quirky, they are fully affected by the core deficits of Autism and the effects on learning and behavior. Because of high verbal skills and academic strengths in certain areas, teachers often have unrealistic academic and social expectations for some ASD students. The student may be able to do certain aspects of an assignment, but may struggle with others. He may be able to explain how to do something, but cannot execute the plan without ongoing prompting and support. He may want to have friends and work in a group, but lack the social skills and understanding to do this successfully. These types of academic and social frustrations often result in acting out or shutting down in traditional school programs.

Students with Cognitive Delays and Severe Autism

It is estimated that 75 percent of individuals with Autistic Disorder also have some degree of cognitive impairment.⁴ While there are no outward physical symptoms of ASD, individuals who function at the middle or lower end of the spectrum are often easier to recognize than those with high-functioning forms of ASD. Their unusual speech (echolalia) or inability to use words to communicate and higher levels of repetitive motor behaviors (self-stimulating behaviors) make the disability more visible and recognizable to others. Teachers and peers may be more tolerant of behaviors or have more realistic academic and social expectations of a child with moderate forms of ASD in traditional educational settings. An issue faced by these students is the tendency of teachers and aides to overprompt or provide such high levels of support that the student never learns how to do things independently.

Time spent in a general education classroom may be overstimulating to a student with more severe ASD, which may result in higher rates of sensory regulating or self-stimulatory behaviors and missed instructional opportunities. It is also very challenging to

address the functional, behavioral, and communication needs of a more-involved student in a traditional inclusive classroom setting. As a result, students with more severe ASD may be educated in special day classrooms (SDC). While this more controlled setting may facilitate academic, functional skills, and communication growth and promote better behavioral regulation, it may also result in missed opportunities for social development. Even when these students are in proximity to typically developing peers, such as during recess, social teaching opportunities are difficult to capture in traditional school programs.

Recess on a traditional school campus is a noisy and active time. The vast space of the traditional playground and the lack of structure make it challenging to be able to teach or facilitate social interactions. Students with ASD may also have great difficulty in generalizing the skills learned at school to other settings such as home and the community.

Problematic Behaviors

Sensory differences, social avoidance, and lack of appropriate play or leisure skills often result in unconventional behavioral patterns. Severe behavior may make teachers fearful of working with a student, and may lead peers to steer away from interactions. Individuals with ASD require higher levels of support, more specialized teaching strategies, and frequent reinforcement for engaging in appropriate behavior. When unable to communicate or understand the expectations of others, problematic behaviors such as aggression, throwing tantrums, bolting, or screaming may develop. Individually designed positive behavior support plans (BSP) that include teaching prosocial and adaptive responses are essential for success. These highly individualized teaching plans must be implemented consistently in order to be most effective. This can be challenging in traditional educational settings, as the student may

encounter many teachers or specialists throughout the day, each with his or her own unique way of working with the student. Consistent implementation of teaching and behavior support plans requires a great deal of communication and planning time amongst team members, which is often difficult to achieve in traditional school programs.

Physical Signs of Stress

A study by Richdale and Prior (1992) found that people with ASD have a tendency toward cortisol hypersecretion (a hormone associated with stress) during their school hours.⁵ In their study, these researchers found that the same subjects had relatively normal levels of cortisol secretion during nonschool hours. This provides evidence that traditional school settings elicit a stress response in people with ASD. These findings are further clarified by Corbett and her colleagues (2006), who found that people with ASD had increased cortisol reactions compared to neurotypical controls when presented with any novel or threatening event.⁶ Due to the level of stimulation and the unpredictable nature of a typical school environment, we can ascertain that the nature of traditional school settings is very stressful to children with ASD. This stress impacts them physically as well as behaviorally as they attempt to cope.

Necessity to Provide a Continuum of Options for Students with ASD

While it is not impossible for a student with ASD to access a high-quality and appropriate educational program in a traditional school setting, this scenario does present many challenges. The needs and challenges of the individual child, as well as the structure, training, and readiness of the school staff, must all be considered. With all the right supports and training in place, many with

ASD can thrive in traditional public education. However, it must also be recognized that the traditional school setting may not meet the needs of all students and families.

The National Research Council (2001) recommends that a continuum of placement options be available to students with ASD.⁷ This continuum can range from full-time placement in a general education classroom to a special day classroom, to home- and community-based instruction. By having a continuum of options available, public school programs will be more likely to succeed with this challenging population of learners. In addition, they may be better able to collaborate with families who believe in and desire homeschooling for their child.

2 Is There Peer-Reviewed Research That Supports Homeschooling for Students with ASD?

At the present time, a comprehensive research literature review on the topic of *homeschooling students on the Autism Spectrum* yielded no formal results; however, numerous studies indicate the importance of parental involvement in the educational and treatment programs of children with ASD. A 1998 study conducted by Sally Rogers reports that all efficacious treatments of young children with ASD involve the parents in some role.⁸ Ivar Lovaas and colleagues found that children whose treatment took place in the home setting, where parents were actively involved, made significant gains on measures of IQ and expressive and receptive language. These home-educated students appeared to have a greater treatment advantage compared with those who received traditional special education services through the public school.⁹

Further studies have indicated that parents can be highly effective as teachers of their children with special needs¹⁰ and can

demonstrate equal levels of success in running an intervention program as trained professionals.¹¹ Additionally, several studies have shown that with parent training in the implementation of effective educational strategies, the level of family stress and the depressive symptoms often seen in mothers of children with ASD can be reduced significantly.¹² Happier and more frequent parent-child interactions and more positive parent-child communications have also been shown as a result of parent training in effective educational interventions.¹³ Studies have also demonstrated that as parents are better able to manage behaviors and as more adaptive skills are acquired, families benefit by their ability to access community and leisure activities.¹⁴

Although there have been no empirically validated studies indicating the treatment effects of homeschooling children with ASD specifically, it is clear from the previously mentioned studies that parents are a vital component of effective educational treatment and that both the parent and child can benefit from parent-implemented educational strategies.

General Homeschooling Research

As we look to the research literature to guide us, it is important to reference the general research on homeschooling and the research that has been conducted in other special needs populations. This research can help to answer some of the questions, criticisms, or possible misinterpretations about homeschooling that many cite in opposition to this educational choice.

Homeschooling and Academic Success

Many people fear that children who receive homeschool instruction are missing out on the valuable learning opportunities that promote success and that their academic achievement will be compromised as a result. Quite the opposite has been documented.

In 1998, the largest survey and testing program for students in homeschools to date was conducted by Dr. Lawrence Rudner, involving 20,760 kindergarten through twelfth-grade homeschooled students. Participants were administered either the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) or the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP), depending on their current grade level. The parents also responded to a questionnaire regarding background and demographic information. The findings of this study indicate that the achievement test scores of this group of homeschooled students was exceptionally high, with the median scores falling in the 70th to 80th percentile. Additionally, 25 percent of homeschooled students from the survey were enrolled in one or more grade levels above their age-matched traditionally schooled peers. The students who had been homeschooled the longest appeared to have the greatest achievement advantage. Although this was not a scientifically controlled study, the results do demonstrate that homeschoolers can accomplish excellent results in academic domains.¹⁵

Further support for homeschooling to yield academic results is supplied by the 1997 study of 5,402 homeschooled students entitled, "Strengths of Their Own: Home Schoolers Across America." This study demonstrated that homeschoolers, on the average, outperformed their counterparts in the public schools by 30 to 37 percentile points in all subjects. This study also indicated that the longer the child had been receiving homeschooling, the greater the advantage.¹⁶

Speculations about why the advantages are so great include the individualized attention and instruction that is provided in homeschooling. Additionally, the student can be assessed for skill mastery on a more frequent basis, moving at their own pace through the curriculum, and problems can be addressed and corrected more quickly. The efficiency of instruction is also increased in homeschooling, with less downtime and more opportunities for

learning and instruction. All of these advantages apply whether the learner is a neurotypical child, a gifted child, or a child with ASD. Given these implications of the research findings, one could assume that the same or similar results would occur with specialized populations. These have all been identified as advantages seen in homeschooling a child with ASD.

Homeschooling and Social Skills

One of the biggest criticisms and misinterpretations about homeschooling is that the student will miss out on social learning opportunities and, as a result, his social skills will suffer. This is probably the most common criticism and reaction about homeschooling a child with ASD. Several researchers have found an overwhelmingly positive picture for homeschooled students' socialization. Not only are homeschoolers provided with opportunities that foster positive social interactions, they also receive protection from many sources of negative socialization.

Research has shown us that home-educated children are in fact exposed to nearly the same number of social contacts as traditionally educated children. The important factor, however, is not the number of contacts, but appears to be the quality of social interactions. According to April Chatham-Carpenter, homeschoolers are exposed to more positive social interactions that promote prosocial behavior rather than negative social interactions that may promote negative social behaviors and attitudes. Researcher Richard Medlin (2000) substantiated this finding with his study comparing 70 homeschooled students to 70 traditionally schooled students. His data indicate that self-concept was higher for the homeschooled students, who also presented with significantly fewer behavioral disorders.¹⁷

It is clear that there is a growing body of evidence indicating that social skills are not negatively, but in fact, positively impacted

through homeschooling. Again, if this holds true with neurotypical children, one can assume that similar results might be found in children with ASD.

Homeschooling Research with Other Special Needs Populations

A growing body of evidence supports the effects of homeschooling specialized populations of learners. While the breadth of this research is meager now, we expect that as homeschooling continues to gain momentum, especially with special needs learners, the body of research will accelerate.

A study conducted by Duvall and colleagues (1997) found that special needs students who were homeschooled exceeded the gains in reading, spelling, and math of their peers who were educated in traditional, special education settings. An exploratory study by Duvall and colleagues in 2004 of students with ADD indicated that homeschooled students were academically engaged about two times as often as traditionally schooled students and experienced greater gains in reading and math. Because of the small sample sizes and lack of replication of these studies, no causal relation can be claimed; however, these preliminary findings are highly suggestive that homeschooling children with special learning needs can be highly effective, perhaps more effective than traditional special education programs and services.¹⁸

Jacque Ensign, in a paper presented at the American Educational Research Association (April 15, 1998) entitled *Defying the Stereotypes of Special Education: Homeschooled Students*, reported her findings from a seven-year longitudinal study of four students with learning disabilities. Of the four students she followed, one had successfully graduated from high school and the other three were expected to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. All four students were also expected to continue with

postsecondary education. This 100 percent graduation rate and anticipated postsecondary education is impressive when compared with the statistical averages for learning disabled students who are traditionally schooled (38 percent dropout rate and only 28 percent college attendance). While her data is anecdotal, it still lends support to the notion that student-centered, individualized programs that are typical in homeschooling yield very positive results in students with specialized learning needs.

We are seeing an increase in the popularity of homeschooling, both with typically developing and special needs children, and particularly students with ASD. As the numbers increase, so too will the research on the practice. This will provide us with a clearer picture of the benefits and drawbacks of homeschooling in this population. Research in this area will hopefully help to identify whether there are advantages to homeschooling for specific age groups or for children who fall in a certain range on the autism spectrum. We hope that future research will also provide some clear procedures and protocols to make the educational program most effective. At this point in time, we must draw from what information we have thus far and trust in good judgment and the implementation of best practice by those who make the homeschooling choice.

3 Why Do Some Families of Children with ASD Consider Homeschooling?

Before addressing why families of children with ASD choose to homeschool, it must be acknowledged that historically a child's education began in the home with his or her parents and extended family members as teachers. Compulsory attendance in public schools did not begin to become mandatory until the mid-1800s when states began to enact laws requiring children to attend school.

A return to teaching children at home emerged again in the 1960s and 1970s when some families became disappointed with public education. Since then, the number of parents choosing to homeschool their children has substantially increased. The most recent research completed in the United States was conducted during 2002–2003 by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and published in 2006. This survey reveals that there has been a substantial increase in the number of students being homeschooled in this five-year period. The data indicated that in 1999 approximately 850,000 children were being homeschooled compared to 1,096,000 in 2003. The 2003 data show that 2.2 percent of the student-age population is in a homeschool program.¹⁹ To read the complete report online, contact the National Center for Educational Statistics at <http://nces.ed.gov>.

The families who completed the NCES survey revealed that they chose to homeschool their children for many of the same reasons that families who have children with ASD do. The three main reasons listed by families surveyed for this book included safety, religious or moral concerns, and dissatisfaction with academic instruction. Both groups of homeschooling families, regardless of the child's ability or disability, share a core set of beliefs: that they understand best the educational needs of their child; that they can provide more time to the child; and that they can pass on the morals and value systems that are most important to their family.

Safety

Because of the social cognitive deficits that are present in children with ASD, they have a greater potential for victimization or being “put up to” things by peers. Many find themselves in trouble with school administrators or sometimes the law due to the lack of social understanding. This is a commonly cited reason for selecting to homeschool a child with ASD.

Parent Perspective

I worried for my child's safety and that he would be a target of teasing.

—Ann Coe

His safety was a major issue since he had not developed the ability to understand deception. We felt that he might get taken advantage of in a school with over two thousand students. Additionally, he would have gone to school where the teachers just see him a few hours out of the week, and they would not understand his social delays and, therefore, would not be aware of the potential for danger.

—Connie Ajay

A Natural Continuation from In-Home Early Intervention Services

Families with children who have received an early diagnosis of autistic disorder before the age of thirty-six months may already be participating in an intensive early intervention program that is being carried out in their home. For these families it may feel more appropriate to continue the educational program at home when their child reaches school age. If the child's homeschooling program is to be provided through a public education homeschooling option, then roles and responsibilities need to be determined through the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. If the parents choose to independently homeschool their child through a private school option, then supports and services become the family's responsibility as will be discussed in Question 9.

Dissatisfaction with Academic Instruction

It is well documented that a significant shortage of fully credentialed special educators exists in the United States.²⁰ In 2007 the U.S. Department of Education reported that more than 10 percent of teachers in special education positions lack the proper certifications. The greatest gap and shortage in fully qualified teachers is in the area of severe disabilities, which is the authorization required to provide services to children with ASD in most states. Data further indicate that one in every five special education teachers leaves special education each year, increasing the gap and leaving many inexperienced teachers to provide special education services and support. Compounding this problem is the lack of special and general educators who have received specific training in Autism Spectrum Disorders. This shortage and the rapidly growing numbers of individuals with ASD translates into a major gap in the public education system's ability to provide enough trained and prepared professionals to effectively educate and support students with ASD. This shortage has had a significant impact on families who have a child with ASD. In cases where there is a lack of knowledgeable professionals, this may result in families quickly becoming dissatisfied with classroom instruction. A national shortage of speech therapists and occupational therapists contributes to the problem of related services. The school system's difficulty in filling professional positions often results in a family's dissatisfaction with the services and supports their child may require to be successful in a traditional school setting.

There is little, if any, training provided to general education teachers or site-level administrators in the credentialing process related to Autism Spectrum Disorders. Training for classroom aides and support staff is often an afterthought, and because of tight budgets, these people often do not receive any specific

training in ASD, evidence-based instructional strategies, or positive behavioral supports. There is a growing concern about these shortages and the significant need for more training in ASD. These concerns are cited by the National Research Council (2001), the California Legislative Blue Ribbon Commission on Autism (2007), as well as other public policy studies conducted around the nation.²¹ The current state of affairs gives rise to several parental concerns, as illustrated below.

Parent Perspective

In my personal experience in dealing with families of children with ASD, the main reason for contemplating homeschooling is often frustration with the school system. The systemic lack of support in implementing the accommodations or modifications and lack of understanding of how the disability impacts the student's learning are common.

—Connie Ajay

Experiences dealing with school personnel may produce an abundance of negative energy that is draining and counterproductive. Parents often decide they would rather spend their time and energy dealing directly with their children, rather than continuing to confront school personnel.

—Karen Crum

There is a sense of frustration with the public school mainstream curriculum and the staff's lack of knowledge or training in how to help these special needs children have a chance in life.

—Michelle King

This sense of dissatisfaction by parents may arise soon after placing their child in traditional public school. Parents may immediately realize that it is not a good fit for their child and remove him or begin looking for alternatives. Other parents may keep their child enrolled in traditional school for a longer period of time. From our research and interviews, it appears that a common decision point to move to homeschooling occurs at around second or third grade. At this time in a child's school career, the simple behavioral concerns that may have been voiced in kindergarten and first grade have increased to issues that must be systematically addressed and resolved. Other natural transition points that prompt the consideration of homeschooling are moving to middle school or high school. The size of the campus, safety concerns, changing classes, and having multiple teachers are all reasons for

Parent Perspective

We chose to homeschool because Ian was about to start high school. He only had two teachers in junior high and had some problems and lots of stress there. I didn't think that six high school teachers would accommodate his learning differences enough to help him be successful. I didn't think communication between Ian, the teachers, and I would occur often enough, or quickly enough. I didn't think that he would adapt to the large, busy high school campus, where only a few people actually knew him. I didn't think much learning would go on in this distracting environment. The special education and resource classes (except math) were not appropriate for my son because of their lower academic level.

—Ann Coe

concern at these points in time. For some families reaching these transition points may have been a long and arduous journey peppered with many issues that may have felt insurmountable. Each transition may feel like starting over.

Emotional Health of the Child and Family

Additional reasons that parents of children with ASD choose to homeschool include reducing stress and anxiety and building self-esteem.

Parent Perspective

Parents may consider homeschool because many kids with ASD become very anxious in a traditional school setting. The anxiety can lead to behavior problems and depression that can have long-term negative effects. The constant anxiety is detrimental to healthy living and learning. The anxiety of the child with ASD usually affects the entire family system in a negative way. Homeschool produces new challenges, but they are often preferable to the chronic stress that traditional school creates. Students with ASD who have average or above-average intelligence often feel incompetent in traditional systems because they learn differently or respond differently from other students. They compare themselves to others in an environment where their gifts may not be recognized or utilized enough to compensate for their differences. At home, without constant comparison to neurotypical peers, students with ASD can learn to appreciate and feel good about themselves.

—Karen Crum

Social Opportunities and Extracurricular Activities

An additional reason parents of children with ASD choose to homeschool is the social opportunities and the richness in appropriate extracurricular participation that can be created.

Lack of Focus on Self-Help and Life Skills

For some families of students with ASD, the increased national and state focus on academic achievement and standardized testing has had a negative impact. Even the alternate standardized testing for students with moderate to severe disabilities reduces important instructional time for students who have ASD along with cognitive or other delays.

Parents of children with significant delays want their child to be successful, but acknowledge that success is not always measured academically. These parents want their child to learn the self-help and life skills that will be the foundation for as independent a life as possible. Learning self-help and life skills requires the same systematic and direct instruction that any academic skill requires. However, for

Parent Perspective

Some people have asked about the social component, but this is not a problem since my child is now getting social opportunities in groups and with kids who share the same hobbies and interests. Now the social opportunities are more meaningful and joyful for my child because they are related to his special interests.

—Connie Ajay

students with more significant delays, instruction requires more practice and experiences in relevant and meaningful environments where the child will actually use the skills. This type of instruction, which is sometimes called community-based instruction, requires a very low student-to-staff ratio, adequate supports, and resources, which may not be available in a traditional school setting to the degree necessary for some students. This may cause frustration and dissatisfaction for parents and prompt them to choose to homeschool their child who needs self-help and life skills instruction.

Bottom-Line Reasons for Choosing Homeschooling

Most of the parents we interviewed admitted that homeschooling was not something that they had anticipated doing. It was a decision that was made over time and based on many factors, and ultimately on the gut-level instinct that it was the best decision for their child at that time.



Parent Perspective

Most parents of children with ASD never planned to homeschool and would not be considering it if things were going well for their child at school.

—Janelle Lewis

