

SUCESSO ACADÉMICO NA ULISBOA

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GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS

Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is it?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder of genetic origin. It can be defined as a developmental condition, that manifests as one's social interactions, communication and behaviour. Although it is a dysfunction originating in a particular brain function, there is no biological marker, meaning the diagnosis is based on a set of behavioural criteria.

Main symptoms:

- Alterations levels of social competency
- Difficulty in social-emotional self-regulating
- Difficulty with abstract thinking
- Limited interests
- Isolating tendencies
- Routine behaviours
- Motor incoordination or alterations in fine motor skills (ex: writing)
- Peculiarity in speech and language
- Disordered non-verbal communication
- Difficulty in communication

Communication difficulties can be of various kinds. Some can be minimally verbal, especially with strangers, while others can express difficulty articulating their speech, making it hard to understand. Alternatively, some people may have fluent and elaborate speech, but remain highly focused on a single topic, finding it challenging to shift to new subjects.

Normally, they encounter challenges with conversational norms, often being unaware of implicit social rules. They may interrupt or speak over others, making irrelevant remarks, and finding it hard to initiate and end conversations.

In any of these scenarios, individuals with ASD may find it difficult to take on the listener's point of view or anticipate their needs. These are aspects associated with the challenge's individuals with ASD face in establishing relationships with others.

It is necessary to pay attention to students with ASD who may display some of the following characteristics:

- Motor agitation
- Increase in obsessive or repetitive activities
- Apathy or inactivity
- Bizarre behavior or ideas

- Increased difficulty in getting around
- Isolation
- Outbreaks of anger (both physical and verbal).

Sometimes, these students may exhibit behaviours perceived as threatening or aggressive, but generally, they are not directed at others. These behaviours typically occur when they feel unable to accomplish something or when the expected order of events has been disrupted, often reflecting frustration. Among the possible behaviours, some common ones include throwing items on the ground or kicking them (e.g., walls or boxes).

What are the strengths for students with autism spectrum disorder?

- Original thinkers (with a unique approach to tasks and topics)
- Task-oriented
- Trustworthy, if they understand what is being asked of them
- Intelligent
- Strong visual-spatial skills
- Attention to detail
- Able to stay focused for long periods, particularly when the topic is of their interest
- Motivated by specific interests
- Excellent long-term memory

What are the main challenges for students with autism spectrum disorder?

- May misinterpret social cues, facial expressions, body language, or intonation
- Difficulty processing and assimilating learning content
- May feel stressed when required to interact socially or work in groups
- Intelligence and elaborate speech may mask communication difficulties
- Sensory hypersensitivity can interfere with learning (e.g., excessive light and intense noise can cause distractions)
- Extreme difficulty performing multiple tasks at once
- Distorted sense of time
- Difficulty coping with change and transitions

How to help students learn?

Students with ASD require tailored interventions to succeed in higher education. A standardized set of interventions is not feasible, as each student with ASD has unique individual needs.

Many students with ASD must work diligently to maintain emotional control throughout the college day, often returning home emotionally exhausted from their efforts. These students need afternoons and evenings free from demands and tasks to recharge; otherwise, they risk reaching their emotional limit and experiencing 'meltdowns.' In higher education, this may mean taking fewer courses during their academic year, ideally under a special course load arrangement.

Here are some suggestions:

- Respect the level of eye contact chosen by the student
- Provide written instructions, divided by stages
- Allow the use of computers in classes
- Provide visual cues and practical learning alternatives
- Allow students to choose where they sit during classes
- At signs of anxiety, suggest if the student would like to leave the class to calm down
- Allow the access to sensory and comfortable objects
- Allow more time for transitions between tasks or events
- Allow extra time for the completion of tests and assignments

Accommodations for specific difficulties:

Due to difficulty in the transition between tasks, it can be useful to organise exams into question groups. Examples of these accommodations include:

- Allowing extra time for the student to complete tasks
- Simplifying tasks or reducing the number of tasks required
- Highlighting the specific information that the student should retain from reading materials
- Providing a model or example of what is expected from the student in specific tasks

Students with ASD may also have a slower reading speed and difficulty distinguishing important facts from irrelevant information. Therefore, underlined texts and study guides help these students make the most out of their reading time. Teachers can further assist by identifying the key information students must retain for future assessments.

Providing a model of what is expected in the work, or a list of assessment criteria, can also help students with ASD. For instance, if a written assignment will be evaluated based on clarity and orthography in addition to its content, this should be communicated to the student. Always bear in mind that what is implied may not be easily accessible information for a student with ASD. Explaining is always the safest approach.

When tasks involve manual handwriting, students with ASD may not be able to fully demonstrate what they know, as handwriting can be cognitively and physically exhausting for them.

Due to difficulties with abstract thinking, these students tend to focus on the concrete meanings of the information they are given. For example, students with Asperger's may have difficulty interpreting ambiguous information. In other words, when faced with a well-defined mathematical problem, they will find it easier than when presented with an exercise that doesn't use concrete language.

In classes where these students are present, language containing irony or metaphors used to explain facts about a subject and relevant information should, if possible, be avoided, as these students may find it difficult to understand the meaning.

If any further questions about the student's situation arise

Each school of ULisboa has a unit or person who is in charge of the special education needs of students. Regarding the compensatory measures the student is using or could be used in the future, please contact the relevant unit or colleagues responsible for issues related with Special Educational Needs (NEE). You may also consult the [ULisboa Status for Special Educational Needs](#).

Most students with ASD are identified and have the status of a student with NEE. However, there may be students who are not flagged. In this case, if any students display particular difficulties and have no NEE status, you may try to speak with him/her and inform about the possibility of asking for the status and gain access to compensatory measures for his/her condition. For further clarification, please contact the unit or person responsible for students with SEN at your school to determine the best approach to support the student.

Sources of information:

www.apsa.org.pt – Associação Portuguesa de Síndrome de Asperger

Manual de Apoio para Docentes – versão acessível. Serviço de Apoio ao Estudante, Instituto Politécnico de Leiria, 2014.



Núcleo de Adolescência e Idade Adulta, Síndrome de Asperger- Adaptações académicas no ensino secundário e superior.

Note: This text was originally produced for the Teaching Resources Centre of the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Lisbon, with the author making some adaptations to be made available at the Teaching Resources Centre of ULisboa.