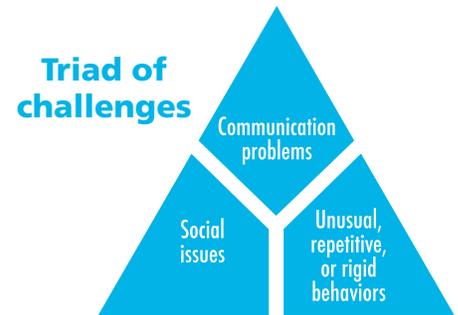


Strategies for supporting the unique challenges of ASD

As a Direct Support Professional (DSP), it is likely that you will support an individual with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It is helpful to conceptualize the support needs of the individual around the three core challenges: social, communication, and behavior issues. These characteristics may be referred to as the Triad of Challenges. Some of these characteristics may be mild. However, in some people with ASD, the characteristics may be severe. It is helpful to utilize support strategies around the Triad of Challenges in ASD. These core strategies will help promote success in working with individuals with ASD.



Social issues

People with ASD often have trouble with socialization. They may not understand social rules and may experience challenges with social skills and social interactions. People with ASD may have trouble creating typical social bonds and maintaining social relationships. They may appear aloof or uninterested in social interaction. Eye contact may be atypical, and personal space issues are common. Social skills must be actively taught. Teaching is most effective when using concrete, rule-based social skill strategies such as —

- Rehearse and role play common social situations.
- Teach non-verbal social skills and social cues.
- Practice general social skills for cooperation.
- Teach appropriate social boundaries.
- Use visual tools such as social stories and visual cues to support social development.

Communication problems

People with ASD may also have challenges with communication. Delayed or lack of verbal speech are common. Speech may have an unusual quality such as lack of tone, atypical rhythm, or inappropriate volume. Some people with ASD display echolalia, which involves repeating words and phrases. There are often difficulties with comprehension, and a lack of understanding of abstract or non-literal terms. To support individuals with ASD in improving their communication skills, DSPs can —

- Practice basic communication skills.
- Keep instructions basic, use fewer words, and break directions into smaller steps.
- Use visual supports or cues to support verbal directions.
- Teach use of signs, gestures, and picture cards for communication.
- Check often for understanding. Repeat if necessary.

Unusual, repetitive, or rigid behaviors

People with ASD often display behaviors that are atypical, repetitive, or overly rigid. Some individuals with ASD may have an intense interest in a specific object, topic or activity. Transitions may be very difficult, and some individuals with ASD may have a noticeable preference for specific routines and rituals. Some individuals display repetitive body movements such as hand flapping, rocking, or finger flicking. As you support individuals with ASD that have challenges restricted or behaviors —

- Try to understand function or purpose of behavior.
- Teach concrete rules around behavior.
- Teach positive alternative replacement behaviors.
- Provide a clear schedule and consistent structure to the environment.
- Set aside appropriate times individual can discuss interest or engage in behavior in a safe manner.

Jennifer Hall-Lande, Ph.D., is a Researcher and School Psychologist who works with children with ASD and their families. She can be reached at hall0440@umn.edu