

some of our boys will be in general education classes with no support by the time they reach the fifth grade. Part of my job as a special educator is to educate my colleagues about the disorder. If we are to advocate for the rights of our students, we have to educate the general population. Autism spectrum disorders are nothing to be afraid of.

## Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms

- Bring models of modifications and accommodations to planning sessions—for example, a visual schedule, a test with a word bank. It is more effective to be able to show someone what you are suggesting.
- Provide brief articles about ASD to those teachers who are interested in learning more about the disability.
- Make sure fidgets and other small sensory items meet the students' needs without disrupting the rest of the class.
- Let other students try out the sensory items you bring in.
- Meet with the general education teachers as much as possible and let them know they can ask you to help prepare general lessons as well as modified lessons.
- Constantly assess the success of your students in the general education setting.
- Data are extremely important. Carry a clipboard or sticky notes. You should be able to back up any statement you make about your students.
- Provide social skills training for the students outside the general education setting. It may embarrass students to have social skills lessons with their peers. Sometimes it is better to practice the lesson outside the room and then bring it into the classroom.
- It is imperative to share the responsibilities of the classroom for inclusion to work. The students need to be a shared responsibility; there should be no “my” students and “your” students. Let the teacher know that you are there for all students.

## Working With Parents and Families

In the field of autism spectrum disorders, working with the parents is essential to success. I often go on home visits with

the younger students. This way, I can model the responses to certain outbursts or inappropriate behavior. I have also gone to restaurants and grocery stores with the families to model behaviors. I have found that it is more successful to model than to just tell a parent what to do.

It is also important for the parents to become familiar with the general education teacher and classroom. In an inclusive program, the parents should feel comfortable talking to the general education teacher as well as the special education teacher. When the special education teacher serves as a go-between (with parents and other teachers), communication breaks down. Parent–teacher conferences should be held with all the members of the team and not just one teacher. It is important to have the parents support each other. We started a parent support group this year. This provided the parents with someone other than me to turn to with questions and problems. I began it at the beginning of school, and then a parent took over. Parents need to talk to each other and compare experiences; having a child with such an intense disability can sometimes make parents feel isolated and helpless.

Special education teachers should familiarize themselves with the local resources for parents and families. Social services, food banks, and local agencies can be excellent resources. However, many families are too overwhelmed and do not know where to look for outside help.

## Advice for Making Inclusion and Collaboration Work

My advice would be to always remember that kids are kids. A disability is only part of a child, and while it may shape most of his or her world, a kid is still a kid. Children still need love and support. You as the teacher need to know how to provide these things to your students and still encourage academic growth. Learn about the disability as much as possible, but learn everything about the kids.

**—Sarah Reynolds**

Kindergarten–Fifth Grade

Leslie Fox Keyser Elementary School, Warren County, Virginia