


Questions I have about teaching students
with autism spectrum disorders



Case Studies

Berent (April)

Berent received a diagnosis of autism when he was two-and-a-half-years-old. His assessment was a collaborative effort by a developmental pediatrician, a psychologist, a speech and language clinician, an occupational therapist, and a social worker. Berent has limited social interactions, severe communication delays, and cognitive impairments. Although his hearing and visual skills appear to be in the normal range, he had severe motor delays and has acquired virtually no personal self-care skills in comparison to other children of his age.

Berent is currently attending a half-day kindergarten program with a full-time teaching assistant for support. Although he found the large group extremely difficult in the fall, after a few months he has begun to participate in some of the group activities. He will play near some of the other children, but does not attempt to communicate with them, and becomes quite upset if they get in his way or try to take things he has. He has occasional toileting accidents, but will go when taken. He is very selective about what he eats, but will now sit at the snack table with the children without crying or running off. He has few readiness skills for academic programming, but will sit in the circle time and at a group table for arts and crafts for approximately 10 minutes if an adult is near him and he is getting assistance with the activities. He particularly enjoys activities with the music therapist who comes into the program one hour a week.

The other half day of the day, Berent is involved in an intensive behaviour program in his home. For the past two years he has received two to three hours of direct applied behavioural programming to learn basic communication, self-care and social skills. He has a team of consultants including an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, a speech and language consultant, and a behaviour specialist. The team designs his programs, and works with his parents and daily staff to provide a comprehensive program which will maximize his learning.

Berent continues to have minimal communication skills, although he is beginning to use some word approximations consistently for items he likes—pop, swim, boat are used, although not clearly. He will reach for items, but often uses screaming, and does not always look at the item or the person he needs to get the item from. People in the environment must try to decide what he wants. Berent is reinforced with small pieces of food and activity breaks during his one-to-one discrete trial training sessions. He will sit and participate under these conditions, but continues to have severe screaming fits and he runs away from things he does not want to do or when he gets tired of the task demands. He is generally not aggressive toward others, but has occasionally bitten someone when he is frustrated or wants to leave a group.



Case Studies (continued)

Berent (continued)

The home program team, school staff and parents will be meeting soon to plan Berent's transition to Grade 1. His parents are committed to inclusive education and wish him to be placed in a Grade 1 classroom in his neighbourhood school in September. The meeting will be an opportunity to meet the Grade 1 teacher, share Berent's strengths and needs, and make the initial plans for a positive move into the full-day school program. Berent's parents, in collaboration with their home-based team, have prepared a list of accommodations they feel will be necessary to meet Berent's needs during his elementary years. Specifically, they hope to continue discrete trial applied behavioural programming as part of the school day with a teacher assistant who is trained in applied behaviour analysis. They have a comprehensive program plan with long- and short-term goals in place and hope to have frequent meetings, a data-based school program and close liaisons with the school teaching staff.

Case Studies (continued)

Pen (September)

Pen is an eight-year-old boy who received a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome in his kindergarten year from a multidisciplinary treatment team. At that time, Pen was having severe tantrums when he did not immediately get what he wanted. He was not building relationships with other children, and could not play on the playground without aggression if other children invaded his space or tried to share equipment. Pen recently was administered a WISC-III which resulted in an Full Scale IQ of 121, and the psychologist was amazed at the speed with which he completed many of the performance-based tasks.

Pen's ability to learn and remember new information is evident in several academic areas. He completes math worksheets quickly and accurately. Pen and his father do math every night and he can quickly answer addition, subtraction, multiplication and division problems. He recognizes many sight words quickly and accurately, and reads orally above grade level. He has an interest in space and has learned many facts about planets and the stars. His motor skills are quite well-developed and he draws intricate maps of star constellations and space ships.

On the other hand, Pen sometimes struggles with comprehension questions and story problems, and cannot always retell sequentially what he reads. He has difficulty interpreting the feelings and emotions of characters in stories and making predictions. Pen appears extremely opinionated and frequently argues with the teacher or other students when they do not agree with him. He does not like to work with other students in cooperative learning groups, a favourite teaching method in his combined Grade 3/4 classroom.

Pen's family does not understand the school's concerns. They are, however, embarrassed by his misbehaviour and wish for him to be more polite and cooperative in the classroom. They see him learning and responding to concrete information and structured teaching, and from their perspective, the school may not be disciplining him correctly. Whenever the school has expressed concerns, the parents ask for more homework. Both of Pen's parents are professionals who have quite high expectations of both Pen and the school. Pen is supervised for two hours at the end of the school day in the daycare which is housed in the school. An additional staff member has been hired to support him as there are frequent behaviour conflicts with the other children. Pen does not follow basic social rules, share materials, or play cooperatively.

No one in Pen's class wants to play with him at recess because he is so aggressive and does not share equipment or toys. He calls them "stupid" when they do not know answers to questions, and he does not take turns, wait politely, or work as a cooperative team member. He is often loud in his criticisms of other children. The other children also have learned that he will hit or kick them if he does not get his own way. A teaching assistant is available to assist Pen for part of the day, but she has many other duties around the school including assisting a boy with spina bifida with his self-care routines at recess and lunchtime.



Case Studies (continued)

Pen (continued)

Next week, Pen's parents are meeting with the school staff to design an Individualized Program Plan for the school year. The parents have completed a survey regarding their focus for Pen and they identify academic goals. The school staff is more concerned about Pen's lack of social skills and feels his academic skills are appropriate for a student his age. Although the parents seem uncomfortable with Pen's behaviour, they may not understand autism and how Pen's social behaviours are affecting his school success.

Case Studies (continued)

Fritz (May)

Fritz has just turned 12 and his parents and teaching staff will soon meet to make plans for his transition to junior high school. Fritz will go to a junior high which is much larger than his present school. There are no established programs for students with special needs, but the school is receptive to creating a program to meet his unique needs. The school will assign a teacher assistant to the Grade 7 class. She will work mainly with Fritz and another student in the class who is legally blind.

Fritz was diagnosed with autism at three and a half years of age. He also has severe cognitive impairments, with a recent intellectual assessment reporting an IQ of 37. He has difficulty with fine motor skills which is evident through his lack of ability to open containers, use tools, hold a pencil and zipper his clothing independently. Sensory problems are in both visual and auditory areas. He often looks sideways out of his eyes, rather than appearing to focus directly on objects. He has a few words including “cookie, hi, bus, book” and “TV.” He occasionally makes word approximations using the first sounds, but his use of oral language is extremely limited. He frequently makes unusual vocal noises in the back of his throat. Receptively, Fritz will sometimes follow single directions of well-established routines, but often ignores adult requests. He frequently stumbles or bumps into furniture. Although Fritz is usually easygoing, he can get upset, especially with change, loud noises and in new settings. He is especially afraid of the fire bell and dogs barking. When he is agitated, he sometimes bites the side of his hand, rocks and cries. He likes to go for walks, especially outside, and also enjoys a swimming program two nights per week.

Although Fritz has had no recent toileting accidents at school, his teacher assistant, who has been with him throughout the elementary grades, takes him to the bathroom on a regular basis and continues to go in with him or takes him to the staff bathroom. A staff member has also been supervising his lunch, cutting food items for him, and helping him clean up. Fritz continues to be extremely dependent on adults and does not read his schedule, look at his picture routines or respond to the natural cues in the environment until he is prompted to do so by adults or peers. His peer group is tolerant and will help him sometimes, but they do not include him in activities unless they are asked to do so. During school, his materials and tasks are totally different than those of the other students. His teacher assistant designs individual tasks such as matching and colouring which he enjoys doing. He also likes “jobs” and his teacher assistant and he deliver notes, do photocopying, set up the science programs for the school, and once a week, walk to the local stationery store to buy specific items ordered by the staff. He does not like going to gym or music as the noise seems to bother him when the whole class is together. He will go into these rooms more willingly when the teacher assistant works with him individually.



Case Studies (continued)



Fritz (continued)

For the next six weeks, Fritz will receive individual occupational, speech and language therapy once a week from consultants who will visit the school. The consultants will review Fritz's current program and provide suggestions to the teacher and teacher assistant. They are also willing to meet with his parents in the home. Fritz enjoys individual therapy, his current program, and his relationships with adults, however, he is not currently using any communication attempts in his daily activities. He does not initiate relationships with peers or adults, and staff are concerned about his dependency as they plan for his move to a large junior high in September. The occupational therapist is particularly concerned about the sensory stimulation in the large, noisy school environment and the difficulty the staff may have in developing a comprehensive programming plan. Fritz's parents have been pleased with his elementary program. They are caring, committed to caring for Fritz's physical needs, but unassertive. They feel certain the new school placement will be positive for him and trust that the school staff will provide him with the same level of individualization and accommodations he has enjoyed the past six years.

Case Studies (continued)

Grace (October)

Grace is a sixteen-year-old girl in Grade 11 who has been integrated with her same-age peers throughout her school career. She is a tall, thin girl who has a history of learning and behaviour difficulties. She received a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome from a child psychiatrist in early elementary school. Her expressive language was a bit slow to develop, although many developmental milestones were reached at approximately the typical ages. Grace also has asthma and many allergies. She has an inhaler kept in the school office because her teachers thought she was overusing it, especially when Grace did not want to participate in certain school activities.

Grace has one younger brother but she relates very little to him. Her mother and father work long hours, and Grace has been supervised predominately by her grandmother who lives with the family.

Grace has had extensive formal testing over the years. Her intellectual abilities are within the normal range, although her individual subskills range from below average to superior. She is at or above grade level in language arts, and has always enjoyed reading for pleasure. Her math scores, and writing abilities have been consistently two years below grade level. She has poor gross motor abilities. She frequently says work is "boring" and her course load has been reduced to eliminate classes in which she refused to participate without major behaviour difficulties. She currently attends the core subjects: social studies, math, science and language arts, and attends French part of the time. Since junior high, she has refused to attend gym classes and option courses, and she is now excused from them. Work Experience is a potential option for second semester of Grade 11 and first semester of Grade 12, and one teacher has suggested Grace be strongly encouraged to participate in that course. Although Grace is passing the core subjects, her teachers feel she could have higher grades if she was willing to put more effort into her work. Her work is frequently late and messy. Although she can use a computer for word processing, she frequently makes grammatical and spelling mistakes, and does not like to edit or rewrite.

Although Grace does not have a specific teacher assistant assigned to her, there are several teacher assistants available in the high school. She has a good relationship with them, but does not like to be "bothered" and does not always take advantage of their support. She needs, for example, some specific help to organize her materials, write down assignments, remember which materials or books need to be taken to various classes and when to study for tests, but she does not always accept help. Staff have been taking turns helping her because she can be quite withdrawn or rude when help is offered. She seems to listen most attentively to the Language Arts teacher who is very dynamic and dramatic in his teaching style.



Case Studies (continued)



Grace (continued)

The type of social difficulties Grace experiences with staff are even more pronounced with her peers. She prefers to sit in the back of the room, off to the side. She does not like to visit with classmates and has no real friends, although many of the students have been with her throughout her school years and the school community is fairly small. Grace no longer causes disruptions and does not have the severe behaviour conflicts she had in elementary school. She does not participate in social opportunities, rarely joins class discussions and is not building relationships necessary for future work and independent living. She often pulls out a book to read when the teacher is talking. The teachers and special education coordinator will be meeting soon with Grace's father and grandmother for the Individualized Program Plan (IPP) meeting. Her mother works long hours and demonstrates minimal interest in Grace's school program. The goal of the IPP meeting will be to develop a comprehensive plan for the next two years, focusing on making the final two years of senior high school as positive and beneficial as possible for Grace.

Strengths, Needs and Long-term Goals

Name _____

Strengths	Needs
Long-term Goals	



Discussion Questions





Collaboration

- ◆ What are the elements that lead to successful home and school collaboration?



Planning a Collaborative Meeting

- ◆ What information needs to be gathered?
- ◆ What planning, problem solving and/or decision making needs to take place at this time?
 - How will goals and objectives be addressed?
 - Is placement an issue at this time?
 - What transition plans are necessary?
- ◆ Which resources and professionals should be involved?
- ◆ Who should be invited to participate in the meeting?



Develop an Agenda

- ◆ Introduction of participants
- ◆ Purpose of the meeting
- ◆ Sharing new information
 - What's working
 - Concerns/issues
- ◆ Brainstorming
- ◆ Planning
 - Who
 - What
 - When
- ◆ Review date



Conducting a Successful Collaboration Meeting


1. Set a positive tone, introductions, logistics.
2. Give each participant the opportunity to share.
3. Brainstorm possible options.
4. Summarize the discussion and review plans.
5. Establish plans and times for follow-up.



Observation Notes IPP – Part One Group Activity

- ◆ Group Number:

- ◆ Name of student
- ◆ Strengths and needs
- ◆ Long-term goals
- ◆ Short-term objectives



Observation Notes
Collaboration Meeting
Role-play

What worked well?

What would you change for next time?



Understanding Your Child

- ◆ Student
- ◆ Date of birth/age
- ◆ Family situation (e.g., parents, siblings, involvement of extended family, how does the child relate to his family, etc.)
- ◆ Diagnosis (how did the diagnosis come about, who diagnosed the child, concerns about the diagnosis)
- ◆ Parent concerns and expectations
- ◆ Interventions (e.g., Early Intervention Programming, therapies, etc.)
- ◆ What types of supports and therapies are currently in place?
- ◆ What type of involvement does the child have in the community (e.g., sports, religious school, other outside activities)?
- ◆ What works at home and in other settings?
- ◆ What worked at previous school setting?
- ◆ Specific concerns or issues to be aware of



IPP – Part Two



- ◆ Group Number:
- ◆ Name of Student:
- ◆ Transition Plan:
- ◆ Accommodations:



Discussion Questions



Visual Guide to Planning a Routine

Substituting More Appropriate Sensory Activities

Inappropriate sensory activities	More appropriate sensory activities
◆ Playing with saliva	◆
◆ Smelling hair or feet	◆
◆ Placing inedible objects in mouth	◆
◆ Aimless running or spinning	◆
◆ Eating shirt sleeves	◆
◆ Putting hands in pants	◆



Write a Social Story

- ◆ What skill/task does your student need that can be taught through a social story?
- ◆ With (a) partner(s), do a task analysis on the social skill.
- ◆ Write the social story.



Brainstorm Possible Functions of Behaviour



Identify Reinforcers

Material	Primary/edible	Activity
Social	Sensory	Exchangeable – Token Economy



IPP – Part Three

- ◆ Communication objectives
- ◆ Communication strategies
- ◆ Social interaction objectives
- ◆ Social interaction strategies
- ◆ Behaviour objectives
- ◆ Behaviour strategies