


**Children with ASD: Understanding and Responding to the Communication, Behavioral and Social Characteristics**



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**What You Will Learn in this 3-part Autism Series**

**This session will focus on:**

- ❑ Understanding the characteristics of children with ASD – Cognitive, Communication, Behavioral, Social Characteristics
  - ❑ The underlying factors that contribute to problem behaviors.
  - ❑ How to provide individualized supports and interventions to maximize their academic, social, and behavioral outcomes.

**Sessions 2 and 3 will focus on:**

- ❑ Provide student and context-specific environmental, instructional, and social supports to decrease tantrum triggers and increase skill-building learning opportunities.
- ❑ Illustrate seven steps of support drawing from evidence-based best-practices to prevent transition-related meltdowns and make smooth transitions.
- ❑ Create a safe steps action plan working collaboratively as a team inclusive of family to follow during severe meltdowns.

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**Participant Poll**  
 Are you serving as...

- A. General education teacher?
- B. Special education teacher?
- C. Administrator?
- D. Speech pathologist?
- E. Other Support Staff
- F. Parent

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**Padmaja's Sarathy' Books and Publications**

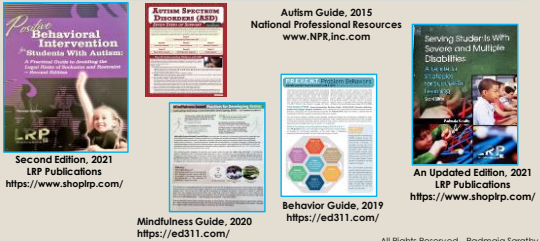


- ❑ Autism: Support Strategies & Interventions, Autism Seven Steps of Support, Music CD – Transitions
- ❑ Behavior Guide (Preventive and Positive Approaches) and Mindfulness Guide
- ❑ Early Childhood: Transition; Parenting Guide; Executive Function - Early Years; and STEM Teaching Strategies
- ❑ Paraeducator Training Guide and DVD
- ❑ Severe and Multiple Disabilities; Significant Disabilities and ESSA

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**This webinar draws information from the following books and mini-guides:**



Second Edition, 2021  
 LRP Publications  
<https://www.shoplrp.com/>

Autism Guide, 2015  
 National Professional Resources  
[www.NPR,inc.com](http://www.NPR,inc.com)

An Updated Edition, 2021  
 LRP Publications  
<https://www.shoplrp.com/>

Mindfulness Guide, 2020  
<https://ed311.com/>

Behavior Guide, 2019  
<https://ed311.com/>

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**Cognitive and Learning Characteristics**

**Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder.**  
 Students with ASD may experience problems in:

- ❑ Attention and organization, impacting learning and behavior, and, as a result, school success.
- ❑ Sequencing information and recognizing relationships between steps of an activity.
- ❑ Seeing only the facts instead of the total picture with the inter-related parts.
- ❑ Understanding cause-and-effect relationships.
- ❑ Imitating others.

**Examples:**

- ❑ Not looking at objects when another person draws attention to it or points to it.
- ❑ May not know how to do the tasks that they have always done unable to separate the change as a non-essential piece of information (e.g., accept calmly a route change to get to the playground for recess).

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### Communication Characteristics

Students with ASD experience problems in using language and understanding language:

- ❑ Difficulty in expressing their needs using typical words, gestures, or pointing instead of words.
- ❑ Problems in responding to verbal instructions.
- ❑ Repeating or echoing words or phrases said to them, or repeat words or phrases in place of normal language.
- ❑ There is a literal quality to the communication (causes misinterpretations & arguments.)
- ❑ Difficulty in understanding verbal directives or explanations that a teacher or parent provides. (causes missteps despite adequate hearing)

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### Student Depiction Distinctive Characteristics

- ❑ **Darian, a 5-year-old preschool student diagnosed with ASD, has significant cognitive strengths.**
- ❑ Demonstrates advanced reading skills and computer skills.
- ❑ Reveals exceptional imagination, and creativity through his sophisticated drawings.
  - ❑ Remarkable sophistication and detail with his drawing (of a ski scene).  
When inquired about the little circles he had drawn above the hills in his drawing of skiers on top of the hills and the ski slopes, he answered, "snow," without raising his head or looking up at the person asking the question.
- ❑ Exhibits limited verbal communication - uses single words in response to questions.
- ❑ Initiates communication minimally.
- ❑ Prefers solitary play - engages minimally in social interactions with peers.

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### Student Depiction - Distinctive Characteristics (Continued)

- ❑ **Darian exhibits unpredictable and fairly frequent tantrums.**
  - ❑ Moving to group activities from solitary play triggers tantrum.
  - ❑ Moving from block play to teacher-directed group lesson (Circle Time) is a challenge.
  - ❑ Transitioning to the playground for recess triggers tantrum.
  - ❑ Transitioning to the restroom and stopping what he is engaged in is difficult.
  - ❑ His preschool teacher is most concerned that his behaviors may negatively impact his inclusion in kindergarten in the upcoming year.

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### Social and Emotional Characteristics

Students with ASD experience difficulties in relating to people, events and objects.

- ❑ Deficits in social communication and social interaction.
  - ❑ Difficulty initiating social contact with others, preferring to be alone.
  - ❑ Little or no eye contact when spoken to directly.
  - ❑ Understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings.
  - ❑ Be very interested in people, but not know how to talk, play, or relate to them.
- ❑ Social-emotional reciprocity issues:
  - ❑ Grasping nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interactions
  - ❑ Developing and maintaining relationships.

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## 2 - Participant Poll

What are some of the characteristics that you have typically observed in your students with ASD? Check all that apply:

- A. Exhibit fear and anxiety about the unfamiliar.
- B. Need verbal instructions paired with visual supports in order to respond appropriately.
- C. Highly verbal in communicating their thoughts and ideas.
- D. Difficulty with understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings.
- E. Show exceptional strengths in organizing and completing assigned tasks/projects.

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### Distinctive Characteristics – Another Case Scenario

- ❑ **Selena, a middle school student diagnosed with ASD, has significant cognitive and communication difficulties.**
  - ❑ Has difficulty focusing attention on any task. Throws and tosses objects placed in front of her during instruction.
  - ❑ Will stay in her seat for a group lesson only for a couple of minutes before getting up and pacing around the room.
  - ❑ When the teacher or paraprofessional persists in a one-on-one instructional activity with her, she drops to the floor or starts pacing around the room.
  - ❑ Engages in aggressive behaviors, pinching the adults when they try to work with her in instructional activities.

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### Distinctive Characteristics (continued)

- ❑ **Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities.**
  - ❑ Repetitive body movements or behavior patterns (stereotyped behaviors such as hand flapping, covering ears, rocking, etc.).
    - ❑ Repeat the same actions over and over again.
  - ❑ Unusual play with toys and other objects (usually in repetitive and sometimes inappropriate ways).
  - ❑ Spinning objects.
  - ❑ Having difficulty with "pretend" play or games.
  - ❑ Showing obsessive attachment to particular objects.
- ❑ Having Tantrums and low frustration tolerance.

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### Step 1: Understanding Characteristics

#### What precipitates the tantrums and meltdowns in children with ASD?

- ❑ **Changes in routines, activities, materials, environments or personnel can trigger tantrums.**
  - Introduces ambiguity and reduces predictability.
  - Too-long a wait time between ending an activity and beginning another.
  - **Transitions** (arrival, dismissal, going to or coming in from recess, etc.)
- ❑ **Have a need for "sameness" and lack behavioral flexibility.**
  - May engage in aggressive or oppositional behaviors.
  - May get anxious and stressed due to their need for sameness. Behaviors may quickly shift into aggressive or oppositional with little or no prior warning, leading to "meltdown".

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### Step 1: Understanding Characteristics

#### What precipitates the tantrums and meltdowns in children with ASD? (Continued)

- ❑ **Asked to stop an activity and move to another activity** (circle-time to center-time, computer to group instruction, unpredictability, stress & anxiety due to not being sure of what to expect in the next activity).
- ❑ **Wanting to escape the activity** (activity is not engaging, boredom due to non-involvement in the lesson, etc.)
- ❑ **Seeking attention** (making attention-grabbing noises; grabbing and pinching while working one-on-one with adult)
- ❑ **Finding the task too difficult** (tears up a math worksheet)
- ❑ **Moving from a preferred to a nonpreferred activity** (Stopping working on the computer to move to a group activity or return to classroom from recess)

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### Step 1: Understanding Characteristics - Tantrum Triggers

#### What precipitates the tantrums and meltdowns in children with ASD? (continued)

- ❑ **New personnel, new situation, new setting** (Anxiety and stress, fear of the unfamiliar)
- ❑ **Reacting to an over-stimulating environment** (assembling in a large gathering - gym, school assembly hall, cafeteria, etc.)
- ❑ **Difficulty with communicating needs and wants** (feeling overstimulated or experiencing pain & discomfort and unable to request help)
- ❑ **Many children with ASD have stress and anxiety disorders** (Lytle & Todd, 2009).
- ❑ **Poor executive function skills** (attention difficulties, difficulty with filtering out distractions)

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### An Action Plan to Address Challenging Behaviors With Student-specific Application

Take Preventive Strategies Ahead of the Meltdown.

Teach New Skills.

Reflect & Respond to Challenging Behavior with a Planned Approach.

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### Student-Specific Supports

#### Preventive Strategies, New Skills to Teach and Responding to Tantrums


**Ahmad, a second grader with autism, with limited communication and engagement during group instruction, runs around kicks and hits adults.**

Ahmad




Personal Space

Preventive Strategies



Cue Cards



- ❑ Use visual support in and out of classroom settings (photos depicting activities of the day attached to a laminated visual schedule; Ahmad moves pictures to "Finished" when completed).
- ❑ **Designate a personal space.** Tape a boundary around his desk, adding photo and name. Teach maintaining personal space, 2 feet of space) between himself and others.
- ❑ **Post a Stop sign at the door.** Teach "Stop", "Turn around", "Sit in chair" (or return to seat).
- ❑ **Teach rules: Walk, No, Stop, Hands on desk, Hands on lap, Maintain personal space, etc.**

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**Student-Specific Supports**  
**Preventive Strategies, New Skills to Teach and Responding to Tantrums**


*Ahmad a second grader with limited engagement during group instruction, runs around, kicks, hits adults.*

**Preventive Strategies** (continued)

- ❑ Offer a role to play prior to beginning a group activity to motivate and engage student.
- ❑ Provide lots of opportunities to make choices (an effective strategy in decreasing problem behavior).
- ❑ Offer multiple opportunities for communication aided with simple AT devices.
- ❑ Guide him to use a single message AT device to request break when feeling overwhelmed/agitated.



Choice Board



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**Student-Specific Supports**  
**Preventive Strategies, New Skills to Teach and Responding to Tantrums**

*Ahmad (continued)*

**New Skills to Teach: Emotional Competencies, Self-regulation and Impulse Control**

- ❑ Use video modeling intervention to teach how to make requests, how to stay on task, to recognize his emotions, perspective taking, social initiation and interaction with peers and adults, etc.
- ❑ Use social narratives to teach appropriate behavioral and social skills.
- ❑ Build his emotional vocabulary, identify his feelings and express them safely.
- ❑ Coach him to practice mindfulness-based calming technique when in calming room.
- ❑ Learn what to do with his hands and feet instead of hitting and kicking others.





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**Student-Specific Supports**  
**Preventive Strategies, New Skills to Teach and Responding to Tantrums**




*Ahmad (continued)*

**New Skills to Teach: Social, Self-regulation and Impulse Control**

- ❑ Learn to use fidget toys to gain sensory input and to calm down.
- ❑ Learn to use calming and breathing techniques routinely to gain self-calming and coping skills.

**Adult Response to Challenging Behavior**

- ❑ Maximize opportunities for Ahmad to receive positive strokes, even for incremental progress. "I like the way you are staying at your desk, that's great/You are learning to keep your arms & feet in your personal space. Awesome!"
- ❑ Embed multiple breaks in the initial stages.
- ❑ Document & monitor progress.

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**3 - Participant Poll**

Identify the techniques that you routinely use. Check all that apply:

- ❑ Teach new skills to replace problem behavior.
- ❑ Coach students regularly to practice calming and stress reduction techniques.
- ❑ Model how to reflect and respond when feeling agitated and frustrated.
- ❑ Offer a system of timed breaks as part of the daily activity schedule.
- ❑ Prepare students in advance for changes to routine and for transitions.

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**Student-Specific Supports**  
**Preventive Strategies, New Skills to Teach and Responding to Tantrums**

*Bruno (a middle school student) communicates through gestures; learning to use few picture symbols; engages in aggressive behaviors when transitioning from his preferred activity to small-group reading lesson.*

**Preventive Strategies**

- ❑ Provide a personal folder with a visual activity schedule placed inside a binder (for using it himself).
- ❑ Use a first-then chart (to help him do a non-preferred activity and then go to preferred (with choices)

|                   |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| First             | Then               |
| Reading (picture) | Computer (picture) |

- ❑ Use pictured rules cue cards (visuals paired with pictures) in all settings.
- ❑ Have designated seating within the group with his name card and photo.
- ❑ Increase engagement and compliance during group academic activities.
- ❑ Make the tasks less complex aided with picture prompts related to the lesson.
- ❑ Teach calming and breathing techniques to achieve longer term outcomes.

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**Student-Specific Supports**  
**Preventive Strategies, New Skills to Teach and Responding to Tantrums**

Bruno continues...

**New Skills to Teach**

- ❑ Learn to use the visual schedule; Understand first-then chart and use it. Operate the timer.
- ❑ Increase his time in group and participate meaningfully in academic instruction.
- ❑ Learn to request breaks and transition gradually to using a break card.
- ❑ Go to "safe space" when feeling upset or frustrated (timed and regulated).

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### Student-Specific Supports

**Preventive Strategies, New Skills to Teach and Responding to Tantrums**

Bruno continues...

**Responding to Challenging Behavior**

- Provide AT devices to enhance Bruno's participation and communication in group.
- Reinforce frequently when engaged and responding appropriately in group.  
"You are using calming breaths to calm down, that's super!"

**During a major meltdown...**

- Remain calm, non-confrontational and protect the student from hurting self or others.
- Move the other students to a pre-determined location.
- De-escalate the volatile situation. Move the student from stage of anger to calm.
- Discuss what triggered the meltdown with pictures and objects when student is fully calmed down.

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### Partnering with Families

**for Sustained Academic, Social and Behavioral Growth**

**Co-opt family support in identifying student's strengths, preferences and needs.**

**Assist families to reinforce the skills you have taught. Assemble a resource kit and share with families.**

**Guide families on what works and what doesn't in addressing academic, social, and behavior issues. Share proactive steps that have been successful.**

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### Resources

- **Autism Internet Modules** ([www.autisminternetmodules.org](http://www.autisminternetmodules.org)) Provides a variety of modules that offer valuable information to educators and families to support individuals with autism spectrum disorders.
- **The Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (AFIRM modules)** (<https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules>) Provide information on planning for, using, and monitoring evidence-based practices with learners with autism from birth to 22 years of age.
- Butler 2019 (July 10, 2019). **How Safe Is the Schoolhouse? An Analysis of State Seclusion and Restraint Laws and Policies**. <http://www.autism.org/pdf/HowSafeSchoolhouse.pdf>
- Erwin, E. J., Robinson, K. A., McGrath, G. S., & Harney, C. J. (2015). **It's Like Breathing In Blue Skies and Breathing Out Stormy Clouds: Mindfulness Practices in Early Childhood**. *Young Exceptional Children*, Vol. 20(10), pp. 1-17.

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### Resources

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- Richards, J. S. & Cohen, J. S. (2019 - 2020). The Quiet Rooms. Retrieved on April 22, 2020 from: <https://www.propublica.org/article/illinois-school-restraints> (December 20, 2019 report) and <https://www.propublica.org/article/illinois-lawmakers-letter-nationwide-ban-isolated-timeouts-students> (January 15, 2020 report).
- Sarathy, P. (Second Edition, 2021). **Positive Behavioral Intervention for Students with Autism: A Practical Guide to Avoiding the Legal Risks of Seclusion & Restraint**. West Palm Beach, FL: LRP Publications. (<https://www.shoplrp.com/>)
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- Sarathy, P., & Lipsett, A.B. (2019). **P.R.E.V.E.N.T. Problem Behaviors: Seven Contemplative Discipline Steps**. Education 311, Austin: TX. (<https://ed311.com/>)

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### Resources

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### Minimize Tantrums, Enable Calm-down

**Plan Ahead, Be Proactive.**

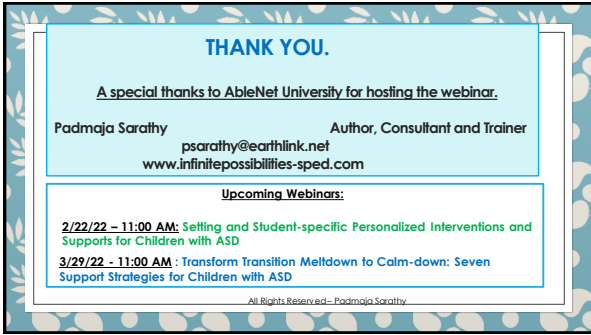
**Reflective, Rather than Reactive.**

**Navigate out of the Situation, Rather than Escalate.**

**Prevent Rather than Punish.**

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**THANK YOU.**

A special thanks to AbleNet University for hosting the webinar.

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**Upcoming Webinars:**

**2/22/22 - 11:00 AM:** *Setting and Student-specific Personalized Interventions and Supports for Children with ASD*

**3/29/22 - 11:00 AM:** *Transform Transition Meltdown to Calm-down: Seven Support Strategies for Children with ASD*

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