

Teaming Up for Success! Collaborating to Support Students with Autism

Research consistently highlights the value of a collaborative team approach to supporting autistic students. The educational team, made up of the student, their family, educators, paraeducators, related service providers, and administrator, works together to provide coordinated, comprehensive, and individualized support. Collaborative practice not only enhances learning and participation in the school setting but also contributes to improved quality of life and long-term outcomes for students with autism.

Effective collaboration is purposeful and student-centered. It fosters a learning environment where strengths are recognized, needs are understood, and growth is nurtured across settings. Collaboration is not a single event; it is an ongoing commitment to person-centered practice, effective communication, shared purpose, mutual respect, and consistency.

● *Tips for Supportive and Collaborative Teaming*

Honor Student Individuality

Autism is a part of a student's identity, but it does not limit their potential. Each student brings their own strengths, interests, communication styles, and support needs. Just like all learners, autistic students benefit from being understood as individuals with unique personalities, talents, and goals. Recognizing individuality helps families and professionals collaboratively choose strategies and supports that honor each student's needs while promoting dignity, engagement, and meaningful participation at school and in the community.

Develop Shared Student-Centered Goals

When teams develop goals together, all professionals work toward a unified set of outcomes that reflect the student's needs, strengths, and priorities. Shared goals promote consistency across settings and ensure that strategies for communication, social, behavioral, and academic skills complement one another.

For example, if a student begins avoiding writing tasks, the teacher, occupational therapist, and school psychologist might examine patterns and determine that fine-motor fatigue is contributing to the avoidance. Together, they modify expectations, introduce supportive tools, and adjust instruction. This unified approach ensures the student receives coordinated and meaningful support.

While collaboration often focuses on annual goals and objectives, long-term goals must be considered. This includes graduation, college and postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. These goals provide context for why skills are being taught and how everyone's role can support success into adulthood.

Coordinate the Implementation of Strategies Across Settings

Consistency is key to supporting student learning, behavior, and communication. When all team members use the same approaches, materials, and visual supports, students receive clear and predictable messages about expectations, promoting independence and ensuring access to the curriculum. Coordinated implementation also helps students generalize skills across environments.



For example, using the same or a similar visual schedule in the classroom, during speech sessions, and at home reinforces routines and builds confidence as students learn to navigate their day with greater autonomy and independence.

Create Opportunities for Regular Communication and Purposeful Collaboration

Effective teaming happens when professionals intentionally make space to share information, coordinate strategies, and problem-solve together. Brief structured check-ins help them review student progress, address emerging needs, and plan how to apply consistent, individualized supports across settings, ensuring communication, sensory, and learning strategies remain aligned and grounded in the student's strengths. All team members' insights should be valued, and collaboration should reflect mutual respect for each person's expertise and perspective.

For example, a weekly 15-minute meeting can focus on quick but high-impact topics such as:

- Notable observations from the week (e.g., communication attempts, sensory challenges, successful regulation strategies)
- Updates on ongoing goals or data from classroom instruction, speech sessions, or OT interventions
- Problem-solving around any new concerns or barriers the student is experiencing
- Adjustments to supports such as visual schedules, sensory tools, vocabulary modeling, or prompting methods
- Planning for upcoming activities that may require coordinated strategies (e.g., assemblies, projects, transitions)

Seek Family Partnership and Input

Families offer invaluable knowledge about their child's strengths, preferences, culture, and goals, making their input critical to effective decision-making. Their perspectives help teams understand how strategies work outside of school and select supports that fit the student's daily life.

For example, if a child responds well to visual timers at home, the team can consistently incorporate them across school settings to reinforce routines and promote independence.

While families may not participate in the school-based check-in meetings, ongoing two-way communication is essential. Regular updates allow families to share observations from home and help school teams communicate what is working in the classroom. When professionals and families work collaboratively as equal partners, autistic students benefit from cohesive, meaningful, and well-aligned support.

References

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