



## THOUGHTS ON EDUCATING ADOLESCENTS WITH AUTISM

By Dave Nelson, Director,  
The Community School, Decatur, GA

*The Community School, a private high school for teens with autism was featured in the New York Times and on ABC Good Morning America in October 2008. The school embraces an approach that promotes students social-emotional development as key to success in learning and in life, based on Drs. Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder's DIR® Model. ([www.icdl.com](http://www.icdl.com)) Dave shares his ideas on what teens with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) need in order to learn....*

### WHAT DO ADOLESCENTS WITH AUTISM NEED IN ORDER TO LEARN?

I reflect on this question frequently, for reaching and teaching any child or teen with autism can be challenging. Each student with an ASD is different, with very different learning needs. Here are some ideas for parents and educators I think about as Director of The Community School. It's not conclusive, not complete. The staff and I are continually growing in our learning process just as our students do.

**1. KEEPING COOL UNDER STRESS:** Teens with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have difficulty processing too much sensory information including sounds, smells, bright lights, loud noises, large groups of people in motion, or strong feelings. They can become overwhelmed and disorganized, or *dysregulated*. They need a lot of help with self-regulation to promote a calm, alert and attentive state, so they can be available to learn. Teens need help recognizing when their "engines are running high," and how to calm and soothe themselves. Teens need to also be aware of when they're "checking out," and how to get energized and attentive. Often, as adults, we tend to believe that because of a teen's size, he or she "ought" to be able to process emotional and physical dysregulation successfully. Most of the challenged teens I meet simply can't do this. For some, dysregulation may look like chaotic, angry, physically discharging behavior; for others, it may look like withdrawal. I will often see students literally falling asleep when situations seem too difficult or confusing. For still others, dysregulation can be subtle, manifesting as an obstinate mood or an extra degree of sarcasm.

There are lots of things adults can do to help teens get better at regulating. Experiment with different tones of voice, and/or change the sensory properties in the environment (like talking softly or finding a quiet room). Use lots of warm, inviting gestures and body language to hold their attention. All of us will get more anxious when we feel disconnected from others, so by focusing on helping a teen feel connected — while simultaneously reducing the communication demands temporarily (fewer words) — a helping adult can often act as a guide leading the teen to a calmer, more balanced state.

*\*When a teen with ASD is upset, he may sometimes act inappropriately. The helping adult should focus not on correcting the behavior in the moment, but on supporting the teen in recognizing his internal emotional state and learning ways to calm and soothe himself first. Only then should the adult move on to a problem-solving discussion.*

**2. GOOD SELF CARE AND PHYSICAL MOVEMENT:** All teens need a lot of energy to get through their day. Getting a good night's sleep, eating well, and exercising is vital. Most teens, and those with an ASD especially, spend a lot of time playing video games and watching TV. Often this is a result of social isolation and constricted interests. Trouble is, the more sedentary a teen, the more challenged his body becomes. Although there is a natural change

in sleep cycles in adolescence (they need more, not less), there is no doubt in my mind that every teen will be in a better position to grow and learn if he is getting uninterrupted sleep. Also important: reasonably nutritious food and a lot more exercise. If you can only focus on one, then focus on physical movement. If a teen can move his body - walking, hiking, playing games (even “young” games like Red Light Green Light) - then he has a better chance of sleeping well and eating right. Plus the more “active” his system, the more engaged he can be in learning. For parents, I recognize that getting a sedentary teen moving is easier said than done. As with all things, think about how to use something they’re already interested in to make it happen. Maybe this means starting out with playing Wii Sports or Wii Fit - with you actively involved.

**3. A MEANINGFUL ACADEMIC CURRICULUM:** Every individual learns better when motivated by a subject that has personal meaning. For teens with challenges, it is almost a necessity that learning has relevance. Without it, the academic journey is fragmented, slow, and tedious - and worst of all, information often does not “stick.” Teens with an ASD really benefit from multi-sensory and experiential learning – exploration, experience, seeing it, hearing it, doing it.

I once worked with a student who would literally run from the room when things got confusing. If he didn’t feel like he could “get” the material, he would shut down completely. Although it took some time to figure out how to work well with this individual, we eventually developed an integrated curriculum around a favorite TV show, “Amazing Race,” which featured research and data collection, language arts and math. We developed profiles of each team, printing pictures and writing biographies. We made guesses about who would do well and why. We rated our favorite players. Each week after the show we would update the progress of the teams, and we created a spreadsheet graph to track the relative progress of each team. And so on.

With another student with whom I work, we used his personal life as the foundation academic learning. Together we tracked meaningful events - good and bad - on a timeline. In addition to giving him perspective on how the past relates to the future, this activity also enabled him to write narratives (and learn about sentence construction, paragraphs), to engage in critical, comparative thinking (which event was “better or worse”) and to learn about emotions through math. We did that by assigning a number to each day from a scale we’ve created (0=horrible, 10=excellent, with many descriptors in between), and at the end of the week we figured out the mode, median, and mean for the week. Over time, we could then compare these statistics.

You have to get creative!

**4. SENSITIVITY TO SOCIAL EMOTIONAL ISSUES:** Most teens I have worked with, even those with significant challenges in regulation and language, seem to go through a phase of increasing self-and-other awareness in puberty, just like their typically developing peers. This is a double-edged sword. It is great to see students begin to be aware of themselves and develop a better understanding of the perspective of other’s. However, at the same time the student may for the first time become aware of how different he is from others, how much harder some things are to do, how he’s not interested in the things others are. He’s experiencing a wave of hormones, like every other teen, but the girl he has a “crush” on isn’t interested in him because he is “different.” So too is the way he learns and how much work it is to just hold it together all day. The teen years can be a particularly difficult time for a person with an ASD.

I see a lot of adolescents struggling with depression and withdrawal. One student in particular I worked with comes to mind. He would pace around the room, rejecting all efforts to be taught while simultaneously criticizing those around him for not running a more “perfect program.” Many teens with an ASD will benefit from one-to-one psychotherapy (i.e., “talk” therapy) to help them cope with their feelings, anxiety and depression and low self-esteem, and to develop better coping skills and find effective solutions. Despite language delays, most teens I’ve worked with can engage in this process to at least a moderate degree.

This is where learning projects can help too! Activities to foster self-acceptance may include helping the student learn “how they tick,” - about different learning styles, the psychology and neurobiology of autism, research projects on famous people with autism, biology, and/or anatomy (“how does my body work”) to understand the physical issues.

A student can engage in learning activities that promote perspective taking, (“theory of mind”). For example, to promote an individual’s understanding of “who I am and what I like,” versus “who you are and what you like,” one activity could be buying holiday presents for family members.

**5. OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE AND INTERACT MEANINGFULLY WITH OTHERS:** As discussed above, in the best of circumstances, adolescence is a perilous time. Those of us who are raising or have raised teens (and those of us who can still remember our own adolescence) know that it can be a tumultuous time even without developmental challenges. Especially important for those who do have challenges, however, is having frequent opportunities to interact with others. At school, a teacher can pair the student with an ASD, with another student for special projects, or a lab activity, etc. (Be sure to assign a peer that will be friendly and sensitive to the ASD teen). If you see the teen with an ASD befriending a peer, support that (don’t just get them in trouble for talking in class)! Pull them aside together to “help” you with something. (And tip the parents off so they can support the relationship after school! They’ll be so grateful.) Is there a “club” on campus that the student might fit in with? (Chess, Anime, Rocketry, Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts?)

For parents, while it’s hard to create “play-dates” for teens, it can be done (call it something else, though, like “hanging out”). Identify others in your teen’s world that may be good candidates, maybe with shared interests or hobbies. It doesn’t have to be someone his age; older or younger kids and adults are fine. So are other teens whom have special needs. They may sense they have something in common and feel comfortable with each other. It’s essential that the teen be able to forge a relationship, to have someone to talk to or play with. If communication is an issue, take them to a movie. You don’t have to speak to enjoy something together. We need to help teens stay connected to the rest of the world in whatever way we can, from bowling together to planting a garden to walking the dog to going to the movies to even playing video games together. The age of the relationship partner, or the type of activity (even if “young”) is so much less important than the quality of engaging and interacting. The good news is that many teens have developed interests that adults actually enjoy, from politics to anime.

**6. THE BIG PICTURE – It is more important to engage your teen in meaningful learning and social emotional growth opportunities than it is to focus on “teaching” life and job skills:** This is a tough one for parents and teachers. We all want our teens to grow into adults who are as independent as possible. As a teen moves towards the ages of 17, 18, and beyond, it is inevitable that parents will feel increased pressure to have a long-term plan in place. I am not suggesting that long-term planning is unimportant; what I am saying is that we should try to stay focused on supporting the growth of basic developmental, social-emotional and learning capacities for as long as possible. These are the basics that can be generalized across settings. Supporting these basics gives an adolescent the best chance for having a meaningful and as independent a life as possible. And, by staying focused on the basics at least until the end of adolescence, you will help make a difficult time for everyone more rewarding, more playful, and more positive. I would also argue that by focusing on the developmental basics, you will find that many useful opportunities emerge naturally, teaching life, relationship and job skills that actually “stick” with an individual.

*There is probably much more to add to this list, including much more about what parents and families need to be able to support these adolescents. But perhaps this is a start, or a reminder, or simply a provocative list to get us all thinking about whether we are in fact providing what our adolescents need and what more we could be doing to foster meaningful growth.*