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About Autism

By Beth Fox

As teachers in public school districts prepared their classrooms and activities for the 2009–10 school year this past fall, they likely encountered an emphasis on prescribed teaching methods for children with autism. According to the Autism Society (www.Autism-Society.org), one in every 150 people in the United States is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Autism, in all of its forms, is the fastest growing serious developmental disability in the nation.

Considering those numbers, ski and ride schools across the country are destined to serve children with autism in this season's lessons. (While this article primarily addresses ASD with regard to children, keep in mind that many adults may also be living with one form of autism or another.) For those of you who will be working with these clients, the information that follows can help you provide outstanding guest service.

What Is Autism?

The term "autism spectrum disorders" applies to a broad range of neurodevelopmental conditions that can lead to the following challenges:

- Difficulties with regard to reciprocal social interaction, i.e., the ability to relate to others and their actions
- Difficulties related to inappropriate verbal and nonverbal communication, including making appropriate verbal and nonverbal exchanges of information as well as trouble interpreting facial expressions and body language
- A markedly restricted range of interests, including self-imposed restrictions, routines, and activities

People diagnosed with ASD each seem to be affected in their own way and to varying degrees, from mild to severe.

Common ASD Diagnoses

Autism: Children diagnosed with autism generally have mild-to-severe cognitive involvement and limited ability in relating to and communicating with others; they also typically exhibit a tendency to stick to rigid routines and repetitive behaviors.

Asperger's Syndrome: Compared to autism, children with Asperger's do not exhibit a significant delay in cognition and may not find the practical use of language so severely challenging.

Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS): Children with this disorder often experience disconnects in peer communication and relationships, unusual sensitivities and overstimulation, behavioral rigidity (as the result of self-imposed routines), and a preference for solitary activities.

Childhood Disintegrative Disorder: After approximately four years of typical development, these children experience a loss of language, problems with self-care abilities, and a lack of interest in their social environment.

Accommodating People with Autism

If operating at a resort located on federal lands, snowsports schools are required—by Section 504 of the area’s United States Forest Service permit—to provide reasonable accommodation for access, services, and equipment to people with disabilities. Even if your resort doesn’t operate on public lands, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires the same type of accommodations from all businesses that offer services to the public. (Some snowsports schools are caught off guard by requests for special services, but leeway exists via protection provided by the “reasonable accommodation” language in the law. In short, the law recommends a 72-hour-prior-notice period for special services—i.e., a reasonable amount of time for a resort to procure the appropriate equipment or qualified instructor to provide services to the guest with special needs.)

Get Parents Involved

Everyone in your school should demonstrate care and sensitivity when gathering information from parents about the needs of their child:

- Reassure the parent(s) that your snowsports school will do its best to offer a positive experience for their child.
- Consider using HIPPA (Health Insurance Privacy and Portability Act) standards as a guideline for reaching a balance of privacy and necessary disclosure with regard to parent questions. Also make sure that instructors and those at the front desk have an awareness of the sensitivity required when keeping records and discussing children and their related special needs.
- Ask parents if they are comfortable speaking about their child’s diagnosis, behavior, and any accommodations (if any) made for the child at school. If such a discussion ensues, be sure to talk about the particulars of communication and communication devices that can be used with the student. Also do your best to cover the student’s cognitive abilities, social interaction skills, preferred activities, typical behavior (as well as any negative behavior and recovery techniques), and external stimulation that tend to disrupt learning. Ask about special instructional methods, classroom or class-member arrangements, equipment needs, processes to follow, or schedules that are particularly helpful to the child.

Tips for Working with Students with ASD

- Take time with each student’s parents, guardians, or authorized representatives to learn about his or her typical daily routine, including snack and rest periods, and stick with it as much as possible during the lesson. Coordinate the plan for the day with your contact person, and create a detailed schedule that will allow you, throughout the day, to know what comes next for the child at any point in time. When appropriate, you can use picture schedules, with activities and timing indicated by icons that can be crossed off when the activity is finished.
- Introduce activities and keep moving, without lengthy verbal explanation or sedentary periods (both of which can agitate students or make it difficult to get them back into the lesson’s flow). To ease transitions from one activity to another, use scheduling cues and/or gentle countdown reminders before activity changes.

- Communicate with the child in his or her preferred mode: e.g., using a PDA, text messaging, sign language or gestures, spoken or written words, or drawings.
- Do what you can to place class activities within an environment that's conducive to the child's needs. Avoid areas where you might have an abundance of potential distractions such as excessive wind, manmade or natural noise, crowds, and lifts.
- Avoid meltdowns by providing brief-yet-frequent rest and relaxation breaks during the lesson. Also, be sure to allow the child a predetermined amount of time to engage in a favorite but suitable activity during those breaks.
- Understand that children with ASD gravitate toward internal and external stimuli, and may engage in behavior such as skiing fast, seeking out bumpy terrain, or riding close to trees. These kinds of actions are usually engaged in by a child seeking sensory stimulation, and may be appropriate if you as the instructor have control and the activities are performed in a safe environment and manner.
- Create skill development activities that produce positive sensory stimulation when practicing a maneuver. A small quarterpipe snake can be used to teach turning and offer sensations that prompt the child to repeat the maneuver.

Equipment and Safety

- Children who lack motor control may need to use such tools as an Edgie-Wedgie, ski bra, or other tip-retention device.
- You may want to attach reins to the tips of the skis so that you can help the skier initiate turns and, ultimately, promote direction change and slowing. Gentle side pulls can help guide the skis through the shaping phase of the turn. Be sure to follow your adaptive snowsports school's protocols for creating and using reins.
- Children who are tactilely defensive are often annoyed by goggles, mittens, helmets, and other cold-weather or protective gear and may discard their cold-weather gear. Therefore, take care to protect the child from the elements while creating a tolerable situation for him or her. If possible, introduce the child to winter wear ahead of time by inviting the student to choose items, coloring pictures of the gear, or wearing it for a few moments at a time to build up a tolerance for it. Sometimes taping a helmet buckle closed or using mittens that are attached to coat sleeves can help prevent loss.
- Remember that all behavior is a form of communication. Do your best to understand what is being conveyed by your student's behavior, and adjust schedule, activities, and/or stimulus to create a balanced situation that will help prevent a meltdown.
- When using adapted equipment, special processes, or other methodologies, always consider the individual child's needs and whether the actions you've taken are beneficial for safety, learning, or experience.
- Meet with parents after the lesson to let them know how things progressed, and discuss any needs or concerns you want to share with regard to upcoming lessons.

Want More Information and Training?

Consider attending a future PSIA-AASI National Adaptive Academy, hosted in conjunction with Disabled Sports USA, at The Hartford Ski Spectacular. The event typically occurs during the second week of December at Breckenridge, Colorado. You can also visit an adaptive program in your region and attend training sessions. To learn more about the academy or regional adaptive programs, go to www.DSUSA.org.

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