Navigating the System
Get the most from your child’s IEP

Classroom Tech: 101
How technology is transforming ASD education

Prevention Strategies
Avoiding ASD triggers
A Class Act

Optimize your child’s learning experience—and his overall health—by ensuring environmentally sound surroundings...

BY DEIRDRE IMUS

When a child is diagnosed with autism or a related disorder, the scope of his or her life changes forever. One of the areas in which this differential can be most striking is education, and the list of questions facing parents in this domain is exhaustive. Should kids on the autism spectrum attend public school, or enroll in a private, more specialized program? Do the public schools where you live provide adequate services for kids with autism? Which alternative education options are worthwhile, and which are a waste of time?

Unfortunately, autism rates are only going in one direction: up. The most recent figures from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that as of 2012, one in 50 school-aged children in this country has autism, a substantial jump from one in 88 only five years earlier. This is less than heartening news, but promising only in the continued attention it brings to this community with highly specialized, varied needs.

With more autism diagnoses will doubtless come more educational opportunities for this population, a development that benefits the individual, his or her family, their community, and beyond. When kids on the autism spectrum—or any kids, really—receive inadequate education, they become further impaired, remaining ill-equipped to cope with daily challenges or rise above their disability.

And yet, when the right teacher, program, or opportunity is sought and found, the results can be dramatically different. Maybe an instructor will notice your child on the autism spectrum is particularly adept at science, art, or music, and hone that skill rather than focus on what he or she lacks. Such specialized attention would do wonders for any student, but has the potential to enhance and change an autistic child’s life intensely—whether for a few minutes, a few months, or forever.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

The challenge (one of many) for parents and caretakers of kids on the autism spectrum is locating the best, most appropriate opportunities. These programs should be holistic in nature, providing a well-rounded experience that not only enhances each child’s capabilities, but also offers the benefits of a healthy, healing lifestyle. But first, you need to do some homework.

One of the primary concerns for the parents of a child on the autism spectrum is how well-equipped the local school district is to handle each child’s diverse set of needs. Are these students mainstreamed into a typical classroom based on their abilities, or isolated into special needs classes—and which option works best for your child? If the public schools seem inadequate, is private school the answer? And what kind of private school? As with many areas involving autism, the answers are found, the results can be dramatically different. Maybe an instructor will notice your child on the autism spectrum is particularly adept at science, art, or music, and hone that skill rather than focus on what he or she lacks. Such specialized attention would do wonders for any student, but has the potential to enhance and change an autistic child’s life intensely—whether for a few minutes, a few months, or forever.

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never exactly clear, and the solutions are rarely easy.

Parents and caregivers can find some degree of certainty when evaluating educational possibilities by looking at the program as a whole. Aside from what your child will learn, consider the environment in which this learning takes place. If your child is soothed by calming, neutral colors, perhaps a classroom boasting bright, rainbow-themed decor will be too stimulating or uncomfortable for him or her. Similarly, find out how instructors are trained to handle the diverse needs of this increasingly diverse population—one ASD kid’s dream could be another’s absolute nightmare.

**NUTRITION MATTERS**

Pay close attention to the smells in each school. Is that a fried food odor wafting down the hall from the cafeteria? Do you sense ammonia-based cleaning chemicals in the bathroom? Unfortunately, many school districts or private schools are not as progressive environmentally as they are educationally, and lag in terms of providing healthy food alternatives or using nontoxic cleaning agents.

As anyone caring for a child on the autism spectrum knows, dietary control is often the key to good behavior. Whether your child follows a gluten-free, casein-free diet or is set off by the texture of broccoli, it’s important to note what foods are available in each school, and how much supervision special needs kids receive during meals. Even though you may pack a healthy, safe lunch for your child to enjoy every day, there is no guarantee that meal will make it into their mouths. The temptation to try something new, or something that smells or feels good, might be overwhelming—and can produce negative consequences, whether an allergic reaction, temper tantrum, or worse.

To boot, certain foods are just plain unhealthy, and have no place in a school (or anywhere else for that matter). Keep all your kids in tip-top shape by avoiding processed foods made with synthetic additives that have no nutritional value. Opt for an organic, plant-based diet full of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. The earlier you practice this at home, the more likely your kids will follow suit, and view day-glo energy drinks, fried foods, and sugary snacks as entirely unappealing.

**THE NOSE KNOWS**

If your nose tells you something toxic is being used to clean the building, follow that instinct. Find out how open the school is to changing course, and adopting a cleaning program that uses all-natural products made from healthy, plant-derived ingredients like essential oils. These products are easier to find than ever, but make sure the brand being used doesn’t merely tout itself as being “green” without making good on that promise.

Toxic cleaning chemicals have the potential to make us all sick: they can exacerbate asthma and other breathing conditions, or cause headaches, nausea, and eye and skin irritation. Chronic exposure has also been linked to certain cancers, and possibly...
even reduced IQ and language skills in children exposed in utero.

Beyond that, the harsh odors unleashed by conventional cleaners can make it difficult to focus, particularly for kids who already have a hard time executing that skill. Any educational facility should strive to make its physical environment as conducive to learning as possible. As autism and ADHD rates continue to skyrocket in the U.S., school officials would be wise to consider all the factors that help students achieve success in the classroom.

WORKING IT ALL OUT

Another important aspect to consider when it comes to your ASD child’s education is how much time they’ll spend being physically active during the day. Beyond the well-known health benefits that we all experience from exercise, it has particular value for kids on the spectrum, for whom exercise can be therapeutic, and an opportunity to work on socialization skills. What’s more, a number of studies have shown that exercise can reduce stress and anxiety, as well as improve sleep, reaction time, and memory, according to the Autism Research Institute, all of which may improve attention in the classroom.

Many people with autism tend to be sedentary, and therefore overweight. In fact, according to a 2005 study, more than half of all children with ASD are either overweight or at risk. Making exercise part of a regular routine for these kids early and often should be paramount.

Since they may not understand the rules of organized sports or be able to participate with mainstream students, make sure your ASD child’s school offers an appropriate adaptive physical education program. Research has shown that swimming or walking on a treadmill are effective exercises for kids with autism, and that increased aerobic activity can decrease negative behaviors.

Spending time outdoors is also productive for any child (or adult, for that matter). Studies, like a recent one out of Scotland, have shown people almost instantly relax when they enter a leafy, green environment from a hectic, urban one. Talk to the head of physical education at your child’s school about opportunities for the special needs population. It’s as essential a part of the learning process as anything else, and shouldn’t be neglected.

Sometimes the big factors will improve the life of an ASD child. But sometimes change comes from making small, dedicated steps to their environment—a move that benefits children on and off the autism spectrum. They’ll feel better without even knowing why. Don’t be afraid to speak up, ask questions, and do your part in creating a safe, wholesome place for your child to learn—and thrive.

Note: Information provided herein is not intended to treat or diagnose any health condition. As always, consult your healthcare provider with any questions or health concerns.