

Working with Students with Special Needs

Focusing on Autism

Suzanne Pritchard, MS, OTR, CDRS

Occupational Therapist

Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialist
(ADED)

Easter Seals Crossroads Driver Evaluation
and Training Program

Agenda

- Basics of ASD in general terms
- Typical challenges and strengths of those with ASD and how those may present in the vehicle
- Communication suggestions
- Involving the parent
- Resources- like Crossroads and others in IN
- More details of CDRS evaluation
- Q and A- welcomed throughout the presentation

Criteria based on DSM V released in 2013 (must meet all 4)

- a) Deficits in social communication and social interaction
- b) Restricted or repetitive pattern of behavior, interests
- c) Sx present in early childhood
- d) Sx together limit and impair everyday functioning

Note: no Asperger's dx

Variability of Ability

- “if you’ve met one person on the autism spectrum, you’ve met one person on the autism spectrum”- Dr. Gwen Martin
- “high functioning” vs. “lower functioning”
(what does this mean?)

Possible difficulties in daily living skills- “pre-driving skills”

- Transitioning from high school to adulthood- executive function
- Independent living
- Time management
- Safety Awareness

Executive Function

- Refers to a set of mental skills that are coordinated in the brain's frontal lobe. Executive functions work together to help a person achieve goals.
- Executive function includes the ability to:
 - manage time, plan and organize
 - make decisions/judgment
 - have insight into their disability and error recognition

Executive Function cont'd

- switch focus/cognitive flexibility (shift between response sets, devise alternative strategies, divide attention, process multiple stimuli simultaneously)
- curb inappropriate speech or behavior (impulse control)
- integrate past experience with present action

When executive function breaks down or has not developed:

...behavior becomes poorly controlled. This can affect a person's ability to:

- work or go to school
- function independently
- maintain appropriate social relationships
- drive

Transition from high school to adulthood and independent living

- Driving is a rite of passage
- Not everyone should be a driver- at least not yet...or maybe ever
- What **life skills** does the student have?
Areas addressed: home skills, personal skills, community skills, family responsibilities (red flags/key skills)

Key life skills

- How do they manage their unstructured time?
- Do they make some appointments by themselves or have some independent understanding of their scheduled commitments?
- Do they have any home responsibilities?
- Motivation (initiation of other interests)?

Time Management

- Does the student know/understand the concept of time lapse? How long things take? How far is _____ from your house?
- Understanding the variability in the driving environment based on traffic, time of day
- Good basic skill to have: setting their own alarm and managing time to get to school/job

Safety Awareness

- Unaware of dangers vs. too cautious (hyper-vigilant on irrelevant stimuli)
- Are there other diagnoses at play? (i.e. ADHD, anxiety, behavioral or emotional issues, OCD) Composure?
- Anticipation of problems/hazards in the road
- These issues are assessed in classroom as well as a passenger in the vehicle

Common Challenges

- **Communication deficits**
 - taking turns in conversation or waiting for instruction
 - difficulty expressing themselves (are they not understanding the concept or simply unable to convey it)
- **Difficulty expressing & modulating emotions-**
what is his or her frustration level?
- **Strong moral code** (adherence to road rules)
- **Motivation** (not just ASD)

Common Challenges cont'd

- **Literal thinking and interpretation-** “black and white vs. gray”
- **Difficulty generalizing-** i.e. left unprotected turns, negotiating construction zones
- **Problem solving during novel situations-** road side emergency, police, detour, change in weather
- **Social skills** - reading social cues, anticipate actions of other drivers

Common Challenges cont'd

- **Short attention span, distractibility-** different than other neuro-typical teens
- **Slower information processing-** in dynamic environment (don't be fooled by static tests)
- **Prioritizing information-** not everything has equal importance
- **Motor skills-**instinctive feel for the vehicle, coordination

Strengths

- Possible high or average IQ- allows for easier memorization skills
- Abide by rules
- Tend to be perfectionists

Communication is key

- Use verbal directions, gestures and pictures to instruct (help them visualize)
- Understand what limitations in expressive and receptive language exist
- Don't say "do you know what I mean?"- have them explain in their own words
- Be ready for literal interpretation and adjust
- Be clear and concise- don't take liberties as one might with neuro-typical drivers (no sarcasm)

Communication is key cont'd:

- Set pace based on student's processing speed- is it possible to drive 1 on 1 with these drivers?
- Provide "quiet" environment
- Recognize difficulties with understanding other's perspectives (may need to explain in more detail how they are viewed by other driver's- i.e do they want their turn at intersection?)
- Be aware of problems understanding and processing "why" questions

Involving the Parent

- Team effort with parents/caregivers from the beginning
- Provide straight forward feedback and examples of challenges seen in vehicle
- Explain 3:1 ratio in terms of needed instruction
- Offer a ride along? Determine amount of co-piloting

Involving the Parent cont'd

- Have them complete Life Skills list-
perhaps driving too early
- Offer ADED handout
- Give passenger activities for family to complete with student
- Thorough evaluation with CDRS
- If parents continue to “deny” challenges:
Do they want to drive with the student?

So who is “successful”?

Resources

- Easter Seals Crossroads- 317-466-1000
(serves ~2 hour radius)
- CDRS in Clayton, Fort Wayne,
Schereville, South Bend, Batesville,
Evansville, Columbus
- ADED website: www.aded.net

Evaluation at Crossroads

- 3-4 hour evaluation of life skills, vision, visual processing speed, cognition, behavior (emotional maturity), coordination, and physical ability
- Completed in clinic and in the vehicle (as a passenger and driver)
- Consultation and “homework”

Q & A

Questions?

Comments?

Concerns?

Please contact me at any time:

317-466-2001 ext 2236

spritchard@eastersealscrossroads.org