



BTAM & ASD: An e-Guide for Assessing Students on the Autism Spectrum

ASD Risks and Protective Factors

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behavior. **1 in 36 children is on the autism spectrum.** Every autistic student is a unique individual, and not every ASD characteristic applies to each individual or impacts their behavior in the same way.

There are several common ASD characteristics, each with their own risks and protective factors for BTAM teams to consider. Having knowledge of the risks and protective factors helps guide behavioral threat assessment models by including considerations for ASD characteristics in the assessment.

Protective Factors: The positive aspects of ASD characteristics, such as being able to remember detailed information on a topic.

Risks: How ASD characteristics may be considered problematic or have negative impacts for individuals, such as being hyper-focused on concerning topics.

The following list defines common ASD characteristics and describes protections and risks associated with each one.

Circumscribed Interests

Circumscribed interests are intense, narrow, obsessional interests.

Protection: Circumscribed interests can be a source of self-esteem, efficacy, creativity, relaxation, and motivation.

Risk: “Harmless” topics could lead to harmful or illegal online searches or interest areas.



Visual Fantasy & Impaired Social Imagination

Visual fantasy and impaired social imagination are compelling and addictive fantasy that may become a means to process and overcome stressors in real life.

Protection: Fantasy can be protective in an emotional sense and help students with ASD cope with stressors.

Risk: If fantasy incorporates concerning, harmful or illegal activities, it can lead to concerning behaviors. The students with ASD may plan or act out the fantasy in detail but not understand the real-life consequences.

Need for Order, Rules, Routines, Predictability

Order, rules, routine, and predictability are how students with ASD cope with a chaotic social world where interactions are inconsistent and unpredictable.

Protection: Many schools provide highly organized and scheduled environments, and students with ASD who display a need for order and routine may do well with this structure.

Risk: Change can be destabilizing for students with ASD and create vulnerabilities with a loss of order and schedule. When another student breaks the rules or interrupts routines, a student with ASD may seek to restore order, potentially leading to conflict with the rule breaker. Students with ASD should be assisted in preparing for times of change.

Obsessionality, Repetition, & Collecting

Obsessionality, repetition, and collecting are compulsive behaviors, and these behaviors may be heightened at times of stress or anxiety. Obsessionality is a term associated with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) or Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD), where an individual's attention for the world is shut off and is focused selectively on one subject.



Protection: Students with ASD can be directed to positive topics and items to research and collect that help build a safe outlet for these behaviors.

Risk: Students with ASD could compulsively pursue or harass an individual while being unaware of how that person feels.

Social Interactions & Communication Difficulties

Social interactions and communication difficulties may be displayed when student with ASD struggle to intuitively pick up on “unwritten” social rules and social contexts. They may also struggle to initiate or reciprocate conversation and to understand perspectives other than their own. Students with ASD may come across as blunt or literal as they often show less emotional expressivity.

Protection: Honest conversation may be an asset, as could independence outside of social contexts.

Risk: Misreading social interactions may lead a student with ASD to victimize another unknowingly, or to be victimized due to their vulnerability. Due to communication difficulties, students with ASD may become anti-social or, in some cases, respond aggressively in confusing social contexts.

Cognitive Styles

Students with ASD may differ in their cognitive styles—or thought processes—in ways that affect their attention to detail, executive functioning, and other factors.

Attention to detail and not seeing the bigger picture: Students with ASD may have an impressive ability to remember minute details but fail to understand the big-picture contexts and overlook links between consequences and implications.

Executive Functioning: Students with ASD may struggle to organize their life, to start and complete tasks, and juggle priorities. They may also have short-term memory issues.



Protection: BTAM team members can identify an autistic student’s cognitive strengths and aptitudes and create as many opportunities for them to capitalize on these strengths as possible.

Risk: Students with ASD may be triggered and appear stressed by cognitive overload when questioned by an authority figure, and they may have difficulties understanding others’ perspectives.

Sensory Hyper- & Hypo-Sensitivities

Students with ASD may experience both hypo-sensitivity and hyper-sensitivity to sensory input. Hypo-sensitivity describes a reduced response to stimuli such as touch, sound, or sight. Hyper-sensitivity, on the other hand, occurs when an individual has an extreme response to sensory stimuli.

Protection: Once sensory interests are identified, they could be used as an effective tool for rehabilitation, learning, and to improve well-being.

Risks:

Hyper-sensitivity – Students with ASD may avoid stimuli and an act of aggression may be due to an overload of stimuli that can lead to isolation or retreat to the virtual world.

Hypo-sensitivity – Students with ASD may seek out stimuli which may appear inappropriate within the context of a given situation. BTAM teams should be aware that this stimuli-seeking behavior may not carry any ill intent. Instead, the purpose of the behavior may simply be to fill a sensory need for the student with ASD.
