

**Autism Spectrum Disorder and LGBT Identities in Higher Education:
A Guide for LGBT Resource Professionals in Engaging and Interacting
with Students**

By

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Introduction

This toolkit is intended to familiarize lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) resource professionals on college and university campuses with the basic language and knowledge around Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The toolkit begins to bridge the gap of information and gives LGBT resource professionals additional tools to engage with and assist students who are on the Autism Spectrum and who also identify as LGBT. Specific suggestions are provided throughout, as well as a one-page appended handout, **Suggestions for Interacting and Assisting LGBT Students on the Autism Spectrum**.

After reading this Guide, you should be able to:

- Define Autism Spectrum Disorder and list the three most common disorders under this umbrella term.
- Understand what “hidden curriculum” includes and describe the impact it has on students who are on the Autism Spectrum.
- Describe the social interaction and communication difficulties that students on the Autism Spectrum encounter, while also recognizing the strengths they possess.
- Recognize how co-morbid diagnoses may intensify social interaction and communication difficulties.
- Identify and implement the suggested tips for LGBT resource professionals.

Common Language

1. **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)** “is a general term to describe a group of complex disorders of brain development” (Autism Speaks). “These disorders can be characterized in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and repetitive behaviors (Autism Speaks). The three most commonly referenced when speaking about ASD are: Autistic disorder, Asperger’s Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD)” (Autism Speaks).
2. **Autism** – sometimes referred to as “Autism Classic,” it is one of the most common developmental disorder in the ASD (National Institute of Mental Health or NIMH). Autism is characterized by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and repetitive behaviors that vary in impact and can be mild to severe (NIMH).
3. **Asperger’s Syndrome** – is also a developmental disorder and included under Autism Spectrum Disorder. Similar to Autism classic, individuals who have Asperger’s Syndrome struggle with difficulties in social interaction and repetitive behaviors. However, they often do not have significant delays in language or cognitive abilities (Autism Speaks). Individuals with Asperger’s syndrome may have some motor development delays (Autism Speaks).
4. **Co-morbidity** – the co-occurrence of two or more disorders in the same person (Matson & Nebel-Schwalm, 2005).
5. **Hidden Curriculum** – is “social information that is not directly taught but is assumed everybody knows” (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2004).
6. **Hypersensitive** – overly sensitive
7. **Hyposensitive** – under sensitive
8. **Neurotypical(s)** – those who are not on the Autism spectrum (Wilczynski, 2010).
9. **Pervasive Development Disorder - Not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)** - is a relatively new diagnosis that dates back to only about 15 years. Due to this, many educators and professionals may be unfamiliar with this term (Autism Speaks). PDD-NOS is also characterized by significant difficulties in language and social interactions and is part of the Autism Spectrum (Autism Speaks).

Overview of Autism Spectrum Disorder

To understand how sexual orientation and gender identity intersects with Autism Spectrum Disorder, we must first understand what that includes. We will take a look at what Autism Spectrum Disorder includes and the three most common neurological disorders classified under it. Next, we will look at the secondary characteristics that are often present with students who are on the Autism Spectrum. Then we will highlight the strengths that students on the Autism Spectrum possess. Finally, we will explore co-morbidity and its connection with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Autism Spectrum Disorder is “a general term to describe a group of complex disorders of brain development” (Autism Speaks). “These disorders can be characterized in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and repetitive behaviors” (Autism Speaks). Autism Spectrum Disorder also includes disorders like Rett Syndrome and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. The three most common disorders found under ASD are Autism disorder, Asperger’s Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified.

Autism, sometimes referred to as “Autism Classic,” is one of the most common developmental disorders in the ASD (NIMH). Autism is characterized by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and repetitive behaviors that vary in impact and can be mild to severe (NIMH). Those students with Autism are more likely to display an intellectual disability and cognitively be anywhere from gifted to severely impaired (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). Next, we will define what Asperger’s Syndrome includes.

Asperger’s syndrome is also a developmental disorder and on the Autism Spectrum Disorder. Similar to Autism classic, individuals who have Asperger’s Syndrome struggle with difficulties in social interaction and repetitive behaviors. However, they often do not have significant delays in language or cognitive abilities (Autism Speaks). Individuals with Asperger’s syndrome may have some motor development delays (Autism Speaks). Intellectually, students with Asperger’s Syndrome often are average to above average. Cognitively, they ranges from gifted to mildly impaired (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). Finally, we will define what Pervasive Development Disorder- Not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) entails.

Pervasive Development Disorder - Not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) is a newer diagnosis that educators and professionals may be unfamiliar with (Autism Speaks). PDD-NOS diagnosis has been around for about 15 years – not very long in comparison to other diagnosis. PDD-NOS is a part of the Autism Spectrum and likewise, characterized by significant difficulties

in language and social interactions (Autism Speaks). Students with PDD-NOS have can have a wide range of intellectual abilities.

Secondary Characteristics

In addition to varying ranges of difficulty of social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and repetitive behaviors for students on the Autism Spectrum, there are other characteristics known as “secondary characteristics” that are common for students on the Autism Spectrum (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). These are known as imitation, theory of mind, motor, or sensory characteristics.

The individual may have difficulty imitating gross, fine and/or oral motor movements. Additionally, imitation of verbal patterns may be impaired or absent. If imitation skills are present, the person may demonstrate difficulty using skills (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

The concept of “theory of mind” cannot be defined neatly. It makes up things like beliefs, desires, emotions, perceptions, and intentions. Theory of mind is “the ability to incorporate these mental states and apply it to yourself and others in order to understand and predict behavior” (Lantz, 2002). This ability to “predict behavior” is something that does not come easily for those on the Autism Spectrum (Lantz, 2002). This causes significant issues when those on the Autism Spectrum try to communicate or socialize with others.

Students on the Autism Spectrum often have difficulty with motor skills. This can affect both gross and fine motor skills. For a student on the Autism Spectrum, gross motor difficulties may make them appear clumsy or uncoordinated (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This may affect their ability to interact in group activities successfully, thus negatively affecting social interactions (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). Student may struggle with fine motor skills, such as poor or slow penmanship or have difficulties in daily living skills such as buttoning, zipping, or snapping (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

We know that students on the Autism Spectrum have strength in visual learning and understanding. We also know that there are more senses in addition to visual. Students on the Autism Spectrum can become what is known as hypersensitive (overly sensitive) or hyposensitive (under sensitive) (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). To avoid these sensory issues, students may avoid situations that they may be hypersensitive to, or on-the-other-hand seek out sensory input to compensate (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

Strengths

Although we have highlighted some of the differences between students on the Autism Spectrum and neurotypical students, students on the Autism Spectrum also possess a variety of strengths. These strengths include memory, visual processing, and intense focus.

Students on the Autism Spectrum are able to process and understand information more readily when presented visually (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). These students on the Autism Spectrum can also hone in on the details of what they are viewing as well (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This strength helps to compensate for the attention and auditory difficulties they may experience (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

Another strength that students on the Autism Spectrum possess is the ability to remember small details as well as relevant and irrelevant information for long periods of time (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This may be helpful when needing to recall information to perform tasks or complete activities (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

Finally, intense focus is one of the last main strengths that many students on the Autism Spectrum possess. Students on the Autism Spectrum are likely able to concentrate on information, an activity, or topics for extended periods of time (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This is especially true if these are topics or activities of interest. Finding a need in the LGBT Center space that matches up with someone who is on the Autism Spectrum can be beneficial for both involved.

Co-morbidity and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Students on the Autism Spectrum can often have additional diagnoses known as a co-morbidity, or the co-occurrence of two or more disorders in the same person (Matson & Nebel-Schwalm, 2005). These could be either medical or psychiatric in nature. The most common co-morbid disorders associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder are seizures and epilepsy, anxiety, depression, attention difficulties, bi-polar disorder, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

There is debate whether or not these are truly a second diagnosis or if they are just symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder (Tidmarsh & Volkmar, 2003). It is often difficult for professionals to make additional diagnosis because many symptoms are also symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder (Tidmarsh & Volkmar, 2003). Depression is one of the most common co-morbid diagnoses for individuals with Autism and can be expressed through increased behavioral disturbances, exacerbated compulsive behaviors, or anxiety (Tidmarsh & Volkmar, 2003). These symptoms may not always be verbalized because of communication difficulties (Tidmarsh & Volkmar, 2003).

Although exact numbers are hard to calculate, the important factor is to recognize and acknowledge the possibility that students on the Autism Spectrum may have one or more co-morbid diagnosis that also influence their experience. Recognizing this will allow you to have more insight when working with students on the Autism Spectrum.

Communication

For students on the Autism Spectrum, verbal and non-verbal communication can be especially difficult. The following highlights the similarities and differences between students with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome and how they communicate. In addition, we look at how they process and understand verbal communication and the meaning of hidden curriculum. Then we will cover the importance of using transition signals. Finally, we look at tips for LGBT resource professional to remember when communicating with students on the Autism Spectrum.

There are some similarities and differences in how students on the Autism Spectrum may communicate. This can vary depending on the diagnosis. For instance, we know that those with Autism in particular have the most difficulty with communication. However, students with Asperger's Syndrome usually have no delay in verbal communication and some even have exceptional verbal skills (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

Communication can vary from non-verbal communication, gestures, one word or sentences, fluid speech, and language (*Virginia Department of Education, 2010 Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Student Services*). Students on the Autism Spectrum may engage in echolalia, which is the repetition of words or phrases with no communicative intent (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This is seen most notably in individuals with Autism. Students with Autism also struggle with displaying and understanding non-verbal communication as well (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). Students with Asperger's Syndrome however typically desire conversation, but may only want to engage in specific conversations that highly interest them and which they are very knowledgeable about (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

In addition to limited topic conversations or atypical communication styles, students on the Autism Spectrum think in concrete and literal ways. This translates into the inability to understand metaphors, sarcasm, double meanings, or idioms. This further isolates students on the Autism Spectrum from neurotypicals because they often do not catch the implied meaning of words or phrases.

The following are a few examples to illustrate how students on the Autism Spectrum may interpret common metaphors unique to the LGBT community. Within the LGBT community

we often hear the terms “in the closet” or “coming-out of the closet.” For those on the Autism Spectrum, they may literally interpret these phrases as someone “physically *in* the closet” or someone “physically moving *out* of a (clothes) closet.” The inability to understand the meanings behind these phrases can result in potentially unsafe situations for those disclosing this information and missed friendship opportunities for those individuals on the autism spectrum.

The above examples can be described as the “hidden curriculum” or the social information that is not directly taught but is assumed everybody knows.” Hidden curriculum is often not understood by individuals on the Autism Spectrum (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2004). What makes hidden curriculum difficult for those on the autism spectrum is that it is always changing depending on the gender and/or context of the job, community, region etc. When this hidden curriculum is not understood by individuals on the Autism Spectrum, but is understood by those who are neurotypical, it can add to the feelings of isolation and difference from others that they already may feel (Endow).

Unlike neurotypical students, students on the Autism Spectrum usually find communicating by text, email, and instant messages easier because it is more direct and requires less knowledge around hidden curriculum. Next we will look at how transition signals help students on the Autism Spectrum adjust easier.

For students on the Autism Spectrum, routine can be very important for them. Depending on the student, any change to a student’s schedule can be upsetting and/or cause anxiety. Therefore, when facilitating activities it is helpful to prepare the student for a pending transition from an activity to another or person to person. This can be done in several different ways depending on what works best for that student. One example could be to announce transitions in activities to prepare the student on the Autism Spectrum for a potential change. For example, 5 or 10 minutes before the ending of an activity, announce that the activity will be transitioning in [amount of time here] minutes.

This not only helps the student on the Autism Spectrum, but also other neurotypical students who may need a warning before an abrupt stop. In addition, the passage of time is often difficult for a person on the Autism Spectrum to conceptualize. Therefore, having some sort of time device will help reduce anxiety. For instance, a timer, stopwatch, alarm or hour/minute hourglass could be helpful (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

How can LGBT Directors and Coordinators communicate with students on the Autism Spectrum more effectively? Below is a list of key points to remember when interacting with students on the autism spectrum:

- Remember, students on the Autism Spectrum are very concrete and literal thinkers. Be logical, organized, clear, concise, and concrete. Avoid using metaphors, sarcasm, idioms, double meanings, and jargon when speaking with a student on the Autism Spectrum.
- Students on the Autism Spectrum are often visual learners. Provide a handout with the common terms and phrases used within the LGBT community on a local, regional, and national level. Also include examples and/or follow up with a 1:1 conversation which provides an opportunity for students on the Autism Spectrum to associate these terms more concretely.
- Students on the Autism Spectrum typically have a difficult time making eye contact when speaking. Do not mistake lack of eye contact for disrespect, inattention, shyness. Avoiding eye contact may be a coping skill for sensory processing issues (Standifer Voc Rehab, 2).
- Give clear signals when transitioning to a new activity. For example: give a five or ten minute warning prior to the ending of an activity. This allows for the student on the Autism Spectrum to begin to switch gears with no surprises that could cause some anxiety. This also allows neurotypical students who may also appreciate such a signal.

Social Interactions

Students on the Autism Spectrum often have difficulty in engaging in and initiating social contact. First, we will look at how social interaction is difficult for students on the Autism Spectrum and the relationship to hidden curriculum. Next, we will look at potential issues related to social interaction and students on the Autism Spectrum. Then, we will look at to what extent do neurotypical students accept students on the Autism Spectrum. Finally, we'll outline steps for LGBT resource professionals to remember when engaging with students on the Autism Spectrum as it relates to social interactions.

Students on the Autism Spectrum often find social interaction difficult because of the missed communication queues that help neurotypical students navigate social interactions. This "hidden curriculum" is often difficult for those on the Autism Spectrum. Students on the Autism Spectrum may appear to be socially aloof, to be socially remote, or to be overly sociable but acting inappropriately or odd (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). These outcomes are not for a lack of interest or unwillingness to interact. It is quite the opposite in most cases, as students on the Autism Spectrum may not have the social skills to implement when engaging with others and/or miss important social queues that enable smooth social interactions.

This social isolation can be illustrated by the article by White, Ollendick, & Bray (2011), which found that “college students with high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder are often socially isolated, may experience considerable loneliness, as well as victimization like hostile aggression or rejection due to a lack of socially unskilled behavior and sometimes odd or eccentric, behaviors and interests.”

A study was recently completed that looked at the level of acceptance that neurotypical students have for students on the Autism Spectrum. Nevill & White (2011) found that students in the social sciences indicated less fear than students in either engineering or the physical sciences (Nevill & White, 2011). However, students majoring in engineering and physical sciences were more likely to “hangout with person” (who was on ASD) than those in the “other” majors categories (Nevill & White, 2011). Finally, engineering students thought that the person with ASD in the example was “less different from themselves.”

Sometimes students on the Autism Spectrum can have an obsession with another person and may not realize that is not socially okay (and could be considered stalking). Helping students to understand how to socially navigate certain social spheres within the LGBT community could be beneficial for both students on the Autism Spectrum and others. Since visual learning is considered strength of many students on the Autism Spectrum, provide them a visual guide into the LGBT social sphere.

Tips for LGBT resource professionals:

- Provide social interactions that are online, which allows for clearer communication and interactions with less chance for missing social queues. This also helps to decrease possible sensory issues associated with eye contact expectations.
- Students on the Autism Spectrum struggle with initiating social interactions. As a LGBT resource professional, you can be that bridge and introduce students on the Autism Spectrum to a few students who are nonjudgmental and accepting of others.
- Too many people in one place can overwhelm some students on the Autism Spectrum. On the other hand, some students on the Autism Spectrum may find comfort in a larger group because it decreases the perceived pressure to engage in social interaction. Provide opportunities for a balance between the two extremes.

Repetitive Behaviors

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder often display repetitive behaviors or movements that set them apart from their neurotypical peers. These behaviors or movements can vary in intensity. These behaviors or movements can range from preoccupation with certain objects (vacuums or fans) to intense interest in specific topics to needing a highly rigid routine (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

Other behaviors often seen with students with Autism can include finger flicking, hand flapping, unusual eye gazing, or habitual toe walking and or spinning (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). As one might expect, these behaviors or movements can interfere and affect learning, social performance, or task completion (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). However, these behaviors and movements usually happen because of hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to sensory stimulations, limited play skills, difficulties in understanding social situations, changes in routine, or anxiety (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

Future Implications

Through this guide, we begin to address the intersections of identities that students in higher education who identify as LGBT and on the Autism Spectrum possess. These identities are not mutually exclusive; however, the lack of research that combines these identities leads us to think differently.

Although the research around children and Autism Spectrum Disorder are plentiful, research around college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder is lacking, particularly regarding the intersection of identities of sexual orientation, gender identity, and Autism Spectrum Disorder. Here are a few research possibilities for the future:

- Conduct a qualitative study with students on the Autism Spectrum Disorder who also identify as LGBT. Specifically, explore their experiences within their college or university's LGBT Resource Center.
- Conduct a mixed-methods study assessing the college experience of students who identify as LGBT and are on the Autism Spectrum with a co-morbid diagnosis.
- Conduct a qualitative study with students who identify as transgender who are also on the Autism Spectrum. Investigate the correlation, if any, of students who are on the Autism Spectrum and identify as transgender with self-identification in binary terms.

More research is clearly needed to adequately support students who identify on the Autism Spectrum and as LGB or T. This toolkit provides a foundation for LGBT resource professionals and others to begin that process.

Resources

Online Resources

Autism Speaks (<http://www.autismspeaks.org/>)

Autism Research Institute (<http://www.autism.com>)

AHEAD (<http://www.ahead.org>)

Think College Learn! Online (www.thinkcollege.net/think-college-learn)

U.S. College Autism Project (<http://www.usautism.org/uscap/index.htm>)

Books

Intimate Relationships and Sexual Health: A Curriculum for Teaching Adolescents/Adults with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorders and Other Social Challenges by Catherine Davies and Melissa Dubie (2010).

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Appendices A

Suggestions for Interacting and Assisting LGBT Students on the Autism Spectrum.

- Remember, students on the Autism Spectrum are very concrete and literal thinkers. Be logical, organized, clear, concise, and concrete. Avoid using metaphors, sarcasm, idioms, double meanings, and jargon when speaking with a student on the Autism Spectrum.
- Students on the Autism Spectrum are often visual learners. Provide a handout with the common terms and phrases used within the LGBT community on a local, regional, and national level. Also include examples and/or follow up with a one-on-one conversation which provides an opportunity for students on the Autism Spectrum to associate these terms more concretely.
- Students on the Autism Spectrum typically have a difficult time making eye contact when speaking. Do not mistake lack of eye contact for disrespect, inattention, shyness. Avoiding eye contact may be a coping skill for sensory processing issues (Standifer Voc Rehab, 2009).
- Give clear signals when transitioning to a new activity. For example: give a five or ten minute warning prior to the ending of an activity. This allows for the student on the Autism Spectrum to begin to switch gears with no surprises that could cause some anxiety. This also allows neurotypical students who may also appreciate such a signal.
- Provide social interactions that are online, which allows for clearer communication and interactions with less chance for missing social queues. This also helps to decrease possible sensory issues associated with eye contact expectations.
- Students on the Autism Spectrum struggle with initiating social interactions. As a LGBT resource professional, you can be that bridge and introduce students on the Autism Spectrum to a few students who are nonjudgmental and accepting of others.
- Too many people in one place can overwhelm some students on the Autism Spectrum. On the other hand, some students on the Autism Spectrum may find comfort in a larger group because it decreases the perceived pressure to engage in social interaction. Provide opportunities for a balance between the two extremes.