

# OST Accessibility Series

Supporting Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

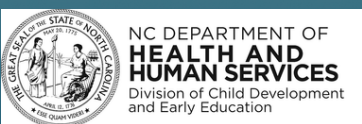
NC School Age Initiative

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Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) bring unique strengths, perspectives, and talents to afterschool programs. These students thrive best in environments that are welcoming, structured, and supportive.

Afterschool settings provide valuable opportunities for social interaction, skill development, creativity, and community engagement, but they can also present challenges related to communication, sensory needs, routines, and transitions.

This resource guide is designed to help afterschool staff better understand and support students with ASD by offering practical strategies, inclusive practices, and tools that promote participation, confidence, and success. As you go through this guide, take a moment to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your current program structure. Allocate time to fine-tune your program's approach to students with ASD and the staff who dedicate their careers to see them thrive.



# What is ASD?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental condition that affects how a person communicates, interacts socially, processes information, and experiences the world around them. The term “spectrum” reflects the wide range of strengths, abilities, and support needs that individuals with autism may have. While some students with ASD are verbal, others rely on alternative communication. Across the spectrum, they often need predictable routines, experience sensory sensitivities, and may find environmental and social changes challenging. At the same time, many students with ASD demonstrate strong attention to detail, creativity, honesty, deep interests, and unique problem-solving skills.

ASD is not an illness or something that needs to be “fixed.” Rather, it is a difference in brain function that affects a person’s way of thinking, learning, and experiencing the world. Every student with autism is unique, and no two individuals with ASD will have the same strengths or challenges. In afterschool programs, understanding ASD can empower your staff to create inclusive environments where students feel safe, respected, and supported. By recognizing individual needs, using clear communication, providing structure, and promoting positive social interactions, your program can help students with ASD fully participate and succeed alongside their peers.

## Levels of ADS support (DSM-5)

Below is a quick look at the three different levels of support for ADS according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5). These levels are designed to determine support needs, not to measure intelligence, ability, or potential.

### ASD LEVEL 1: REQUIRING SUPPORT (MILD)

- **Social Communication:** Difficulty initiating social interactions, joining group activities, or knowing how to respond when others engage with them.
- **Behavior:** May prefer routines and familiar activities; may struggle with switching away from preferred topics or interests.
- **Support Need:** Usually able to do many daily tasks independently; may need support with social situations, flexibility, or changes in routine.

*Important Note: In the past, some people with this level of autism support were diagnosed with “Asperger’s Syndrome.” This term is no longer used in current medical guidelines.*

### ASD LEVEL 2: REQUIRING SUBSTANTIAL SUPPORT (MODERATE)

- **Social Communication:** Significant difficulty in verbal and nonverbal communication skills; limited initiation of social interactions.
- **Behavior:** Strong difficulty with changes in routines and expectations; Repetitive behaviors or focused interests may happen often and can affect participation in different settings.
- **Support Need:** Requires substantial daily support with behavior, transitions, social interactions, and communication.

### ASD LEVEL 3: REQUIRING VERY SUBSTANTIAL SUPPORT (SEVERE)

- **Social Communication:** Severe difficulty in verbal and nonverbal communication; may rarely or never initiate social interactions independently.
- **Behavior:** Extreme difficulty coping with changes in routines, transitions, or unexpected situations. Repetitive behaviors or focused interests may strongly affect daily participation.
- **Support Need:** Requires very substantial, ongoing support for daily living, communication, safety, and navigating everyday activities.



# Program Environment and Structure

A supportive program environment and consistent structure can make a significant difference for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in afterschool settings. Many students with ASD thrive in environments that are predictable, calm, and organized because clear expectations help reduce anxiety, overstimulation, and confusion. Afterschool staff can create a welcoming atmosphere by establishing routines, using visual schedules, and preparing students ahead of time for transitions or changes in activities. When students know what to expect, they are often more comfortable participating in group activities, interacting with peers, and trying new experiences.

It is also important for afterschool programs to recognize and accommodate sensory and communication needs. Busy, noisy environments can sometimes feel overwhelming for students with ASD. Having quiet spaces available for breaks or tools for reducing noise can help students regulate and regain focus. Staff should use clear, simple instructions and provide extra processing time when needed. Building positive relationships, encouraging inclusion, and focusing on each student's strengths can help create a sense of belonging and confidence. An inclusive environment benefits not only students with ASD, but all children in the program by promoting empathy, understanding, and respect for individual differences.

## Quick Tips

- Maintain consistent daily routines and schedules
- Use visual schedules, picture cues, or written instructions
- Give advance notice before transitions or schedule changes
- Use clear, simple, and direct communication
- Provide access to a quiet or calming space for sensory breaks
- Reduce unnecessary noise and distractions when possible
- Offer noise-reducing headphones or other sensory supports when appropriate
- Break tasks and activities into smaller, manageable steps
- Allow extra time for processing instructions and responding
- Encourage positive peer interactions and inclusive group activities
- Build on students' strengths and interests to increase engagement
- Offer choices when possible to support independence, comfort, and participation
- Use predictable expectations and clear behavioral supports
- Model and teach social skills in natural settings
- Partner with families to understand individual needs and strengths
- Recognize that sensory needs and communication styles vary from student to student



# Communication

Communication support works best when students feel safe, understood, and included. For many students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, communicating can look different from what adults may expect. Some students may use a lot of words, while others may communicate through gestures, pictures, devices, or facial expressions.

Taking time to learn how each student communicates helps build trust and creates a more welcoming environment. Simple strategies like using clear directions, visual schedules, and consistent routines can make activities easier to follow and reduce frustration.

Patience is one of the most important tools staff can use. Students with ASD may need extra time to process information and respond, especially in busy or noisy environments. Giving students space to answer without rushing them shows respect and helps build confidence. Visual supports, choice boards, and step-by-step reminders can also make communication easier during games, homework time, snacks, and transitions. Staff can encourage friendships by creating small group activities where students have opportunities to practice conversation and teamwork in a low-pressure setting.

Strong support for communication is really about building relationships. When students know adults are listening and trying to understand them, they are more likely to participate and engage. Celebrating small successes, acknowledging effort, and responding positively to all forms of communication can help students feel valued and confident.

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### Quick Communication Tips



#### Individualize Communication

Work with families and the student's support team to learn which communication strategies work best for the child. Use supports and approaches that match the student's needs and strengths.



#### Safe Space

Build a program culture where all forms of communication are respected. Verbal, nonverbal, and alternative communication methods should always be accepted and never mocked by staff or peers.



#### Time

Some students may need extra time to process information and respond. Build extra time into routines and encourage staff and peers to be patient and supportive during conversations.



#### Support

Communication skills develop over time through safe and supportive relationships. Help students practice communication daily in ways that reduce stress and build confidence.



# Social Supports

Social support plays an important role in helping students with Autism Spectrum Disorder feel safe, included, and connected in afterschool programs. Many students benefit from structured opportunities to build friendships, practice social skills, and participate in group activities in ways that feel comfortable and manageable. Afterschool staff can support this by creating welcoming environments where differences are accepted and students are encouraged to interact at their own pace.

Positive social experiences help students build confidence, and a sense of belonging. Staff can model kindness, encourage teamwork, and provide guidance during peer interactions when needed. Simple supports and thoughtful planning can make social situations less overwhelming and help students feel more successful when joining activities, conversations, and games.

## Quick Tips

- Use small group activities to encourage comfortable peer interactions
- Pair students with supportive peers or buddies during activities when appropriate
- Provide clear expectations for games, conversations, and teamwork
- Model respectful communication and positive social behavior
- Give students choices in how they participate in group activities
- Create quiet spaces for students who may need breaks from social interaction
- Use social stories or role-playing activities to prepare for new situations or transitions
- Encourage inclusion by celebrating individual strengths and interests
- Offer praise and encouragement for positive social efforts and participation
- Maintain predictable routines to reduce stress and anxiety during group activities
- Respect a student's choice to not participate. Provide alternative ways to engage that align with IEP goals or individual needs.

# Academic Support

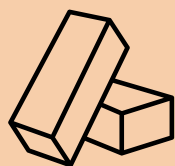
Providing academic support in afterschool programs can help students with Autism Spectrum Disorder feel more confident and successful outside of the school day. Many students benefit from a calm and structured environment where they can complete homework, practice skills, and ask for help without feeling rushed or overwhelmed. Afterschool staff can support learning by breaking tasks into smaller steps, giving clear directions, and checking for understanding along the way.



Flexibility is also important when supporting students academically. Some students may need extra time to complete assignments, while others may benefit from visual reminders, hands-on activities, or movement breaks to stay focused. Creating predictable routines during homework or learning time can help students with ASD know what to expect and reduce stress or frustration. Offering choices, such as where to sit or which task to complete first, can also increase engagement and independence.

Encouragement and positive reinforcement can make a big difference in a student's confidence and willingness to participate. Recognizing effort, celebrating progress, and focusing on strengths helps create a supportive learning environment where students feel capable, respected, and valued. Communication between afterschool staff, families, and school personnel can also help provide more consistent support across settings. When possible, work with families to understand strategies, accommodations, and goals that support the student's success in school and in the afterschool program, including supports connected to the student's IEP plan when appropriate.

## Quick Approaches to ASD Academic Support



### Build Skills Over Time

Supporting the academic success of students with ASD is an ongoing process. Afterschool programs can strengthen learning by including students in all academic activities and planning supports based on each student's individual needs. This may require dedicated planning time for staff outside of program hours.



### Schedule Enough Time

If homework or academic support is part of your program, allow enough time for students to work at a comfortable pace. Predictable routines during academic time can help students stay focused and know what to expect. Visual timers and reminders may also help reduce stress and support transitions.



### Breaks are Great

Breaks are an important part of learning and self-regulation. Some students may benefit from movement breaks, quiet breaks, or sensory breaks during academic activities. Structured breaks can help reduce stress, improve focus, and support emotional regulation.



### Work as a Team

Collaborate with families, teachers, and school support staff whenever possible. Even if afterschool staff are not part of the official IEP team, understanding the student's supports, accommodations, and successful strategies can help create more consistent and supportive experiences across settings.

# Life Skills and Personal Success

Life skills support in afterschool programs helps students with Autism Spectrum Disorder develop practical skills they can use in everyday situations. These skills may include organizing personal items, following schedules, managing transitions, practicing hygiene routines, preparing simple snacks, or learning how to ask for help when needed. Afterschool settings are ideal for practicing these skills in a supportive environment where students can learn through real-life routines and repeated practice.

Staff can support life skills development by giving clear, simple instructions, modeling tasks step by step, and using visual supports when helpful. For example, students may benefit from visual checklists for cleaning up after activities, picture cues for handwashing routines, or labeled storage bins to encourage organization and independence. Breaking tasks into smaller steps and allowing extra time for completion can help students feel more confident and successful.

Social and self-management skills are also important parts of life skills instruction. Students may need support with taking turns, handling frustration, managing emotions, or making appropriate choices during group activities. Teaching calming strategies, practicing problem-solving, and helping students identify and express emotions can support self-regulation over time. Encouraging students to make choices, complete responsibilities independently, and participate in daily routines helps build confidence and supports greater independence in school, home, and community settings.

## Quick Tips

- Practice following daily schedules and transitioning between activities
- Encourage students to clean up materials and personal spaces after activities
- Teach students how to ask for help or request breaks when needed
- Use snack time to build independence, sharing skills, and basic self-care routines
- Support organization skills by using labeled bins, folders, and visual checklists
- Provide opportunities for students to make choices during activities and routines
- Practice turn-taking, teamwork, and problem-solving during games and group projects
- Teach calming strategies students can use when feeling overwhelmed or frustrated
- Encourage students to manage personal belongings such as backpacks and jackets
- Model and reinforce respectful social interactions during free play and group activities





# Resources and Community Support

Raising a child with autism often comes with unique challenges. Afterschool programs can serve as an important connection point by helping families access community activities, support networks, and opportunities that encourage inclusion and participation for their child.

Strong community support also helps families build confidence and connection. When parents know their child is welcomed and understood, they are more likely to participate in events and activities together. Afterschool staff can help by maintaining open communication, sharing local resources, and creating inclusive environments where both students and families feel respected and valued. Supportive communities help families feel connected and give children with ASD more opportunities to grow socially, emotionally, and independently.

## ASD Resources for Parents and Caregivers

- [CDC Autism Resources](#): General information about ASD, developmental milestones, early intervention, and family resources.  
1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
- [Autism Society of America](#): Offers support, advocacy, education, local affiliates, and a national helpline for families.  
1-800-328-8476
- [The Arc of the United States](#): Advocacy and support for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including ASD.  
1-800-433-5255
- [Autistic Self Advocacy Network \(ASAN\)](#): Resources and information created with input from individuals with ASD, focused on inclusion and self-advocacy.
- [211 United Way Resource Line](#): Connects families to local community services, mental health support, respite care, food assistance, and disability resources.  
Dial 211 from any phone.
- [NC Department of Health and Human Services – Autism Resources](#): Information on Medicaid services, developmental disability supports, early intervention, and behavioral health resources for families. [www.oshr.nc.gov](http://www.oshr.nc.gov)
- [Easterseals PORT Health](#): Easterseals PORT Health is a nonprofit behavioral health and disability-services organization operating across North Carolina and Virginia. It provides mental health and disability supports for children, adults, and families. [www.eastersealsport.com/autism-and-aba-services](http://www.eastersealsport.com/autism-and-aba-services)