

Review of the *National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder Website*

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The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder

National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder, Evidence-Based Practices,
<https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices>

According to Dietz et al. (2020), 2.21% of the general U.S. population, or approximately 5,437,988 individuals, are on the autism spectrum. This data comes at a time when adult educators are seeing more learners either diagnosed or suspected of being on the autism spectrum. As practitioners seek to understand and identify the needs of adult learners on the autism spectrum, it is essential to learn how to best support these learners in adult education programs. While more research focused on the experience and instructional best practices of adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is needed, there is evidence regarding what works in K-12 and mental health settings that can be applied to practices in adult education.

Evaluation

The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder reviewed literature published from 1990-2014 and identified 27 evidence-based practices for persons with ASD, from birth to age 22. The resulting website features

autism focused intervention resources and modules (AFIRM) for each evidence-based practice. These modules offer excellent professional development featuring practical, evidence-based instructional strategies that adult educators can implement in their programs. Each module provides an overview, step-by-step instructions, an implementation checklist, and references as well as case examples demonstrating the practice through audio and video demonstrations. Individuals completing the AFIRM modules earn a professional development certificate.

The first module every adult educator working with learners with ASD should take is the “Introduction to Autism.” This module takes between 2-3 hours and contains information about the characteristics of autism, its impacts on social communication, and examples of representative behaviors including those related to thinking and learning (Steinbrenner et al., 2019). With 27 evidence-based practices, it is critical for practitioners to select the most appropriate ones

for the learners in their program. The “Selecting an Evidence-Based Practice” module is designed to support practitioners in choosing effective instructional practices. This module, which takes 1-2 hours to complete, explains the steps for identifying a learner’s goal and highlights specific techniques to effectively address the goal.

The practice-focused modules follow a four-step process. First, users identify the behavior or concern to address. Next is developing an observable and measurable goal. Using the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice Domain Matrix, users then identify potential instructional practices. Finally, considering the goal and any learner and team characteristics, users select the strategy they plan to implement (Waters et al., 2022).

Not every AFIRM module will be applicable to adults, but several of the modules can be especially useful for adult educators working with learners with ASD. The module focused on “Functional Communication” is one practice that could prove helpful. “Functional Communication” is the language used to elicit a desired outcome. For example, if a teacher is working with an adult learner with ASD who has difficulty asking for a bathroom break during class. Instead of using functional communication to ask for a break, the individual may speak out or behave in an unexpected way. The “Functional Communication” training module supports the user in systematically identifying the function of the unexpected behavior and finding a replacement behavior, such as raising their hand, appropriately communicating their plan, or following another class norm to excuse themselves.

The “Scripting” module focuses on an adult learner who does not respond to oral prompts or questions. An individual may not be responding

for a variety of reasons ranging from anxiety to processing speed. “Scripting” is an evidence-based practice for providing specific models for language and social behavior in a highly structured manner which supports a learner’s planning and processing for engaging in oral responses.

The “Social Narratives” module features a practice that educators can develop to support learners to better understand and respond to social situations. The narratives are a way to describe the social interaction for learners using relevant cues, explanations of others’ feelings and thoughts, and descriptions of appropriate behavior expectations. This module demonstrates how to support both classroom interpersonal dynamics and comprehension of narrative texts that can prove challenging for some learners with ASD to understand.

The “Task Analysis” module illustrates a technique that some learners with ASD may benefit from when asked to complete multi-step tasks. Using “Task Analysis” to teach a learner the individual steps in a multi-step process can help them become more independent and also supports a learner in using more complex target skills and behaviors that promote full inclusion in small group and whole class activities.

The National Professional Development Center’s set of “Timely Toolkits” is another valuable resource featured on the site. These toolkits are designed to support navigation through disruptions in learners’ routines. Changes in routine can be especially challenging for individuals living with ASD, and the resource also includes practical steps for supporting online learning for this population.

Recommendations

The scope of this online resource is what makes it valuable for any educator new to working with

the spectrum of neurodivergent learners. Due to a lack of research with older adult learners with ASD, the upper age limit for the suggested practices is 22. However, it seems likely that the recommendations can be effectively applied to a broader age range of adult learners.

Adult educators are especially resourceful when it comes to meeting learners where they are. The evidence-based practices outlined on the site offers a useful menu of options. Involving the adult learner in the decision-making process

around behavior and goal selection is highly recommended. Learners may present with complex profiles, but focusing on a behavior that impacts their educational access or performance allows practitioners to identify and understand some simple practices that can make a significant difference in learner outcomes. Striving for consistency is important when applying an evidence-based practice, so keeping the focus narrow and manageable will support learners to develop routines for success.

References

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