

Everyday Classroom Strategies and Practices for Supporting Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders

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and Shirley Cohen, PhD



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Dedication

To the staff of ASD Nest programs at schools throughout the five boroughs of New York City who use the strategies and supports in this manual every day, and especially to Dorothy Siegel, whose intensive drive turned the idea of an inclusion program for children with autism spectrum disorders into the reality of the ASD Nest program. And finally, to the children and families who provided us with evidence of the goodness-of-fit of the strategies and supports we used every day.

Acknowledgments

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The ASD Nest program reflects a long collaborative process involving two university colleges – New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, and Hunter College of the City University of New York – and the New York City Department of Education. We wish to thank the administrators of all three institutions who supported and contributed to this relationship so that the ASD Nest program could be established and continue its work with children on the autism spectrum.

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Preface

Shirley Cohen

Everyday Classroom Strategies and Practices for Supporting Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders was conceptualized in the spring of 2012 after the manuscript of the book *The ASD Nest Model: A Framework for Inclusive Education for Higher-Functioning Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders* was completed and submitted to AAPC Publishing. That book provides the structure or “bones” of the ASD Nest program along with the story of how it was created, a sampling of the content of the program, and a general picture of how it was doing. A description of the students served by the ASD Nest, the professional development program that undergirds the ASD Nest, the challenges in sustaining an inclusion program for children with ASD within a large urban school system, and the voices of parents of children served by this program are also included in that book. The book gives district and school administrators, supervisors, advocates, and parents a template for what an effective inclusion program serving higher-functioning children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) might look like, how it could be established, and how it might operate.

While that book delineates an overall approach and samples of strategies for the classroom, we realize that many teachers would benefit from more than that – from a stronger focus on everyday classroom practices designed to meet the needs of children with ASD. That realization led to the production of this manual on classroom practices. The manual can be used as a companion to the book for everyone involved in the education and treatment of children with ASD, and for classroom teachers and their support teams, it can also stand alone. Chapter 1 is a brief overview for readers who are not familiar with the ASD Nest program that was presented in *The ASD Nest Model*.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Shirley Cohen

One can barely read the news these days without encountering some mention of autism, usually communicating alarm about its increased prevalence or the myriad possible factors, genetic and environmental, that may cause or trigger it. Parents-to-be and parents of infants are frightened. Well-known figures from the entertainment field are lending themselves to fundraising efforts for research into this condition. Conferences on autism abound. Arguments about diagnosis and labeling pervade the medical and educational fields. Should the term “autism spectrum disorder” have replaced the terms “autistic disorder, Asperger’s disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) in the latest version of the widely used diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-5)? What genes cause autism? And finally, what treatments and/or supports that are available now will help which children the most?

It is this last question that this manual and the book associated with it, *The ASD Nest Model* (Cohen & Hough, 2013), address. The co-founders (Dorothy Siegel and Shirley Cohen), consultants, and long-term staff of the ASD Nest program have developed and have been implementing an intervention model for higher-functioning children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) that has enabled almost all of the children in this program to be successfully educated in classes with their more typically developing peers in neighborhood public schools. While providing support for the special needs of these children, we are strengthening their ability to understand and meet social and academic expectations.

Who are these “higher functioning” children with ASD?

They are children who have challenges in social communication and interactions along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. Many are highly routine-dependent and resistant to change. Some have unusual reactions to sensory stimuli, with hypersensitivity to one or more types of sensory input. Some have poor self-regulation and frequent meltdowns. Others need extra time to process verbal communications and respond to them. Many are highly anxious. Some flap their hands or jump up and down when they are anxious or excited. And many are passionately interested in selected subjects and are intellectually curious as well as creative. Virtually all have IQs within the range considered average or higher, and all have received a diagnosis of autism, either prior to being considered for admission to the ASD Nest program or during the admission process. Most children are admitted at kindergarten age, with a few being admitted in higher grades when there are openings in the program.

The strategies and classroom practices described in this manual were designed for the ASD Nest program. The ASD Nest model is an inclusion program serving children who have ASD, particularly higher-functioning children with that condition. As of the 2012-2013 school year, the ASD Nest program was being implemented in 19 public elementary schools in New York City. While the program serves children on the autism spectrum who are often referred to as high-functioning or "higher-functioning," many of the practices in this book will be useful in working with children with ASD who are not usually thought of as higher functioning, as well as other populations of children with special needs, including children identified as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and children with learning or behavior disorders.

The principles behind these practices take into consideration each child's needs, strengths, and interests, all basic to sound and effective instruction in both general and special education.

The ASD Nest model includes the structural elements listed below. (For more extensive information about this model, see *The ASD Nest Model* [Cohen & Hough, 2013]). Many, if not most, of the discrete strategies recommended in this manual can also be utilized in programs that do not include all the structural elements of the ASD Nest model, provided that an overall framework of positive behavior support exists.

- **Reduced class size:** 12 students at the kindergarten level, 4 of them children with ASD; 16 students in grades 1-3, 4 of them with ASD; up to 20 students in grades 4-5, up to 5 of them with ASD
- **Co-teaching:** two classroom teachers, one certified in special education and one in general early childhood or childhood education, or teachers certified in both special education and general early childhood or childhood education; plus a cluster teacher, who divides her time between ASD Nest classes to support children during special subjects and instructional lunch
- **A transdisciplinary team approach** with weekly team meetings that include teachers, related service providers (speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, social worker), and a school administrator (principal or assistant principal)

- **A central team of ASD consultants** – positive behavior support specialists, speech-language pathologists, and special educators with a focus on ASD, who work with participating schools during their first two years in the program and on an “as-needed” basis after that. (In some schools that have been in the program for more than two years, the consultant is replaced by a “coach/cluster teacher;” that is, an experienced ASD Nest teacher who has received additional training and is provided with several periods for coaching each week.)
- **Targeted goal areas:** social understanding and social communication, self-regulation and coping skills, adaptive behavior, selected academic skills needed by individual students in order to meet grade expectations
- **Use of intervention strategies delineated in the Classroom Guideposts for the ASD Nest program and the Three-Tier Model of Supports for the ASD Nest program**, which are presented later in this manual. (In addition, there is a social development intervention focus, SDI, led by each program’s speech-language pathologist, consisting of sessions that take place outside the classroom daily at the kindergarten level and three times a week at higher grade levels.)
- **Preservice training** consisting of two graduate courses focused on ASD taken at Hunter College in the summer prior to beginning work in the ASD Nest program
- **Inservice training** during the school year through workshops and conferences led by the consultants to the ASD Nest Support Project at New York University
- **Home-school connection:** home and school visits for new students before the start of the school year; two-way communication notebooks; school-based parent meetings; workshops and conferences

Permeating all elements of the ASD Nest program is an overall framework of positive behavior support and a welcoming, supportive atmosphere.

The ASD Nest Program Classroom Guideposts

The Classroom Guideposts document is a compendium of strategies and practices that are basic to the ASD Nest model and are used frequently in all classes in the program. Many of the strategies have a strong evidence base in relation to students with ASD while others are considered highly promising, and still others are accepted as best practice in special education. These practices focus on the needs and challenges common to children with ASD (Smith, Myles, Aspy, Grossman, & Henry, 2010; Stansberry-Brusnahan & Collet-Klingenberg, 2010). However, the way Guidepost practices are implemented varies depending on age/grade differences between classrooms. Use of these strategies and practices is guided by team planning for both individual students and whole classes.

The Classroom Guideposts are organized into five categories that have guided our thinking about intervention: prevention strategies, instructional strategies and supports, social supports, teach-

ing replacement behavior, and positive reinforcement systems. However, these categories are not mutually exclusive, as some practices can be and are used for multiple purposes.

The Classroom Guideposts are introduced to new staff of the ASD Nest program during their summer training program prior to beginning work in the program, and they are also used as a resource in planning for classes and for individual students throughout the school year. The Guideposts are expanded periodically as new strategies and practices are identified that are consistent with the overall approach of the model and have been found to be beneficial to students in the program. The latest version of the Classroom Guideposts is presented in Chapter 2.

Three-Tier Model of Supports for the ASD Nest Program

The Three-Tier Intervention Model, the ASD Nest version of a response-to-intervention (RTI) system (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012; Van DerHeyden & Burns, 2010), provides guidelines for which strategies and practices from the Classroom Guideposts to use with which students and when. The three tiers are defined by frequency and intensity of service delivery and by the level of direct adult involvement. Each tier is organized into four domains: behavioral, social, academic, and sensory functioning/self-regulation supports.

The ASD Nest Three-Tier Model differs from the broader use of RTI in that all tiers in the ASD Nest system are designed for use with special education students, particularly students with ASD. Thus, Tier I is designed to be used with all students in inclusion classes – both children on the autism spectrum and their more typically developing peers. Tier II is used for students with ASD (or other special needs) for whom the practices at Tier I are insufficient to help them meet individualized education program (IEP) goals or program expectations. This tier consists of individualized strategies and supports that are implemented in small groups, sometimes with initial teaching in a one-to-one format. Finally, Tier III is designed for students who have major difficulty in meeting expectations even after Tier II strategies have been used for some time.

The intensive, highly individualized supports in Tier III are only used after careful assessment by the school team and an ASD Nest program consultant, as well as a meeting with a child's parent. Practices in Tier III are substantially more intensive than those of Tiers I and II, and they require much one-to-one teaching, support, and monitoring. As a result, they may reduce the amount of teacher support that can be given to other students, and are therefore generally used only when a student is at risk of being considered for movement to a more restrictive setting. Figure 1.1 presents the conceptual model of the ASD Nest Three-Tier system. The full model is presented in Chapter 3.

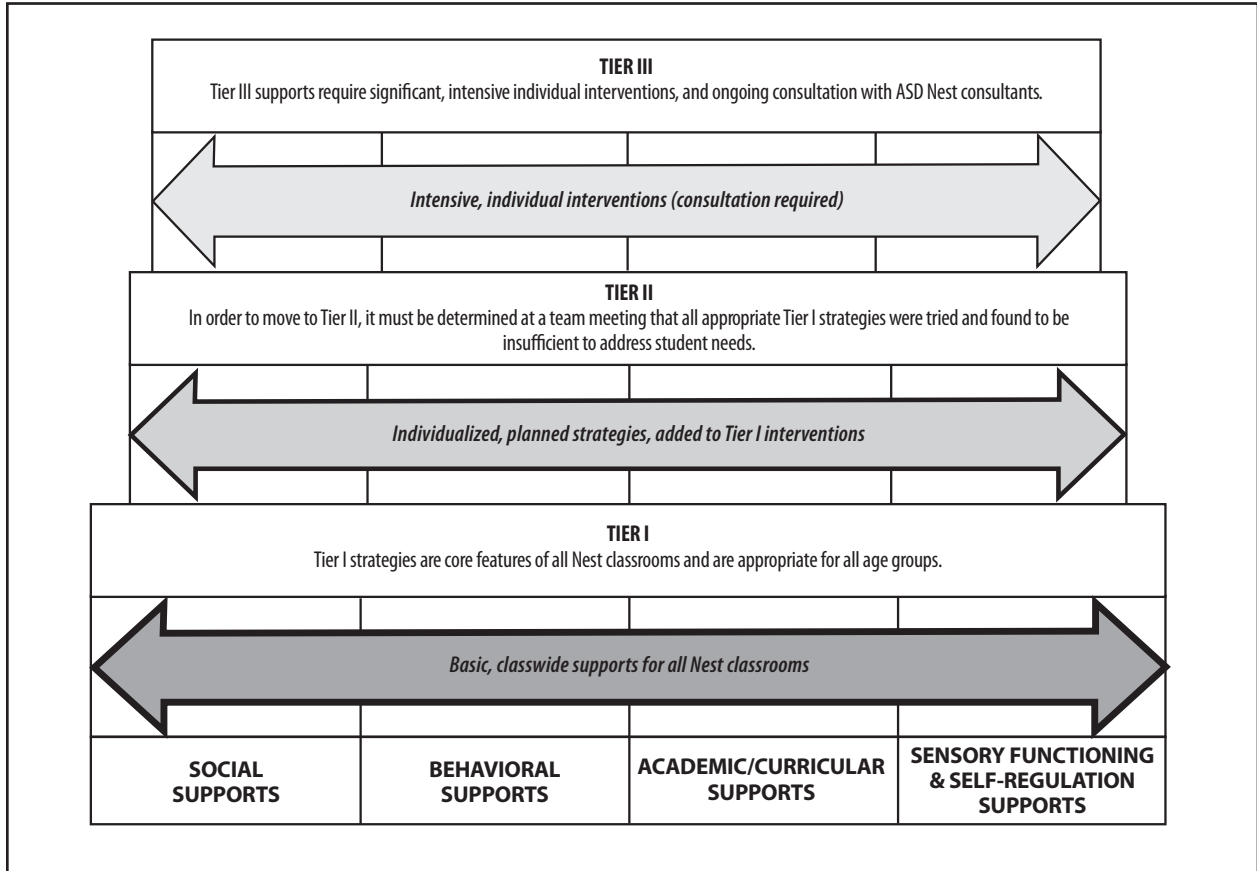




Figure 1.1. Three-tier model of supports for the ASD Nest program.

Just as the other major component of the program, the ASD Nest program Classroom Guideposts, the Three-Tier ASD Nest Model is introduced to new staff of the ASD Nest program during their summer training, and is used in conjunction with the Classroom Guideposts in team planning both for classes and for individual students throughout the school year. Implementation of the Three-Tier Model is guided by the use of checklists. Four checklists have been designed to be used in this process.

 Classroom: _____ Subject(s)/Activities: _____ Completed by: _____ Date & Time: _____		
Sensory Functioning & Self-Regulation Supports		Notes
LEVEL A: Supports that should always be present and observable in each 45- to 50-minute observation period:		
1. Classroom environment accommodates sensory sensitivities and prevents sensory overload.	<input type="checkbox"/> Observed <input type="checkbox"/> Not observed	
2. Arousing and calming activities are balanced across the period.	<input type="checkbox"/> Observed <input type="checkbox"/> Not observed	
3. Break area* is inviting, available for student use, and offers materials for calming.	<input type="checkbox"/> Observed <input type="checkbox"/> Not observed	
4. Teachers modify voice volume appropriate to individual students and to the size of the group.	<input type="checkbox"/> Observed <input type="checkbox"/> Consistently <input type="checkbox"/> On occasion <input type="checkbox"/> Not observed	
5. Opportunities are created for whole-class movement (e.g., movement break or transition between rug/desk).	<input type="checkbox"/> Observed <input type="checkbox"/> Not observed: <input type="checkbox"/> Missed opportunity	
LEVEL B: Additional support strategies that may be implemented:		
6. Relaxation activities are used to develop strategies for self-regulation.	<input type="checkbox"/> Observed <input type="checkbox"/> Not observed: <input type="checkbox"/> Missed opportunity	
7. Sensory tools are used by/available to students (e.g., work carrels, headphones, fidgets).	<input type="checkbox"/> Observed <input type="checkbox"/> Not observed: <input type="checkbox"/> Missed opportunity	

- Tier I Classroom Checklist.** This checklist is used to monitor implementation of the strategies and supports in the Guideposts that are meant to be used in all ASD Nest classrooms. It is a tool for ensuring that the strategies and supports are being used fully and appropriately (i.e., to ensure fidelity of implementation). It can also be used as a tool to advance the professional development of teachers and other members of the school ASD team. This checklist is often used in conjunction with a 45-minute observation period by a consultant or school-based ASD coach. Completion of the checklist itself may then take as little as 10 minutes after the end of the observation period and before a discussion between the observer and the teachers takes place. The form may also be used by classroom teachers for self-study, which may involve anywhere from 30-45 minutes.

		Tier I ASD Nest Program Three-Tier Model			
Tier I Checklist for Individual Student Planning: <i>Relevant for All Nest Classes</i> This individual student form is to be completed by the student's teachers and other members of the school team for planning more effective use of Tier I strategies. Team members identify the strategies across all four domains that are most relevant to help support this student. For each of those strategies, indicate whether it should be continued, modified, or added to the student's intervention plan by placing a checkmark in the appropriate column, in accordance with the key below. Comments on implementation recommendations may be added in the column on the right, entitled "Notes on Implementation."					
Recommendations					
C	M	A			
Continue current use of support	Modify existing support (Increase or decrease)	Add as a new support			
Student Name: _____		Date: _____			
Sensory Functioning & Self-Regulation Supports		Identify Strategies That Are Most Relevant			Notes on Implementation
		C	M	A	
1. Modify classroom environments to accommodate sensory sensitivities and prevent sensory overload.					
2. Balance arousing and calming activities across the day.					
3. Create and promote the use of a break area that contains calming materials for self-regulation.					
4. Monitor teacher voice volume so that it is appropriate to individuals in the class and to the size of the group.					
5. Utilize whole-class movement activities throughout the day.					
6. Use classroom relaxation activities throughout the day.					
7. Make sensory tools available, as appropriate (e.g., work carrels, headphones, fidgets).					

- Tier I Checklist for Individual Student Planning.** This checklist is used by the team to identify strategies and supports within Tier I to plan more effective intervention for a child who is not moving toward meeting his IEP goals and class/grade expectations, or who is exhibiting behavior that interferes with learning. Teachers complete a draft of this checklist a short time before a case conference on the child is scheduled to take place. This process often takes about 20 minutes. That draft is then used as a starting point for a discussion by the team, which may take about 20 minutes.

Tier II

Tier II
 ASD Nest Program
 Three-Tier Model

Tier II Strategies and Supports: Individualized, Planned Interventions

The following Tier II strategies are used with individual students who require additional, planned interventions and supports. Movement from Tier I to Tier II supports in any domain requires (a) completion of the Tier I Checklist; (b) review and discussion of Tier I Checklist at a team meeting; and (c) determination that Tier I supports across domains have been implemented adequately and found insufficient to meet the student's needs. Communication with a parent or guardian is recommended.

Team members should identify the strategies across all four domains that are most relevant to help support this student. For each of those strategies, indicate whether it should be continued, modified, or added to the student's intervention plan by placing a checkmark in the appropriate column, in accordance with the key below. Comments on implementation recommendations may be added in the column on the right, entitled "Notes on Implementation."

Recommendations		
C	M	A
Continue current use of support	Modify existing support (Increase or decrease)	Add as a new support

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

Sensory Functioning & Self-Regulation Supports	Identify Strategies That Are Most Relevant			Notes on Implementation
	C	M	A	
1. Implement individual <u>sensory diet/relaxation program</u> created by occupational therapist (OT) requiring teacher supervision and monitoring by OT therapist.				
2. Use individual <u>sensory tools</u> as directed by OT (e.g., bump seats, wedges, pencil grips, OT vests, slant boards).				
3. Create and use private work space, separate from peers.				
4. Utilize individualized sensory stories.				

- Tier II Checklist for Individual Student Planning.** This checklist consists of strategies and supports that are used in planning for a child for whom the strategies in Tier I have not been sufficient in helping to move the child toward meeting IEP goals and class/grade expectations or reducing interfering behavior, even after the implementation of the Tier I individual plan. Teachers use this checklist to review the effectiveness of the Tier I strategies and supports they have been using and to identify any additional supports they think may be useful by checking them on the Tier II planning form. This process may take about 20 minutes. That draft of the Tier II planning document then becomes a starting point for the team's case conference on the child, which may take an additional 20 minutes or so.

Recommendations		
C	M	A
Continue current use of support	Modify existing support (Increase or decrease)	Add as a new support

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

Sensory Functioning & Self-Regulation Supports	Identify Strategies That Are Most Relevant			Notes on Implementation
	C	M	A	
1. Provide intensive use of individual, 1:1 sensory-based strategies throughout the day on a consistent schedule with consistent teacher support and data collection with monitoring by therapist to evaluate effectiveness.				
2. Provide individual sensory schedule with frequent breaks that require specific sensory input (e.g., proprioception, movement), teacher facilitation, and therapist supervision and monitoring.				
3. Implement break program with scheduled breaks every period.				
4. Provide prompted support/guidance for relaxation training throughout the day.				

Behavioral Supports	Identify Strategies That Are Most Relevant			Notes on Implementation
	C	M	A	
1. Use individual task boards/mini-schedules with continued teacher guidance.				
2. Provide individualized planned priming for all tasks and events.				
3. Provide frequently scheduled teacher-supported break times throughout the day.				
4. Implement more intensive reinforcement system requiring frequent teacher monitoring.				
5. *See task simplification under Tier III academic supports as a prevention strategy.				

- Tier III Checklist for Individual Student Planning.** This checklist is used in planning for a child for whom the strategies in Tiers I and II have not been sufficient in helping to move that child toward meeting IEP goals and class/grade expectations or reducing interfering behavior; and who is at risk of being moved to a more restrictive setting. This checklist is part of a comprehensive evaluation of an individual child, which invariably includes extensive data collection and additional data collection forms. The child's parent and an ASD program consultant must be involved when movement to Tier III strategies and supports is being considered. A functional behavior assessment is often conducted as part of the process of creating the Tier III intervention plan. While completion of the Tier III form, which takes place at the end of the evaluation process, does not take very long, the entire evaluation process may take anywhere from several days to about three weeks.

Complete versions and detailed descriptions of the above forms are found in Chapter 3. In addition, owners of this book may download these and other forms and checklists from www.aapcpublishing.net/9105.

Case Examples

Chapter 4 presents case examples of how the Three-Tier Model is implemented. The first illustration focuses on use of the Tier I Classroom Guideposts and includes a completed form for a second-grade class. The second case example illustrates the use of Tier I in planning for an individual child in a different second-grade classroom. The third case example shows how Tier II can be used to support a student for whom the Tier I strategies are insufficient, leaving him struggling to meet school expectations. The fourth case example illustrates the process of considering a child for movement from Tier II to Tier III and planning to serve him or her at that most intense level.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the background from which this manual grew along with an overview of its major components and their intersections. We hope that the strategies, supports, and practices presented in the remainder of the manual prove useful to you in meeting your goals for helping children with ASD.



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