



ASD on the Mat: Parent Questions

Introduction

This is intended to be a resource to support Judo instructors teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder characterized by deficits in communication and social skills alongside the manifestation of restrictive and repetitive behaviors that impede daily life (Maenner et al., 2023). These deficits and/or challenging behaviors may impede a student's ability to effectively learn or appropriately participate in class alongside their neurotypical peers without individualized supports. In this case, instructors should work with family members and/or caregivers to determine the best approach for supporting the student on the mat. Being that Judo instructors may not be aware of the available supports or know what questions to ask, below are recommended questions to open discussions into how best to support neurodiverse students on the mat.

It is important to remember these conversations with families/caregivers should be framed as efforts to ensure the student's success rather than focusing on their shortcomings. We must ensure that we are able to safely support them in class and do our best to make the dojo a positive and beneficial environment. Not regularly providing support to students leads to feelings of neglect, negatively impacts their self-esteem, and can inhibit other students' learning. Think of this as building a Judo IEP (Individualized Education Plan) to ensure the student is able to succeed.

There is some clinical terminology used throughout this resource. Please refer to the glossary at the end for definitions as needed.

Language and Communication

Individuals with autism may not communicate fluently or use vocal communication. It is common for more impacted individuals to use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) including iconic exchange using picture cards, letter boards to type on, tablets that speak (commonly referred to as AAC devices), signed language, gesture and hand leading, and more. These communication systems are not as accessible to people outside of the student's inner circle (such as immediate family members, teachers, therapists, etc.) as vocal communication

and often require some training to effectively understand the student and support their communication. Students may also struggle with understanding spoken language and/or may have a preferred language to which they are more responsive than the class' instructional language. Supporting their mode of communication and learning strengths will be the first step to the student's success.

Effective communication will be the cornerstone of successfully including neurodivergent students in your class. The following questions should serve to open the conversation concerning effective language and communication accommodations for the student.

- How does your student communicate (e.g. vocally, vocally with prompting, iconic exchange/PECS, AAC device, signed language, gesture and hand leading, or some combination)?
 - If using alternative forms of communication, what training on their methods of communication will be provided? Stress that it is necessary that instructors are trained on the individual's mode of communication if they are not being provided with a private 1:1 aid in class. Families/caregivers are responsible for providing whatever materials are necessary for the student's communication, but may ask for instructor support with personalizing their communication materials for Judo.
- Is your student multilingual? If so, do they have a preferred language? What is it?
- How does your student best understand instructions (e.g. vocal instructions, visual instructions, physical model, physical guidance, or some combination)?
 - If modes of instruction beyond vocal instruction or physical modeling/guidance are more effective, what materials can the family/caregivers provide to support this style of instruction? It is the responsibility of the family/caregivers to provide additional materials. Instructors should collaborate with families to create Judo-specific materials as needed.

Challenging Behaviors

Individuals on the spectrum often engage in challenging behaviors in order to get their wants and needs met or as a result of excessive inflexibilities. What these behaviors look like and why they occur varies from person to person. Knowing what challenging behaviors a student may engage in during class and why they typically occur will prepare you to minimize situations that may lead to the challenging behavior and to respond appropriately should one occur. Additionally, it is vital to know of any potentially dangerous behaviors such as aggression, self-injurious behaviors (SIB), elopement (running away), property destruction, mouthing/PICA,

etc. that this student has a history of engaging in, so that instructors can antecedently ensure safety, prepare to act, and/or have the appropriate individuals available to support with behavior management. Should a student who frequently engages in challenging behaviors that may put them or others in danger join your class, a family member/caregiver must be present at all times to step in to manage the challenging behavior. Staff members, including instructors, who are not professionally trained to manage severe and/or potentially dangerous challenging behaviors must not be left alone with a student likely to engage in such behaviors without the oversight and support of a professionally trained individual and/or a family member/caregiver. Questions to prepare you for challenging behaviors and ensure you have the appropriate support in class for behavior management are below.

- Does your student engage in challenging behaviors? If so, what do they look like and when do they occur? What are they trying to say when they engage in these behaviors?
- What tends to lead to frustration, tantrums, meltdowns, or shutdowns?
- What do the warning signs for challenging behaviors look like? e.g. Do they look to the door a few times before running away? Do they grumble before hitting others?
- How do you usually manage their challenging behaviors? Do they have a behavior intervention plan (BIP) or behavior support plan at school or in private services? If so, can we be provided with a copy of this plan?
- If challenging behaviors are frequent enough or difficult to manage in a group setting, can you (the family/caregivers) provide a 1:1 aid trained to support the student?

If a student engages in challenging behaviors that pose a safety risk to the student or others, a family member/caregiver must be present at all times to step in in the event of the student engaging in a potentially dangerous behavior. The family/caregivers may be able to arrange for a private 1:1 aid trained to manage challenging behaviors and provide learning support to attend class with the student. Ensure that every adult, including outside 1:1 aids, are up to date with all of the requirements by the USJF and USA Judo for being on the mat in an instructor capacity before allowing them into class.

Sensory Needs

Autistic individuals may be hyper- (over) or hypo- (under) sensitive to sensory input and/or require more sensory breaks than their neurotypical peers to regulate themselves. Sensory break activities should be individualized to meet the student's sensory needs and can include activities such as jumping, rolling on a yoga ball, brushing the student's feet, applying pressure on the student's body, and more, so that the student's sensory needs are being

addressed. Regular sensory breaks can mean the difference between a student participating in class and the student engaging in challenging behaviors. Instructors should work with family/caregivers to determine what kind of sensory breaks and how often these breaks may be needed.

- Does your student have any sensory sensitivities (e.g. loud noises, touching a specific part of their body, bright lights, etc.)? If so, what are they?
- What does it look like when your student is experiencing sensory overload?
- What helps your student come down from sensory overload?
- What does it look like when your student is becoming dysregulated?
- What sensory activities, if any, help your student regulate? For how long is this required before they are able to return to tasks?
- Does your student need to take sensory breaks during class? If so, what do those sensory breaks look like? How frequently do they need to occur?

Adaptive Skills

Adaptive skills are skills related to day-to-day tasks and responsibilities including bathrooming, washing hands, dressing and undressing, etc.. Knowing the student's independence with these skills is necessary for avoiding various accidents in class.

- Is your student independent in the bathroom? If not, a family member/caregiver must be present to assist them in the bathroom.
- Can your student indicate that they need to go to the bathroom? Or do they need reminders?
- Can your student wash their hands independently?
- Can your student dress independently? If not, will they be arriving to class in their Judogi/uniform? Will they need assistance putting on or taking off elements of their uniform (i.e. taking off the jacket to use the restroom)?

Glossary

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)/Behavior Support Plan	A customized, written plan based on a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) that utilizes positive behavioral interventions and supports to address, prevent, and replace a student's challenging behaviors that impede learning or pose a safety risk.
Behavior Management	The intervention of another person to prevent or stop an individual from engaging in a challenging behavior. This can include intervening after the individual has begun engaging in a challenging behavior or interrupting the individual as they begin to engage in the challenging behavior. This includes actions to ensure the individual's and other's safety in the event of a crisis.
Caregiver	A parent, guardian, or primary support person responsible for making treatment decisions and assisting an individual with developmental delays and/or behavioral challenges. This may include teachers, group home staff members, therapists, behavior technicians (BT/RBT), behavior analysts (BCBA/LBA), occupational therapists (OT), speech therapists (SLP), and other professionals.
Challenging Behavior	Any action that disrupts learning, interferes with daily life, or threatens safety. These behaviors are methods of communication that are not socially appropriate and interfere with an individual's independence or ability to access least restrictive environments.
Aggression	Physical aggression towards another person or an animal typically including but not limited to hitting, pinching, scratching, kicking, biting, hair-pulling, throwing items at others, etc..
Elopement	Leaving a safe, supervised area without permission by a caregiver. This may take the form of running, walking, crawling, or other modes of travel.
Mouthing	Instances of inedible items entering an individual's mouth or making contact with their tongue. This does not include ingesting inedible items.
PICA	An eating disorder characterized by the persistent craving and consumption of non-food, non-nutritive substances (such as dirt, ice, hair, or paint chips).
Property Destruction	Any intentional, observable action that damages, breaks, or alters objects, surfaces, or the environment such as throwing items at the floor or walls, peeling paint off of walls, swiping items off of surfaces onto the floor, etc..
Self-Injurious Behavior	Actions that put the individual at risk of harm such as banging one's head on hard surfaces, scratching one's self, pulling one's own hair, skin picking, etc..
Iconic Exchange	A specialized augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)

method involving users exchanging an "icon" (a picture or symbol representing an item or action) for a desired object/action.

Prompting

The use of assistance or cues, such as verbal instructions, physical guidance, or visual aids, given before or during a task to help a learner respond appropriately.



References

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