

National Autism Awareness Month

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VCU Autism Center for Excellence

Make it real.

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Autism Center for Excellence



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The VCU Autism Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE) is a university-based technical assistance, professional development, and educational research center for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the Commonwealth of Virginia. VCU-ACE is dedicated to improving services to individuals with ASD and to the implementation of evidence-based practices in schools and the community.



1. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO SCHOOL DIVISIONS

Students with ASD often require a higher level of structure and carefully designed direct instruction to acquire the academic and functional skills needed to become independent adults.

- Focuses on long-term changes that will result in service improvements of administrators and educators and ultimately improve outcomes of students with ASD
- 2014-2017 Cohort 2 ACE Technical Assistance School Divisions: Alexandria City Public Schools, Bedford, County Public Schools, Chesapeake County Public Schools, Franklin County Public Schools, Spotsylvania County Public Schools, Warren County Public Schools

2. TRAINING FOR EDUCATORS, FAMILY MEMBERS AND PROFESSIONALS

Professionals and family members often need training in ASD to provide effective and individualized services and supports. VCU-ACE offers a variety of training activities:

- Online Instructional Courses
- Webcasts and Seminars
- Post Baccalaureate Certificate in ASD
- Coursework in Applied Behavior Analysis

3. RESOURCES TO PROVIDE INFORMATION ON ASD

Knowing where to go for information on ASD can be overwhelming. VCU-ACE provides resources to help guide you on a variety of topics.

- Guides
- Fact Sheets and Research Briefs
- Agency Information
- Video Library
- Research Articles and Books

4. RESEARCH TO DEVELOP SUPPORTS AND STRATEGIES

To better support students with ASD, it is important to continue to identify effective strategies and supports. VCU-ACE conducts research on evidence-based practices for individuals with ASD.

- Vocational Rehabilitation Services and Employment Outcomes
- Project SEARCH
- Technology and ASD



FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE VCU-AUTISM CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE PLEASE CONTACT:

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Change.

It's not a concept that comes easily to individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder and those who support them. And yet, in the past year, the autism community and the staff at Virginia Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE) have witnessed a tremendous amount of change. The biggest, of course, is the change in the definition of autism. While it is easy to think of a diagnosis as being a static definition, autism is anything but static. The meaning of autism and the way we understand it changes over time. In other words, autism is constantly evolving.

What we once understood about autism from when researchers first used the term many years ago, has changed dramatically in the light of today's research. As medical, educational, and research communities continue to improve our knowledge about autism, the professional community has responded by updating the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition, or DSM-5, the guide used to define the characteristics of the disorder. Some of the most important changes to the definition of autism are the changes in the terms used. Previously, Autism was considered to be a collection of disorders that included Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified, or PDD-NOS, as well as a few other rare genetic conditions. Under

the new definition, the terms Asperger's Syndrome and PDD-NOS have been eliminated and integrated into one general label: Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD.

The characteristics for ASD have also changed. In the DSM-5, the criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder now combines communication challenges and social skills deficits into one category: social communication. Simply put, the new criteria emphasizes the importance of communicating with other people. After all, communication is used to express ideas, thoughts, and beliefs with someone else! Individuals with ASD can have tremendous difficulty with many different types of communication, no matter how many words he or she is able to use. The change in the diagnostic criteria focuses on how that person is able to communicate with others.

Another change includes the addition of sensory issues to the restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities category. Many individuals with ASD, their families, and the professionals who support them have long understood the difficulties individuals with ASD faced in terms of sensory information. In other words, how a person with ASD interprets what they hear, feel, see, smell and taste can be very different from someone else. Imagine how difficult it can be for the person with ASD to move about life hearing sounds and feeling the world in a very confusing way. The addition of sensory

information into the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder might seem like a minor addition; however, such a change reflects another leap in our understanding of how ASD can affect a person's day-to-day life.

With all the changes in the field of Autism Spectrum Disorder, though, one thing remains the same. At VCU-ACE we believe that individuals with ASD deserve a high quality of life and that each person should reach their fullest potential. This continues to be what drives our programs and services forward. At VCU-ACE, it is our mission to improve services to individuals with ASD and the implementation of evidence-based practices in schools and the community. By delivering technical assistance, professional development, and engaging in educational research we can help family members and professionals who serve or love a person with ASD to provide better supports and guidance. After all, once a person is diagnosed with ASD, it's important for families and professionals to know what interventions are available and which ones will be the most effective. Evidence-based practices can assist a person with ASD as they grow from a toddler learning to communicate and interact with others, to mastering academic skills, to an adult who is working and living in the community.

Programs and services at VCU-ACE will continue to focus on the most up-to-date information and the most effective strategies for every single person in the autism community. We encourage you to visit our website and learn more about the changes in the DSM-5 or to discover the resources we offer for individuals with ASD, their families, and the professionals and communities who support them. ❖