

# Guide to Supporting Military-Connected Youth and Service Members with Autism



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# Introduction

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This brief guide is intended to educate Department of Defense (DoD) service providers and educational professionals regarding best practices as they support neurodiverse, military-connected individuals who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and high-functioning autism (HFA).

## About Autism

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Every individual who has ASD has a unique set of strengths and challenges. Individuals who have ASD may present various behaviors that educators and providers should be aware of and understand. ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by impairments in social communication, use of repetitive behaviors, and an aversion to certain sensory inputs that can lead to challenging behaviors. ASD affects slightly less than 1% of the global population (Brugha et al., 2020). Milder forms of autism were previously diagnosed as Asperger's syndrome, but, in 2013, the American Psychiatric Association began grouping all autism disorders under the designation of ASD. The term Asperger's syndrome is no longer used.

HFA is an informal, non-clinical term used to describe individuals who are on the autism spectrum who typically exhibit average or above-average intelligence and may possess good language skills yet experience challenges with social interaction and communication (Huang & Wheeler, 2006). Children and adults who have HFA may seem developmentally typical but may face challenges that are characteristic of ASD. Providers and educators need to be aware that not all individuals who have ASD may outwardly appear to be different from a neurotypical individual. In addition, adults and children who have HFA may often face simultaneous mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, in addition to their ASD symptomatology (Lake et al., 2014). Despite the common struggles of people with HFA, traditional mental health services often fall short of meeting the needs of this population (Lake et al., 2014).

Some of the common struggles people who have ASD face include having problems with social interaction (e.g., understanding what other people may be thinking and feeling) and communication (e.g., making eye contact, using an appropriate tone of voice that is not overly loud, too soft, or monotone) and demonstrating restrictive or repetitive behaviors (e.g., rocking back and forth, resisting changes to schedules and routines) (Friedlander, 2009; Fittipaldi-Wert & Mowling, 2009).

In educational settings, specifically, students who have ASD may become overwhelmed by sensory stimuli such as bright lights or loud noises, and this environment can lead to disruptive or self-stimulatory behaviors (Fittipaldi-Wert & Mowling, 2009).

However, in addition to the challenges that having ASD presents, individuals who have ASD also possess a unique set of abilities and assets. Some examples of the strengths people who have ASD may bring to their school, work, and family include creativity, a strong memory, honesty and loyalty in relationships, and a unique way of perceiving life as an individual with ASD (Cope & Remington, 2022). Note, individuals who have ASD may display a variety of intellectual abilities and skills, and these will vary among individuals—there is no “one size fits all” for individuals who have ASD just as this is true for neurotypical individuals.

Researchers are now beginning to study and understand how gender may impact individuals who have ASD. Boys with ASD are more likely to display pronounced repetitive and restricted behaviors, such as hand-flapping or intense focus on specific interests. Girls often exhibit fewer behaviors like these, which may result in them being overlooked during evaluations. Although both genders may struggle with social communication, girls are generally more adept at camouflaging their difficulties by mimicking social norms, and this ability could mask their symptoms and result in delayed diagnoses (Hiller et al., 2014). Additionally, girls with ASD may have interests that align more closely with social norms, such as animals or pop culture; however, boys might demonstrate more restricted interests. Regarding social relationships, girls may form fewer but deeper friendships, while boys often struggle to establish any social connections. Research also indicates that girls who have ASD might demonstrate better verbal skills and emotional reciprocity compared to boys who often show more significant challenges in these areas (Hiller et al., 2014).



# Challenges for Youth with HFA

Military-connected children and youth with HFA and their families face several unique challenges across school, work, and home environments. The demands and lifestyle of military families often compound these challenges. The following are some of the key issues.



## School Challenges

### Frequent Relocations

Military-connected students often experience high mobility, and they move six to nine times during kindergarten through 12th grade. This constant change and need for adjustment can disrupt their education and social connections, which can be particularly challenging for children with ASD who thrive on routine and stability (Boyd et al., 2014; Chhabra, 2022).

### Lack of Continuity

Changing schools frequently can lead to a lack of continuity in educational and therapeutic services. This includes challenges in maintaining individualized education plans and accessing necessary support services and can lead to delays in diagnosis, intervention, and access to services (Cramm et al., 2019; Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019).

### Social Integration

Children who have ASD may find it difficult to integrate socially in new schools due to their challenges with social skills and the frequent need to make new friends. This can lead to social rejection and bullying, which can further exacerbate their difficulties (Wishart, 2023).

### Practical Tips

Provide structure for students, when possible, during their day. Consider the individual needs of students in and out of the classroom (e.g., classroom set-up and environment), and implement evidence-based interventions for self-management of daily life tasks (e.g., managing a personal calendar). Understand that there are gaps between available evidence-based interventions and recommended best practices (Stokes et al., 2017;

Munsell & Coster, 2018). Research indicates that inclusive education plays a crucial role in supporting students who have ASD, and peers often provide support through welcoming and compassionate social practices. Developing a plan with a student who has ASD about how to tell other students about their ASD diagnosis can help all students better understand ASD and lead to more consistent social support for students who have ASD (Ochs et al., 2001). Collaborating with students who have ASD about their preferences regarding what language to use around their ASD diagnosis when talking with classmates and others could also be helpful.



## Home and Family Challenges

### Stress and Routine Disruption

The stress of military life, including deployments and frequent relocations, can intensify ASD symptoms in some individuals. Children who have ASD benefit from engaging in predictable routines, which are often disrupted in military families (Klin et al., 2015; Wishart, 2023).

### Emotional and Behavioral Management

Managing emotional outbursts and behavioral challenges can be difficult for parents, especially when these behaviors are compounded by the stressors of military life. Parents are encouraged to use coping strategies and seek professional support to help manage these challenges (Wishart, 2023).

### Practical Tips

Using family-centered approaches and interventions are recommended to help address disruptions and support families as they navigate the emotions and behaviors of their child who has ASD. Connecting parents to skills-training opportunities, coordinating services between providers (e.g., obtaining parental permission to communicate with counselors or physicians for recommendations at home and in school), and offering transitional supports during changes in or disruptions to activities, settings, or routines are practical strategies families may find helpful. Examples of simple transitional supports may include visual and auditory cues, such as the use of timers or visual schedules, and the use of these supports may ease the stress of change for students (Russa et al., 2015). In addition, schools can help by implementing interventions that improve self-management of daily life tasks (e.g., self-care, social skills, organization, breaking down larger tasks into smaller tasks) for youth who have ASD (Munsell & Coster, 2018).



## Work and Community Challenges

### Navigating Systems

Military families often face challenges in navigating school, community, and military systems as they try to access necessary services and support for their children who have ASD. Navigating healthcare and educational systems can be complex, particularly when moving between and among jurisdictions (Hill & Blue-Banning, 2023; Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019).

### Parental Stress

The cumulative stress of managing a child's special needs, coupled with the demands of military life, can lead to significant parental stress and mental health challenges (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019).

### Practical Tips

Connect families and students with evidence-informed care tailored to supporting individuals with ASD. Telehealth models like the Remote Check-up can provide family-centered interventions and care coordination services (Hall, 2018). Employment-focused programs such as Project SEARCH + ASD Supports have shown promising results in helping military-dependent youth who have ASD gain competitive, integrated employment (Whittenburg et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, utilizing family-centered approaches is crucial to addressing needs like gaining access to quality information, parent-skills training, and coordinated services. Promising models include Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, which is a framework designed to improve school-wide behavior and create a positive learning environment; parent-educator partnerships; and Family Navigator models. These models provide comprehensive support and guidance to families who have children with special needs (Russa et al., 2015). To improve outcomes and well-being, evidence-based solutions should focus on obtaining an early diagnosis, improving access to early intervention, and establishing a tiered menu of services that tailored to each child and family. These approaches should align with the military ethos and healthcare system to ensure sustainability and effectiveness (Klin et al., 2015).

Educators can support students who have ASD by implementing strategies that can help these students learn and practice social rules and classroom expectations (Safran, 2002). Effective educational practices for students who have ASD include individualized support, systematic

instruction, structured learning environments, specialized curriculum content, functional approaches to behavior, and family involvement (Lovannone et al., 2003). Educators across various levels often need additional skills and support to work more successfully with individuals who have ASD (Marinič, 2023). Key issues that arise in educating students with ASD include ensuring the qualifications of educators are suitable, making sure educational settings are conducive to learning for these individuals, and ensuring curriculum content is fitting and helpful (Simpson et al., 2011). To improve ASD education, professionals should be aware of, understand, and be prepared to use evidence-based practices and instructional strategies (Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020). Ongoing training and support for educators are crucial to help them address the challenges and enhance the effectiveness of ASD education (Marinič, 2023; Simpson et al., 2011).



## Challenges for Service Members with HFA

DoDI 6130.03-V1 states that autism is a disqualifying condition for military service unless a medical waiver is obtained, indicating that individuals with autism may not be automatically excluded from service. Instead, they can apply for a waiver, allowing individuals to consider their medical condition and its impact on their ability to serve. This means that Service members with autism can potentially join or remain in service if they can demonstrate that their condition does not hinder their performance or pose a risk to themselves or others in a military environment (DoD, 2020).

The number of Service members who have ASD is not readily available as the military does not typically release detailed medical statistics of specific conditions like ASD within the ranks due to privacy, confidentiality, and operational concerns. The medical-screening process that an individual goes through to join the military is likely to filter out individuals who have more severe ASD, and this process will impact the number of individuals who have ASD within the U.S. military. DoD Instruction 6130.03-V1 outlines the criteria and procedures for determining medical eligibility for entry into the military and ensures that applicants meet the health standards that are necessary for military duties. It includes requirements for a comprehensive review of medical history, physical examinations, medical tests, and mental health evaluations (DoD, 2020).

For individuals who have ASD and their families, the associated stigma that can be prevalent can create additional stressors and challenges. In fact, some cases of ASD may go unreported or undiagnosed due to stigma and the negative effects the stigma carries. This, consequently, may negatively impact individuals who have ASD and their families. Individuals who have ASD often experience lower levels of social satisfaction and self-efficacy due to stigma via discrimination and exclusion, which can lead to diminished self-esteem and increased mental health challenges (Marion et al., 2023). Some individuals who have ASD may camouflage their traits to avoid stigma, and this situation could exacerbate feelings of isolation and inadequacy. The negative consequences that stigma creates highlight the need for increased awareness and acceptance of individuals who have ASD to improve the quality of life for those who are affected and their families (Marion et al., 2023; Turnock, et al., 2022).

The Technical Assistance team found no published research that focused on adult Service members who have HFA. However, the team did find research on adults in the general population who have HFA and the challenges they face. These challenges are multifaceted and impact various aspects of life.



## School and Education

### Transition to Adulthood

The transition from school to adulthood is particularly stressful for individuals who have ASD and their families. This period involves significant changes in educational, occupational, residential, and relational roles. These changes can be difficult to navigate due to the inherent challenges associated with ASD symptoms, such as difficulty coping with change and the complexity of the disorder (Milen & Nicholas, 2017; Smith et al., 2012).

### Loss of Services

Upon exiting the school system, individuals who have ASD often experience a significant reduction in available services. This loss can lead to unemployment and a lack of engagement in daytime activities, and these activities are crucial for maintaining functional independence and mental health (Smith et al., 2012). Adults with HFA often experience co-occurring psychiatric issues, such as anxiety and depression, yet traditional mental health services struggle to meet their needs adequately (Lake et al., 2014).

### Practical Tips

Offer support services that address self-management of life tasks, including using social-skills instruction, such as learning how to build and maintain relationships; providing peer mentoring, like connecting individuals who have ASD with a peer who can provide ongoing support in social environments; and administering a self-determination curriculum, which can include instruction on goal-setting and understanding one's strengths and weaknesses (Munsell & Coster, 2018). Having access to support services on educational campuses may also be crucial for students who have HFA. These services could include promoting awareness of and access to academic accommodations and offering counseling and supervised social activities (Barnhill, 2016). Parents of adults who have HFA also experience significant emotional distress and require support to effectively assist their adult children (Lowinger & Weidberg, 2019). Overall, studies emphasize that using comprehensive support systems and interventions, which can be used to improve outcomes for adults who have HFA and their families in educational and daily life contexts, is essential.



## Work and Employment

### Employment Challenges

Adults who have HFA often face high rates of unemployment. Even when employed, these individuals tend to occupy low-paid, menial jobs with limited hours. This is partly due to the lack of appropriate adult day services, which can help individuals develop functional skills, and the challenges in maintaining employment services, which are programs designed to support the unique needs of individuals with ASD to secure and maintain employment (Marsack-Topolewski & Weisz, 2020; Smith et al., 2012).

### Social Interaction Difficulties

Deficits in social interactions, such as discomfort with eye contact and difficulty with non-verbal communication, can hinder workplace integration and career advancement for individuals who have HFA. This may lead to isolation and loneliness, which further affects mental health and overall well-being and, consequently, impacts social dynamics and support systems (Black et al., 2023).

### Practical Tips

The use of targeted programming can mitigate many work-related challenges. Providing work-placement programs that are designed to help individuals who have HFA find and maintain meaningful employment has shown promise in improving work performance and quality of life for adults who have HFA (Katz et al., 2015). Preparing the employee with ASD in progressive stages may support their success in the workplace. Building an individual's self-esteem and self-efficacy by positively reinforcing their successes and providing kind, helpful feedback for areas of improvement; supporting the individual in gaining professional knowledge by offering training and professional development opportunities; encouraging professional goal-setting; and gaining the cooperation of all stakeholders (e.g., leadership and coworkers) are examples of successful support strategies that can be used in the workplace (Syvan & Pearlman-Avnion, 2019). While research on successful workplace interventions is limited, particularly regarding gender differences, evidence does suggest that offering and using tailored interventions and support systems are crucial for improving employment outcomes and overall well-being for adults who have HFA (Hayward et al., 2018; Katz et al., 2015; Syvan & Pearlman-Avnion, 2019).



## Home and Family Life

### Family Stress

Families of individuals who have ASD experience heightened stress, particularly during transitional times such as the move from school to adulthood. This stress may be compounded by concerns about the future and the availability of services (Smith et al., 2012).

### Healthcare Access

Adults who have ASD face barriers to healthcare access, including a shortage of services, limited insurance coverage, and communication difficulties with healthcare providers. These issues can worsen existing health concerns and create additional stress for families (Malik-Soni et al., 2022). These challenges are often compounded by stringent program criteria and societal stigma, which highlight the need for improved support systems and trained professionals who can address the complex needs of adults who have HFA and their families (Milen & Nicholas, 2017; Marsack-Topolewski & Weisz, 2020).

### Practical Tips

Providing access to comprehensive care for families and adults who have ASD is vital. Support agencies can help improve home and family life for individuals and families by promoting independence and overall well-being through the use of comprehensive programming that focuses on communication, self-regulation, and adaptive skills. This type of programming should be initiated during childhood and should continue through adulthood as needed (Loomis, 2014). For parents of young adults who have HFA, obtaining Non-Violent Resistance training has shown promise in reducing parental accommodation (i.e., when parents change their behavior with their children as a way to try to reduce child stress) and helplessness while improving the individual with ASD's independent functioning (i.e., children learn to be resilient and self-confident) (Golan et al., 2018).

Overall, these challenges emphasize the need for targeted interventions and support systems that can be used to assist adult Service members who have HFA and their families as they navigate school, work, and home life. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort to improve service availability, enhance social support, and increase awareness and understanding of ASD in various settings.



# Best Practices for Supporting Youth with HFA

Research suggests that military-connected children and families of children with ASD face unique challenges and increased stress (Burgin & Ray, 2020; Russa et al., 2015). Best practices for supporting these families include using family-centered approaches, offering access to quality information and services, and providing parent-skills training and coordinated services (Russa et al., 2015). To improve support for military-connected children and youth who have ASD, service providers should be prepared to address their unique needs using culturally responsive practices and implementing evidence-informed strategies that cater to the individual's specific needs (Burgin & Ray, 2020). The following are some identified best practices and strategies that service providers may find useful.



## Evidence-Based Practices

### Naturalistic Interventions

These involve embedding intervention strategies within the typical settings and routines of the child. Service providers can arrange the environment to engage the child's interest and provide support to encourage targeted behaviors (Schreibman et al., 2015; The IRIS Center, 2016).

### Parent-Implemented Interventions

Parents are trained to deliver interventions at home or in community settings that focus on improving a wide range of skills and reducing interfering behaviors. This approach leverages structured parent-training programs to enhance consistency across settings (Cheng et al., 2022; The IRIS Center, 2016).

### Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention

This strategy involves teaching peers to engage children who have ASD in positive social interactions, which can, consequently, increase social and learning opportunities in natural environments. This method is effective in teacher-directed and learner-initiated activities (The IRIS Center, 2016; Zagona & Mastergeorge, 2018).

## Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

This communication system helps children with limited communication skills who have ASD learn to become more effective at communication by exchanging pictures for desired items. This system progresses through six phases of communication tasks (Hart & Banda, 2010; The IRIS Center, 2016).

## Pivotal Response Training

This training is implemented in settings that build on the child's interests and initiatives and focuses on pivotal learning variables such as motivation and self-management (Coolican et al., 2010; The IRIS Center, 2016).



## Family-Centered Interventions

### Family Processes

Interventions should focus on improving family dynamics, such as parenting practices and parent-child relationships, which can be crucial for the well-being of children who have ASD. These interventions have shown effectiveness in military and civilian contexts (Charlop et al., 2020; Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019; Russa et al., 2015).



## Support Systems and Resources

### Child Care Options

Military services offer quality, affordable child care options that accommodate children with special needs and ensure reasonable accommodations and individualized assessments (Military OneSource, 2021).

### Military Family Support Programs

Programs like the Exceptional Family Member Program provide resources and support that are tailored to families who have members with special needs and help them navigate the complexities of military life (Military OneSource, 2021).



## Implementation Strategies

### Collaboration with Parents

Engaging parents in selecting and implementing evidence-based practices to use with their family member who has ASD increases the likelihood of strategy effectiveness in different settings. Using consistent approaches at home and school can enhance outcomes (The IRIS Center, 2016).

### Professional Development

Training service providers on the unique challenges faced by military-connected students, such as high mobility and stress due to deployments, is essential. This includes ensuring providers understand legal guidance and trauma-informed care (Aronson et al., 2016; Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.).

These strategies, grounded in evidence-based practices, intend to provide comprehensive support to military-connected children who have HFA and their families and address their educational and emotional needs.



# Best Practices for Supporting Service Members with HFA

The Technical Assistance team found no published research that targets military-connected service providers who support adult Service members with HFA. To address these issues, using solutions that focus on diagnosis, intervention, and individualized services that align with the military healthcare system is recommended (Klin et al., 2015). In addition, families and providers should collaborate to provide written medical summaries, compile lists of adult providers, and use checklists to track transition progress for youth who have ASD and who are transitioning to adult healthcare (Kuhlthau et al., 2015). Supporting adult Service members who have HFA and their families requires a comprehensive approach that integrates evidence-based practices and considers the unique challenges military families face. The following are some key insights and best practices that could help support this population are listed.



## Adapt Evidence-Based Strategies from Civilian to Military Contexts

Lessons learned from implementing interventions within civilian contexts can be adapted and applied to military settings to enhance the overall understanding of effective practices. This approach allows comparisons to be made in order to identify characteristics that improve the adoption and sustainability of interventions (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019).



## Create Comprehensive Support Systems

Establishing comprehensive support systems that include a tiered menu of training and services that are tailored to the individual needs of the Service member can improve outcomes and well-being. Interventions like Project SEARCH + ASD Supports and others supported by NEXT for AUTISM show promise in improving outcomes (NEXT for AUTISM, 2024; Whittenburg et al., 2020).



## Use Stepped-Care Models

Developing and implementing stepped-care models can help tailor the intensity and type of intervention to the specific needs of Service members and their families.

These models should include decision rules for when to escalate or de-escalate care and should be evaluated for their effectiveness in military settings (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019).



## Access to Specialized Resources

Providing specialized resources for military families can help address the unique challenges of military life and culture. These resources include directories of mental healthcare providers and educational materials on mental health and substance use (National Association of Chronic Disease Directors, n.d.).



## Embrace Mobile Health Technologies

Integrating mobile-health technologies can enhance care delivery to Service members. Providers should be familiar with these technologies, understand their evidence base, and know how to integrate them into treatment plans. This includes using apps and telehealth solutions that are compliant with DoD safety and security standards (Armstrong et al., 2021).



# Audiovisual Resources on ASD

The Technical Assistance team found no reputable audiovisual resources that are specifically aimed at supporting military-connected service providers and educators who champion military-connected individuals who have HFA. The team compiled a list of reputable organizations that provide audiovisual resources to service providers and educators, and this list could be used to support military-connected individuals who have HFA. The following list provides a brief description of the program or organization and a bulleted summary.

## The AFIRM Modules

<https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules>

The AFIRM Modules are online, evidence-based resources that are provided by the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder at the University of North Carolina. These modules are designed to help educators, service providers, and caregivers implement effective practices as they support individuals who have ASD. Each module focuses on a specific evidence-based practice and includes interactive content such as step-by-step instructions, video demonstrations, case examples, and downloadable materials. The AFIRM Modules intend to enhance the understanding and application of proven strategies that can be used to improve outcomes for individuals who have ASD.

AFIRM Modules include the following characteristics:

- Online, evidence-based resources by the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder at the University of North Carolina
- Designed for educators, service providers, and caregivers
- Focus is on implementing effective practices for supporting individuals who have ASD
- Each module covers a specific evidence-based practice
- Interactive content is included:
  - Step-by-step instructions
  - Video demonstrations
  - Case examples
  - Downloadable materials
- Intends to improve understanding and application of proven strategies for ASD support

## The IRIS Center

<https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/>

The IRIS Center, based at Vanderbilt University, provides free online modules for educators and service providers and focuses on evidence-based practices in education. These modules include interactive activities, video examples, and strategies that can be used when working with students who have ASD and other disabilities. Topics covered include behavior management, communication strategies, social-skills development, instructional strategies, and inclusive practices. The IRIS Center offers a self-paced learning format and allows participants to earn professional development hours and certificates upon completion; these hours can be used for continuing education requirements.

The IRIS Center includes the following characteristics:

- Based at Vanderbilt University
- Provides free online modules for educators and service providers
- Focuses on evidence-based practices in education
- Modules include the following:
  - Interactive activities
  - Video examples
  - Strategies for working with students who have ASD and other disabilities
- Topics covered are as follows:
  - Behavior management
  - Communication strategies
  - Social skills development
  - Instructional strategies
  - Inclusive practices
- Offers professional development hours and certificates upon completion
- Self-paced learning format

## Autism Internet Modules

<https://autisminternetmodules.org/>

Autism Internet Modules (AIM) is a free online platform developed by the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence. It offers self-paced educational modules on ASD for educators, service providers, and family members. AIM covers a wide range of topics, including

communication strategies, behavior support, social skills, and evidence-based practices. The modules feature interactive content, video examples, case studies, and practical tools and tips. AIM intends to deepen users' understanding of ASD and improve outcomes for individuals who are on the autism spectrum by providing accessible, comprehensive training resources.

AIM includes the following characteristics:

- Free online platform developed by Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI)
- Offers self-paced educational modules on ASD
- Designed for educators, service providers, and family members
- Topics include the following:
  - Communication strategies
  - Behavior support
  - Social skills
  - Evidence-based practices
- Features include the following:
  - Interactive content
  - Video examples
  - Case studies
  - Practical tools and tips
- Intends to deepen users' understanding of ASD and improve outcomes

## The Autism Speaks Tool Kits

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-speaks-tool-kits>

The Autism Speaks Tool Kits are a collection of free, downloadable resources that are designed to provide practical support and guidance for individuals who have ASD, their families, educators, and service providers. Each toolkit focuses on specific aspects of life for people who have ASD, such as early intervention, employment, school transitions, and behavioral health. The toolkits include checklists, tips, strategies, and detailed information to help individuals manage the challenges associated with having ASD and to promote positive outcomes in various environments. These resources are developed to be user-friendly and accessible to help people effectively navigate the complexities of ASD. Autism Speaks provides a variety of toolkits, including videos and guides, that are designed to help educators and service providers create supportive environments for students who have ASD. The School Community Tool Kit includes strategies for managing behaviors and supporting social and academic success.

Autism Speaks Tool Kits include the following characteristics:

- Free, downloadable resources that provide practical support for individuals who have ASD, their families, educators, and service providers
- Examine various aspects of life for people who have ASD: early intervention, employment, school transitions, behavioral health.
- Include checklists, tips, strategies, and detailed information
- Designed to be user-friendly and accessible
- School Community Tool Kit offers strategies for helping individuals manage difficult behaviors and for supporting social/academic success
- Additional toolkits are available for specific needs and situations

## The Autism Research Institute

<https://autism.org/>

The Autism Research Institute (ARI) is a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to supporting autism research and providing comprehensive resources for individuals who have ASD, their families, and professionals. ARI offers information on various aspects of ASD, including free expert webinars, research updates, and educational materials. The organization features tools for understanding and managing ASD across the lifespan for the individuals and their families and focuses on evidence-based approaches and best practices in treatment and care. ARI intends to empower individuals who have ASD through knowledge and support, and covers topics such as behavioral interventions, medical treatments, and educational strategies in their webinars and resources. Educators and service providers can access these valuable materials and stay informed about the latest developments regarding ASD research by visiting the ARI website.

ARI includes the following characteristics:

- Nonprofit organization that supports ASD research and provides resources
- Offers comprehensive information on various aspects of ASD
- Provides free expert webinars, research updates, and educational materials
- Features tools for understanding and managing ASD for the individual and their families across the lifespan
- Focuses on evidence-based approaches and best practices in treatment and care
- Intends to empower individuals who have ASD through knowledge and support
- Webinar topics include behavioral interventions, medical treatments, and educational strategies

## Special Ed Connection

<https://www.specialedconnection.com/>

Special Ed Connection is a comprehensive online resource that is designed for special education professionals, educators, and administrators. It offers a range of tools, including legal and regulatory updates, case law summaries, and practical guidance to help the professionals navigate the complexities of special education. The platform provides access to expert analysis, training materials, and customizable forms to support compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and other relevant laws. This resource can help professionals stay informed about the latest developments in special education and ensure best practices in the field.

Special Ed Connection includes the following characteristics:

- Comprehensive online resource for special education professionals
- Offers legal and regulatory updates, case law summaries, and practical guidance
- Provides expert analysis and training materials
- Includes customizable forms to support Individuals with Disabilities Education Act compliance
- Keeps users informed about the latest developments in special education
- Helps ensure best practices in the field
- Is utilized by over 2,500 school districts

## DirectSTEP® eLearning Courses

<https://www.matrixparents.org/military-resources/> or  
[https://jackson.armymwr.com/application/files/8115/4220/8003/Army\\_DirectSTEP.pdf](https://jackson.armymwr.com/application/files/8115/4220/8003/Army_DirectSTEP.pdf)

DirectSTEP® eLearning Courses offer high-quality online training on special education topics and are available to military/DoD personnel and educators who serve military children. Developed by respected experts, these courses cover legal requirements and best practices in areas such as behavior management and ASD. The self-paced format allows learners to progress at their own speed, and they engage with quizzes and activities to enhance comprehension and retention. DirectSTEP® focuses on educationally and legally sound decision-making and provides practical skills for professionals in the field of ASD. Upon completion, participants receive a certificate, which can validate their professional development. These courses are

accessible through various military support channels and offer resources for those who work with children in military communities.

DirectSTEP® eLearning Courses include the following characteristics:

- Online training for special education topics
- Available to military/DoD personnel and educators who serve military children
- Covers legal requirements and best practices in behavior management, autism
- Developed by respected special-education experts
- Self-paced learning with quizzes and activities
- Focuses on educationally and legally sound decision-making
- Provides certificate of completion

## Operation Autism

<https://operationautism.org>

Operation Autism is a specialized resource that was created by the Organization for Autism Research to support military families who have children with ASD. It intends to address these families' unique challenges, such as frequent relocations and deployments. The website offers comprehensive information on accessing healthcare services, finding educational support, how to navigate military systems, and providing guidance on connecting with local ASD services at different duty stations. Operation Autism provides practical advice, up-to-date information, and community support to help families manage the complexities of raising a child who has ASD in a military environment. It also offers "Operation Autism: A Resource Guide for Military Families," which is a tool that can be used to help families and the community understand and address the specific needs of those with ASD.

Operation Autism includes the following characteristics:

- Resource for military families with children who have ASD
- Created by Organization for Autism Research
- Provides the following:
  - Information on healthcare, education, and military systems
  - Tools for managing relocations and deployments
  - Guidance on accessing local autism services
  - Practical advice and community support
- Offers "Operation Autism: A Resource Guide for Military Families"
- Addresses unique challenges of ASD in military environments

## Supporting Students with Autism

<https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/students-with-autism/>

Supporting Students with Autism is a training module that is provided by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State. This module is designed to help educators understand and support students who have ASD, particularly those from military families. It offers resources and strategies that teachers can use to help them create an inclusive classroom environment, improve communication, and address the unique needs of students who have ASD. The module is part of a broader set of resources that school staff can use to support military-connected students' academic and social-emotional well-being.

Supporting Students with Autism module includes the following characteristics:

- Available on Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State website
- Focuses on helping educators support students who have ASD, particularly those from military families
- Offers the following:
  - Strategies for creating inclusive classrooms
  - Methods to improve communication
  - Approaches to address unique needs of students who have ASD
- Part of a broader resource set for supporting military-connected students
- Intends to enhance academic and social-emotional well-being

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