



Foundations of Special Education

By Dr. Kathleen VanTol

Chapter 7: Autism Spectrum Disorders

Discussion Questions

1. Temple Grandin has said that people with autism are "different... not less." What do you think she meant by this statement? How does this perspective influence the way educators should approach teaching students with autism?
2. Autism is described as a spectrum disorder. What does this mean, and why is it important for teachers to recognize the diversity that exists among students with autism?
3. How has our understanding of autism changed over time? Why is it important for educators to understand the history of autism, including misconceptions that have since been disproven?
4. Explain the two broad domains of characteristics used in the DSM-5 to diagnose autism spectrum disorder. How might these characteristics affect a student's participation in the classroom?
5. Many children with autism experience differences in communication, social interaction, and sensory processing. Which of these characteristics do you think might have the greatest impact on learning in a general education classroom? Explain your reasoning.

6. Why is joint attention considered an important early developmental skill? How might difficulties with joint attention affect later learning and communication?
7. Research has shown that genetics play an important role in autism, yet no single cause has been identified. Why is it important for educators to distinguish between scientifically supported evidence and myths or misconceptions about autism?
8. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) serves as the foundation for many evidence-based practices used to teach students with autism. What characteristics of ABA make it effective for many learners with autism?
9. Task Analysis is one of the evidence-based instructional approaches discussed in this chapter. Describe how it works and explain why it can be effective for some students with autism.
10. Predictable routines and visual supports are commonly recommended for students with autism. Why are these supports effective, and how might they also benefit other students in an inclusive classroom?
11. The chapter emphasizes that teachers should teach flexibility while also providing predictable routines. Why is it important to balance structure with opportunities to practice adapting to change?
12. Many students with autism interpret language literally. What implications does this have for classroom communication and instruction? How can teachers adjust their language to better support understanding?

13. The chapter recommends maintaining high expectations while providing individualized supports. Why is it important to maintain both of these perspectives rather than emphasizing only one?
14. Think about a classroom you have observed or experienced. Which of the instructional strategies described in this chapter would have improved participation or learning for one or more students? Explain your reasoning.
15. Throughout this chapter, a recurring theme is that no single instructional approach is appropriate for every learner with autism. What does this statement mean in practice? How can teachers use evidence-based practices while still individualizing instruction to meet the unique strengths, interests, and support needs of each student?

About the Author

Dr. Kathleen VanTol has over 35 years of experience working in the field of education. She holds a doctorate in special education from Western Michigan University and is a professor of special education at Dordt University. She is also a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and a Board Certified Advocate in Special Education.

Recommended citation

VanTol, K. (2026). *Foundations of special education* (3rd ed.). Dordt University.

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