



**Critical Components for an
Autism/Life Skills Program**
An Assessment Checklist

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How to Use this Checklist

The following checklist may be used to assess both general education classrooms and special education classrooms containing one or more students with autism or with some cognitive disability.

Administrators may use this checklist to assess to what extent a classroom exhibits the traits necessary for *all* children in the room to be successful. Teachers may use the checklist to self-assess whether they are doing all they can to help *all* their students—including those with autism or cognitive disabilities—be as successful as possible.

This document is set up as a checklist—either you feel you’re doing well enough on a particular item to check it, or you don’t. If you want to add some more nuance to this assessment, you can easily turn it into a rubric by giving a score of 1-4 on each item (1 = unsatisfactory; 2 = needs improvement; 3 = satisfactory; 4 = exceeds expectations).

Classroom Organization

The organization of a classroom can go a long way toward providing the necessary structure for students to feel psychologically safe. Students with autism or a cognitive disability, especially, benefit from knowing what to expect in any situation and knowing what’s coming up next.

The four main elements of classroom organization are the room arrangement, the class schedule, the use of transition markers, and individual work systems.

1. Room Arrangement

The traditional classroom set-up of desks in rows is challenging for students with autism or cognitive disorders, as there’s a lack of environmental cues to tell students what needs to be done, when, and where. Thus, it’s important to structure the classroom into a number of discrete work areas so students know what’s expected of them when they are in each area (for example, “This is the place where I do independent work” or “This is the place I’m expected to participate in group discussions” or “This is my quiet place”).

When designing the classroom, it’s also an excellent idea to designate an area as the “chill zone” or “cool off spot”—a place a student can go to calm down when they’re about to lose control. Having such a spot can often help prevent a meltdown.

In addition to teaching students what they're expected to do in each area of the room, teachers also need to teach students how to get out, use, organize, and put back in place all materials that are housed in each area.

2. Schedule

The second aspect of classroom organization is the classroom schedule. This schedule must be posted where everyone can see it and reviewed daily. The schedule could be a picture schedule (more common in elementary grades) or a written schedule (more common in high school), or a combination of the two.

In addition, some students might need individual schedules—if they have to go to counseling, for example, or if they're going to their resource class or occupational therapy, or if they're going to be leaving early that day.

Classroom schedules need to be reviewed daily to provide predictability, structure, and routine. *All* students need this structure, but especially students with autism or cognitive disabilities.

The schedule may take a variety of forms. It may take the form of a checklist where you check items as they are completed. It could be a list on a whiteboard where you mark through each item as it's completed. Or it could be something else—whatever works for both the teacher and the students.

3. Transition Markers

Another aspect of classroom organization involves the use of transition markers.

For students who have problems transitioning from one activity to another—especially when transitioning from a favorite activity to something they don't want to do—a transition marker can be used as a visual way of reminding the student that there's going to be a change.

For a younger student, a transition marker might look like Spiderman; for an older student, it might be a picture of a pencil, checking off the items on a list.

The key here is that all students who need transition markers have them, that these markers are individualized, and that they are used regularly.

4. Individual Work Systems

The final aspect of classroom organization involves students' individual work systems. The work system is a more detailed breakdown of their individual schedules.

If the schedule says, "Reading," the work system might say, "I'm going to read my book in the book corner, then I'm going to write about my book in the writing station, then I'm going to do some research for my project on the computer."

The individual work system tells the student *what* to do, *when*, and *where*.

Communication Systems

This category applies to students who need extra help communicating. It might be a student who's nonverbal, using an assistive technology device. It might be a student with Asperger's, using a non-intrusive visual cue to ask for help instead of raising their hand. This also might involve the use of a Social Story, social script, or Power Card that helps the student communicate their wants and needs.

It's also important that the teacher teaches the student how to use their communication system (whatever that entails) to communicate in group situations *and* that the teacher teaches the other students in the group how to communicate with the student who requires the communication system. Making sure *everyone* in the group understands how to communicate with this student is crucial to keeping the student from becoming frustrated or upset.

Class-Wide Behavioral Supports

This section of the checklist is designed to assess whether a consistent system of expectations and consequences is clearly communicated to students and consistently employed by the teacher.

Whatever system the teacher employs (whether it's a voice control chart, behavior chart, list of expectations, etc.), it's important that the expected behaviors are communicated *visually*. But just posting the system isn't enough. It's also crucial that teachers *teach* (model and have students practice) the expected behaviors, no matter the grade level of the students. And, of course, it's not enough to simply establish this all at the beginning of the school year and then forget it; teachers must *use* the system daily, collect data, and document how students are progressing with their behavior.

In addition, if an occupational therapist has recommended use of tools such as wiggle cushions, therabands, etc., for specific students in the class, the teacher needs to make sure that those tools are being used when and as recommended.

Instruction

The teacher should obviously have daily lesson plans, and instruction should always be meaningful, motivating, and linked to *all* students' interests.

In addition, for students with IEPs, lesson plans should provide ways for the goals and expectations listed in the IEP to be achieved, and these goals and expectations should be clearly linked to each day's lesson plan.

System of Documenting Student Progress

Any system for documenting student progress should of course apply to *all* students, but the system used must also be flexible and provide a method for documenting the progress achieved by students with autism or a cognitive disorder, even if the progress goals for these students look significantly different than those of other students.

Scheduling of Student/Staff

Whether the classroom in question is a regular education classroom or a special education classroom, the teacher in that classroom should work with *all* students, *including students with autism or a cognitive disability*, regularly. Even though these students may have an aide assigned to them, the aide shouldn't be the only one working with the student. There should be a clear plan in place for how the teacher will work with these students throughout the week.

Checklist of Critical Components for Autism/Life Skills Program

Classroom Organization:

1. Room Arrangement

- Classroom furniture is arranged to clearly define work areas
- Defined areas exist for individual and group instruction
- The room is arranged for students to assume responsibility for class materials
- There is a designated "chill zone" to allow students to calm down when needed

2. Schedule

- A classroom schedule is developed and posted for the school day
- Individual schedules for children are developed and posted
- Evidence exists that both types of schedules are used daily

3. Transition Markers

- Transition markers are evident and individualized

4. Individual Work Systems

- Work systems are developed and are in use for each student
- Time is allotted in the daily schedule for work systems to be used in 1:1, independent, and group settings

Communication System:

- Each student has a method to communicate wants and needs
- Teacher uses group opportunities to teach how individuals using communication systems will use the system to interact with others

Class-Wide Positive Behavior Supports:

- Behavior goals are visually communicated and taught
- Sequential consequences for misbehaviors are communicated—including strategies for prevention, intervention, and consequences
- There is evidence of close daily monitoring and data collection and documentation of progress
- Sensory needs are recognized and met using sensory diet and/or tools such as wiggle cushions, therabands, deep pressure, joint compression, etc. (based on recommendations from occupational therapist)

Instruction:

- Daily lesson plans exist
- Instruction is meaningful, motivating, and linked to students' interests
- Lesson plans correlate with IEP goals and objectives and grade level expectations
- The teacher can link each student's IEP objectives to daily lesson plans

System of Documenting Student Progress:

- There is documentation of individual student progress

Scheduling of Student/Staff:

- The teacher (not just an aide) is scheduled to work with *all* students throughout the week

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