

Advocating for Autistic Clients in Schools and Medical Settings

Practical Guidelines for SLPs & OTs

Autism in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Region, along with many other parts of the world, has historically been misunderstood with many families reluctant to seek out help due to social stigma or a lack of awareness that may have confused autism and other neurodevelopmental differences as behavioral issues. This has often led to delayed diagnosis and limited inclusion in education, healthcare, and even society. However, more recent developments, particularly in the UAE with their People of Determination policies and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2023 reforms, are helping to increase inclusion and accessibility throughout the region. Speech language pathologists (SLPs) and occupational therapists (OTs) provide a critical role in bridging the remaining gap in understanding and inclusion, creating a bridge of support in navigating the educational, medical, and community settings.

Understanding the Individual's Needs is Key for Meaningful Advocacy

Because autism presents differently in each individual, it is important to assess the client's unique strengths and challenges to ensure that any accommodations are relevant and meaningful to the autistic individual. SLPs and OTs are in a unique position to assist their clients because they work so closely in assisting their clients overcoming challenges in communication and daily life, which provides unique insight into their accommodation requirements.

This assessment should include understanding the client's communication and sensory needs. It should be noted as to whether they are verbal or require augmentative and alternative communication (ACC) on a full or part-time basis, and may also be helpful in some situations to note how they process verbal communication; whether they are Gestalt language learners, or whether they may use echolalia as part of their verbal communication skills as this can help to alleviate miscommunication between a provider and the autistic individual.

Sensory sensitivities that can impact communication and participation should also be considered. In addition to working directly with the autistic individual, collaborating with their family and caregiving team is also important, as they will be able to provide valuable insight into the person's preferences, comfort levels and sensory triggers. This may be particularly poignant if the autistic individual is nonverbal. It should also be kept in mind, especially in the case of SLPs and OTs, that autistic neurodiversity with its attendant communication and sensory differences are valid and that non-harmful behaviors should be supported rather than corrected.



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Assess the Individual's Communication & Sensory Needs

- **Communication Needs:**
 - What is their verbal fluency level?
 - Do they require augmentative and alternative communication (ACC) part or full time?
 - Are they Gestalt language learners, or do they use echolalia or nonverbal cues?
- **Sensory Needs:**
 - Do they have any sensory triggers such as bright lights, colors, or loud sounds?
 - Do they have social modelling difficulties, such as difficulty with eye contact?
 - Do they have difficulties with large groups, or unstructured situations

Advocacy in Educational Settings

Educational settings are one of the areas that first comes to mind in regards to the need for accommodations and advocacy. Many SLPs and OTs work within the school system, this offers a unique edge in advocating for younger autistic clients. Collaboration with teachers, support staff such as special educators, and in-school psychologists is key in providing the necessary support for autistic students. As an advocate, understanding national and local regulations are important in promoting inclusive education. These include such governmental policies as the UAE's National Policy for Empowering People of Determination or Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reform goals.

Advocacy in the school setting needs to ensure that the student receives appropriate interventions that allow them to participate fully within the educational system and meet their educational goals. When advocating for their clients the SLP or OT should work to ensure a communication and sensory plan is in place. This includes advocacy for communication tools such as AAC devices even in bilingual environments as appropriate for the student. This may also include sensory accommodations as required.



It may also be necessary to advocate with school staff and administration on autistic communication styles; additional education and resources in understanding these differences and assisting with the implementation of visual supports and the creation of social stories may also be required. In certain cases the SLP or OT may also need to advocate against traditional social skills training, such as requiring eye contact, or the suppression of benign stimming. They may also need to explain the value of authentic communication over social masking. The ideal that the SLP or OT would want to advocate for in educational settings is the implementation of inclusive classroom practices that respect different ways of interacting, processing information, and sensory regulation. This is a practice that can be beneficial for all students, including both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals.



Within the educational space the SLP or OT should, of course, also include autistic individual's parents or their legal guardians. Many caregivers may require assistance in understanding their child's legal rights for accommodation and services within the educational setting. While this varies across countries within the GCC, it generally includes meeting specific educational goals and may provide guidelines for resources. This often includes specific accommodation structures and individualized education plans (IEPs). In addition to providing resources and advocacy tools for parents and guardians it may also be helpful for the SLP or OT to attend the child's IEP meetings to ensure that the strategies and educational goals are meaningful, functional, and individualized to the student.

Advocating within School Settings

Collaboration with School Officials:

- Ensure communication and sensory accommodations are in place.
- Advocate for AAC devices, even in bilingual environments.
- Provide training on autistic communication styles and create visual supports/social stories.
- Oppose traditional social skills training that enforces masking or eye contact.
- Promote inclusive classroom practices that benefit all students.

Collaboration with Parents/Caregivers:

- Educate them on legal rights for accommodations (IEPs, local policies).
- Assist in advocating for meaningful and functional educational goals.
- Attend IEP meetings to ensure individualized strategies are implemented.

Advocacy Within Medical Settings



Medical environments can be overwhelming for autistic individuals; an SLP or OT are a natural choice for helping to navigate these environments. These providers can advocate for their clients to ensure accessible, accommodating, and respectful care. Some of the most important aspects of advocacy in the medical setting is education and understanding of what autism is and the use of autism-friendly care practices.

This includes not only communication strategies such as the use of AAC, or understanding echolalia, or that nonverbal responses may be meaningful communication, but must also include the assumption that autistic individuals are competent and should be included in discussions about their own healthcare. This assumption can lead the way towards the creation of meaningful communication strategies. The client's therapist is in a unique position to be able to assist healthcare providers in establishing these communication strategies, they can also assist with guidelines advocating for the use of clear, precise communication. They may also offer the use of social stories and visual supports to ensure comprehension by the autistic individual.

In addition to creating communication accommodations, other concerns that the SLP or OT may want to advocate for their client include sensory accommodations. This can include specific sensory triggers for their clients, but may also include more broad strategies that may be useful for a wide range of autistic and sensory sensitive individuals. These accommodations could be as simple as dimming lights or providing sunglasses to sensitive individuals, scheduling during quieter times of the day or providing noise canceling headphones. This may also include allowing trusted caregivers to remain in the room during procedures where they would not typically be allowed to stay with the patient. In certain circumstances the SLP or OT may want to introduce wider educational practices such as specific training or certification on supporting the autistic community.

One of the more progressive strategies that an SLP or OT may want to introduce in collaboration with other healthcare providers is trauma-informed care. This approach aims to recognize that trauma can impact the patient experience. This may be particularly relevant for autistic individuals who have had less advocacy and understanding within healthcare settings in the past. Healthcare providers using this approach can reduce stress and enhance patient comfort by creating greater transparency on the part of the healthcare provider. This can create more trust between the provider and the patient in order to create more trust and provide better patient outcomes.

Advocating in Medical Environments

Collaboration with Medical Officials:

- Presumption of competence in autistic individuals & inclusion of them in their own healthcare
- Promote autism-friendly communication strategies such as: AAC use, understanding echolalia, & use of clear, precise language.
- Sensory accommodations such as dimming lights, noise reduction, & allowing caregivers to stay during procedures.
- Trauma-informed care to create a more supportive patient experience.

Collaboration with Parents/Caregivers:

- Assist in pre-visit preparation, such as social stories or role-playing
- Apprise parents or caregivers of autism certified hospitals, clinics, and other medical personnel



Advocacy Within Medical Settings, Continued

As in educational settings, advocacy and engagement with the autistic individual's parents or guardians is also key in healthcare. Parents, particularly those whose child has only recently been diagnosed with autism, may be unaware or have little knowledge of the resources available to them and their child. SLPs and OTs can be a valuable asset in guiding parents to resources and support systems. This can include hospitals and clinics that are autism certified, have credentialed staff, or that have other autism-friendly resources. The SLP or OT can also work with the parents on creating a plan that makes healthcare settings more familiar for their child with pre-visit preparation, such as creating social stories, role-playing the visit, or other such strategies. Involvement and collaboration with parents or caregivers is key in creating a positive experience for the autistic individual.



By taking a proactive approach to advocacy, SLPs and OTs can ensure that their autistic clients receive the respect, accommodations, and support they need to reach their full potential in both educational and medical settings. SLPs and OTs can serve a unique role in advocating for a multidisciplinary approach to care for autistic individuals that integrates therapy, education and healthcare and also includes full collaboration with the autistic individuals' family to provide the highest level of support.

Become a Certified Autism Professional with IBCCES

The International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES) offers two autism certifications: Certified Autism Specialist™ (CAS) and Autism Certificate (AC). These certifications are designed for professionals who are responsible for providing services or support to individuals who have autism. The CAS program requires either a Master's degree with two years of experience, or a Bachelor's degree with ten years of experience. The AC program is designed for those who are currently working with, or will soon be working with autistic individuals. Each program incurs a required two year renewal.



These 14 CE training and certification programs focus on best practices and feature evidence-based practices developed with the unified collaboration of medical professionals and autistic self-advocates. ASHA and AOTA-approved CEs are also available for current members of those organizations.

Autism certification equips SLPs and OTs with specialized skills and understanding of autistic individuals, allowing them to offer high-quality support for their clients. This credential also demonstrates a dedication to professional growth and excellence in therapy. Become an autism certified professional and become the advocate that your clients deserve.

IBCCES Training & Certification Process:

1. Apply online
2. Complete online autism training program
3. Pass certification exam
4. IBCCES verification
5. Board approval
6. Certification issued

Delivering the global standard for training and certification in the fields of autism, neurodiversity, and accessibility – IBCCES provides a series of certification programs that empower professionals to be leaders in their field and improve the outcomes for the individuals they serve. For over two decades, IBCCES has been a global leader, setting the industry standard in autism and cognitive differences training. IBCCES works in over 111 countries and provides training in 8 languages, and its programs have been recognized around the world as the leading benchmark in training and certification.