Understanding Students with Autism
Defining Autism
- IDEA: Autism is a developmental disability that affects children prior to the age of three in three areas:
  - Verbal & nonverbal communication
  - Social interaction
  - Academic performance
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD)
  - Autistic disorder, Rett's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, Asperger's disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified
- Educators often use the term autism spectrum disorders when referring to some of all of these disorders

Prevalence of Autism
- In 2006, 223,395 students
- Fewer students with Asperger's Syndrome
- Males outnumber females four to one
- Increased prevalence in last decade
- Different theories for the increase in prevalence:
  - Greater public awareness
  - More refined diagnostic procedures

Characteristics of Autism
- Language Development
  - Ranging from no verbal communication to complex communication
    - Delayed Language
    - Echolalia
- Social Development
  - Delays in social interaction and social skills
    - Impaired use of nonverbal behavior
    - Lack of peer relationships
    - Failure to spontaneously share enjoyment, interests, and achievements
    - Lack of reciprocity
- Repetitive behavior
  - Obsessions, tics, and perseverations
- Problem behavior
  - Self-injurious behavior
  - Aggression
- Need for environmental predictability
- Sensory and movement disorders
- Intellectual functioning
  - Savant syndrome

Determining the Causes
- Historical perspectives on causes
  - "Refrigerator mothers"
- Biomedical causes
  - Abnormalities in brain development
  - Neurochemistry
  - Genetic factors

Determining the Nature of Specially Designed Instruction and Services
- Functional assessment — an ecological assessment
  - Describe the nature of the behaviors
  - Gather information from interested parties
  - Determine why the student engages in problem behavior
  - Hypothesize relationship between behavior and events before, during, and after the behavior
  - Incorporate functional assessment information into the IEP

- o Help student develop alternative behaviors
- Address the domains of access, classroom ecology, and task modifications
- Access involves modifications to the community, campus, building, or classroom to ensure physical and cognitive access
  - o Also provide "behavioral access"
  - o The lunchroom is a frequent environment in which problem behaviors occur; consider modifications to seating
  - o Include accommodations for before and after school and in the hall between classes

Planning for Universal Design for Learning

- Some characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorders are potential areas of learning strengths and provide a basis for curriculum adaptation
  - o Ability to focus attention on detailed information
  - o May excel in areas of the curriculum that are not as language-based, such as math or science
- Mnemonic strategies
  - ▪ Keyword
  - ▪ Pegword
  - ▪ Letter

Planning for Other Educational Needs

- Provide students instructional supports that enable them to develop and maintain friendships
- Promoting friendships
  - o Include students in all areas
  - o Use peer buddy programs
  - o Use person-centered planning models that involve peers
  - o Ensure peers learn about the goals of inclusion

Planning for Other Educational Needs

- Students' IEPs should address the following instructional areas:
  - o Trustworthiness and loyalty
  - o Conflict resolution
  - o General friendship skills
  - o Positive interaction style
  - o Taking the perspective of others

Secondary and Transition Students

- The techniques underlying positive behavior support emerged from a set of strategies referred to as applied behavior analysis (ABA)
- ABA uses the principles of operant psychology
- Discrete trial training is based on the "three term contingency" outlined by applied behavior analysis:
  - o Presentation of the discriminative stimulus (cue)
  - o Presentation of the prompting stimulus (if needed)
  - o The response
  - o The reinforcing stimulus

Making Accommodations for Assessment

- Students with autism may perform better on standardized assessments when provided more frequent positive reinforcement
- They may also perform better when assessments are administered by a familiar person
  - o Presence of the examiner minimizes the students' anxiety and stress associated with testing