

# STRAIGHT TALK *About* **Autism**

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## The Flexroom *Supporting Inclusion and School Success*

### Part One of a Two-Part Article

When most of us encounter stressors in our daily lives, we have places to go to and activities to engage in “to chill out.” Whether it is a favorite chair we sit in, a special room for reading or listening to music, engaging in a hobby, or going to the gym, life’s challenges would be far more taxing without these places and activities that support our emotional well-being.

Do individuals with ASD have the same opportunities for “chill-out” time that most of us have? In my experience, in most cases, the answer is *no*. Indeed, it can be argued that many children and older individuals with ASD are under so much pressure to learn and participate that there are fewer opportunities to relax and engage in emotionally regulating activities. However, research and everyday experience has clearly indicated that persons with ASD are extremely vulnerable to many stressors, more so than those of us without ASD, so it seems obvious that they would have a greater need for such opportunities. Furthermore, it stands to reason that this need would be especially acute in the school setting, since it is one of the most high-stress environments that one may encounter.

In part one of this article, I will be discussing the *Flexroom*, a support strategy that is designed to address these challenges and support students with ASD in school settings. Flexroom is short for *Flexible Resource Room*. Resource rooms were originally established in schools to support students with learning disabilities by providing extra academic support outside of classrooms. The addition of the word *flexible* is to emphasize the multipurpose nature of the Flexroom for students with ASD and related disabilities. Before discussing the function and use of Flexrooms in greater detail, it is useful to consider the types of stressors found in the school setting.

### School as a Multi-Stress Environment

School may be thought of as a potential multi-layered “quilt” of stress factors. This is especially true for students with ASD who are fully or partially included in regular classes and activities throughout the school day. What are some of the factors that contribute to this quilt? The following is a non-exhaustive list:

**Social Complexity.** In the typical school setting, a student with ASD is confronted with many different social contexts, each with varying numbers of students and staff. Moreover, social groupings present various levels of complexity regarding the predictability of activities, causing additional stress. For example, classroom social activities such as morning meeting might have very predictable routines, while playground activities typically evolve and change, making it very difficult to anticipate what comes next.

**Social and Behavioral Requirements.** Social and behavioral requirements vary greatly depending upon the class, location, and social roles required of students. For example, expectations for behavior in the gym are very different from those in classroom settings such as art, or in the library.

**Social Confusion.** Ongoing interactions require a constant “on-line” reading of other persons’ intentions and emotions, expressed both verbally and nonverbally. It is well accepted that most persons on the autism spectrum are challenged in their ability to read these multimodal, complex, and sometimes subtle signals in real time.

**Academics.** Academic activities and expectations also may be very stressful. This is especially true when expectations for performance are out of sync with student ability level, causing

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frustration when they are too high and boredom when they are too low.

**Environmental Factors.** Additional challenges in the school setting may include the physical structure of the building and spaces within, as well as issues related to acoustics (bells, alarms, hard surfaces reflecting sound), lighting (fluorescent lights), and other sensory challenges.

**Pace.** The “pace of life” in the school setting may be quite frenetic, with multiple transitions required and abrupt “start” and “stop” times peppered throughout the day. In addition, the very types of activities that support emotional regulation and “chill-out” opportunities for many typical kids (lunch in the cafeteria, recess, or gym) can have the reverse impact on, and be especially demanding and stressful for kids with ASD. Even the academic pace of the inclusive classroom setting can take a toll on stress levels. Finally, because of the pace of today’s classrooms, there often are fewer opportunities for movement throughout the day despite increasing evidence that exercise and movement actually support learning.

### The Flexroom as a Strategy to Support Inclusion

Over my years of consulting, I have had the opportunity to observe the use of alternative spaces that have some of the characteristics of a Flexroom, in elementary, middle, and high schools. I have also visited schools that do not use Flexrooms. In their absence I have observed increased challenges in keeping students with ASD well-regulated emotionally so as to support their availability for learning and engagement. This has been especially apparent in inclusive classrooms, and when efforts are made to include students with ASD in activities with peers throughout the day. In schools where Flexrooms are unavailable, the prevailing attitude appears to be that allowing students to leave the regular classroom to go to a different space is somehow inimical to the goal of successful inclusion. In my opinion, a more helpful perspective would be to view the use of a Flexroom as a support strategy designed to increase the student’s success in the inclusive setting. My personal experience supports such a perspective, for I have observed that when staff use well-designed Flexrooms appropriately—taking full advantage of the range of possibilities they offer—students achieve greater success throughout the day.

### Functions of a Flexroom

In general, a Flexroom may be used in two different ways. First, it may be used *proactively* to provide academic and other support for students on a regularly-scheduled basis. Second, it may be used *reactively* when a student is perceived as having some difficulty that requires action—for example, when the student’s level of dysregulation interferes with successful participation in ongoing activities. The following functions are discussed in greater detail.

**Emotional Regulation.** The major purpose of a Flexroom is to provide an environment within the context of the school setting that has relatively few stressors. In other words, it provides a safe haven from many of the factors that make the school environment stressful. Use of a Flexroom may be thought of as part of a more comprehensive Emotional Regulation Plan for students (see “Behavior it not the Issue: An Emotional Regulation Perspective on Problem Behavior,” ASQ Spring and Summer, 2011).

An example of proactively using the Flexroom for emotional regulation would be that of having a student who is unable to deal with the unstructured and often chaotic time prior to the start of class check into the Flexroom first thing in the morning. Likewise, a student may also go to the Flexroom at the end of the day, since students tend to become more dysregulated at this time, and when this occurs they may find typical classrooms more stressful. This is particularly true if there is increased noise or a lessening of predictability in that setting. While it is most desirable for students to participate in the “settling-in” and “end of day” routines with his or her peers, a difficult entry time first thing in the morning may set the tone for a difficult day; and leaving the school in a dysregulated state may pose a significant challenge for parents when the child arrives home.

An example of using the Flexroom reactively would be that of monitoring the student’s signals and removing him or her from the more complex, dysregulating classroom environment and bringing him or her to the Flexroom, either to engage in a regulating activity or just to be in a less stressful setting. Activities that involve movement, regulating sensory input, or that are calming / enjoyable may be very helpful. Furthermore, over time, a student may develop positive emotional memories regarding the Flexroom setting due to its benefits. Just knowing that there is such a setting available, in and of itself, may support regulation in more complex and challenging situations in the school setting.

**Academic Support.** A Flexroom also provides opportunities for academic support either on a one-to-one basis or in small

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group activities. The additional benefit of the latter is that it also provides opportunities for addressing social goals in a supportive environment.


**Social Activities.** Within the Flexroom context, fun activities may be designed to help students with special needs work together on aspects of social skills, emotional expression, and conversational skills. In addition, “reverse-mainstreaming” in the more laid-back Flexroom environment provides an ideal context for shared experiences between students with autism and their typical peers.

**Exercise.** Depending upon space availability, the Flexroom may offer opportunities for exercise. Activities may range from yoga, to stretching exercises on mats, and to aerobic activities such as jumping on a small trampoline, all of which provide important emotional regulatory input. Here, as with social activities, reverse mainstreaming can provide additional interactive opportunities.

**Play.** With the increasing emphasis on academics, play opportunities in school—including preschool and kindergarten—are more limited than in decades past. Notwithstanding, students with autism need support in learning to engage and play with peers. Even solitary play is important as it may be emotionally regulating. Given the dwindling number of opportunities for play available in typical school settings, the Flexroom looms large as a place that offers opportunities to provide the important developmental foundations that support imaginative play and social development.

**Nurturing Special Interests and Talents.** An extremely positive and growing trend within the autism community is that of identifying and nurturing special interests and talents in individuals with autism. In many cases, however, there are neither places nor opportunities to engage in these activities, despite their clear benefits. The Flexroom offers both a place and the opportunity to engage in art activities, music, cooking, crafts, or even idiosyncratic interests that provide pleasure and relaxation.

In part two of this article, I will discuss the physical characteristics of Flexrooms and how they differ at different school levels. I will also provide guidelines, along with practical

examples, for using Flexrooms effectively for students of differing abilities. 

**BIO**



**Dr. Barry Prizant** has more than 40 years experience as a clinical scholar, researcher and international consultant to children and adults with ASD and their families. He is an Adjunct Professor, Brown University, and Director of Childhood Communication Services, a private practice. Barry is co-author of *The SCERTS Model: A comprehensive educational approach for children with ASD* (Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent & Rydell, 2006) and the assessment instruments, CSBS, and CSBS-DP (Wetherby & Prizant, 1993, 2002). He has published more than 100 articles and chapters and has presented more than 700 seminars and keynote addresses in the US and internationally. Barry developed and co-facilitates an annual weekend retreat for parents of children with ASD, and is the recipient of the 2005 Princeton University-Eden Foundation Career Award for “improving the quality of life for individuals with autism.” For further information, go to [www.barryprizant.com](http://www.barryprizant.com), or contact Barry at [Bprizant@gmail.com](mailto:Bprizant@gmail.com).