

## What is Autism?

Autism is difficult to define as it is a complex disability; the definition changes as more is discovered. Autism is often referred to as a spectrum disorder since there are a variety of symptoms which vary in intensity (Kluth 2003). Typically, autism appears in children before they are three years old; however, it may not be diagnosed until they are four, if ever. Autism is four to five times more likely in boys (Kluth 2003). There is growing evidence that autism is genetic and that susceptibility differs across families. In addition, the brains of individuals with autism appear to have some structural and functional differences (Ministry of Education). It is critical to remember that people with autism have varied skills, interests, abilities, characteristics, gifts, talents and needs; no two people experience autism in the same way (Kluth 2003). The most important and useful definitions come from people who experience the disability every day.

## What is High-functioning Autism?

People have many misconceptions with the term high-functioning autism. "The use of the term 'high-functioning' means that the child has average or above average intelligence. It has nothing to do with the number of autistic symptoms the child has. A child with 'high-functioning' autism could be a child who has many self-stimulatory behaviours, little social interactive ability, little expressive language, and yet has a near normal IQ score" (Moyes, 2001, p. 17).

## Diagnosis and labelling

"Diagnostic labels [...] can be helpful; they provide individuals with disabilities, families, educators, and researchers with a common language and framework and connect people to resources, information, funding, and services" (Kluth, 2003, p. 7). It is important to remember that labels are limiting because they give us little information about the individual or their needs. As teachers, it is helpful to know the "label", in order to research the topic, but it can be harmful if it prevents you from getting to know the individual.

## Assessment

The use of testing tools can be problematic for people with autism, for various reasons. The professionals assessing the students sometimes do not know them well and so do not understand their communication needs or abilities (Kluth 2003). Some students have difficulty manipulating materials, communicating or responding to directions in a typical way. For example, a student may be asked to draw a triangle during a test. The student may know what a triangle is, but be unable to draw it; in this case, the test does not reveal what the child *knows*, it only reveals that the child *can not draw a triangle on command* (Kluth 2003). Similarly, a child may be asked to point out a horse from four pictures; if the student does not have a reliable pointing response, he/she will fail that item of the test. Assessment through tests is not a true evaluation of a child's abilities.

## Common Characteristics

Remember: these are general characteristics that are shared by people with autism; no two people will share the same characteristics or to the same degree.

### *Movement differences:*

These involve difficulties with starting, executing and switching movements; they may impede posture, actions, speech, thoughts, perceptions and memories. They may walk with an uneven gait, rock, pace, flap hands, produce unintentional speech, or struggle to make transitions from room to

room or situation to situation. It is important to be aware of these differences so that you don't assume the student is not paying attention. (Kluth 2003)

*Sensory differences:*

"A student's sense of hearing, touch, smell, sight, or taste may be more sensitive or less sensitive than is typical" (Kluth 2003). It is not uncommon for people with autism to avoid being touched as some may only be able to tolerate certain types of touch. Students may be bothered by sounds that the teacher can not hear; it is important not to dismiss the sound as if it is not there. Students may also be distracted by certain types of light, colours or patterns; teachers must pay attention to whether students are bothered by bulletin boards or posters. Some smells may be unbearable, while others are pleasant and calming. (Kluth 2003)

*Communication differences:*

Many students have communication differences that affect speech and language; many use few or no spoken words. They may have unusual speech intonation or use repetitive speech; conversational timing and rhythm may be difficult for people with autism to learn to use. (Kluth 2003)

*Socialization and interaction differences:*

Some individuals say they need time alone or find some social situation challenging, while at the same time, claim that they crave social interaction and friendship. People with autism may not be very good at reading subtle social cues which makes conversation more difficult. (Kluth 2003)

*Learning differences:*

Teachers may assume that students with autism are incapable of answering questions correctly because they do not understand the task. In fact, it is usually because of the way the information is presented, heard, or processed. (Kluth 2003)

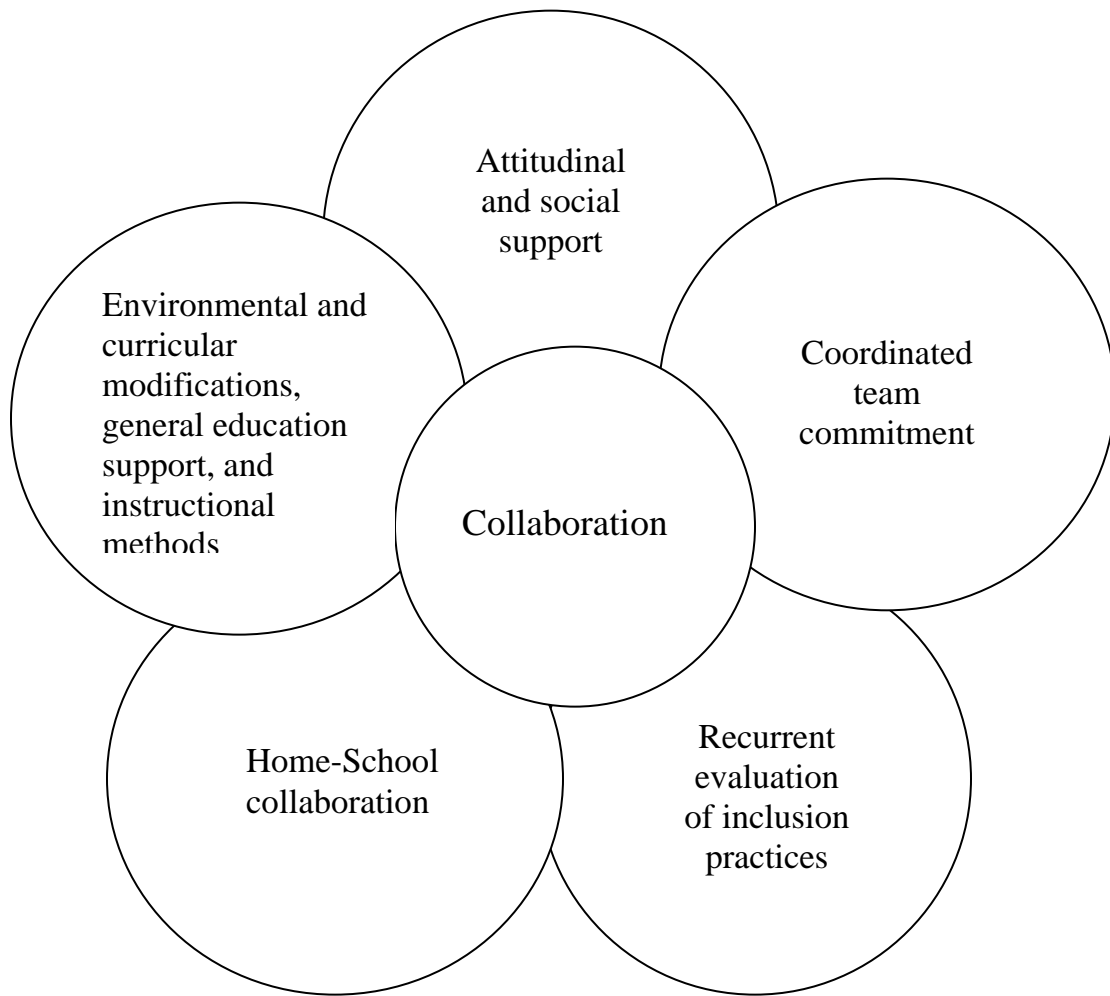
*Interests and fascinations:*

Many individuals with autism have a deep interest in one or a variety of topics. Often, a student's educational team will focus on curbing these interests and compulsions; however, it can be dangerous for people without autism to pass judgment on them. Students with autism may be interested in trains, horses or light switches. We must ask ourselves how this differs from students who are obsessed with basketball, football, or other "typical" obsessions. Fascinations often serve important purposes in the lives of individuals with autism. (Kluth 2003)

"If you know one person with autism, you know ONE person with autism" (Kluth, 2003, p. 2)

"We can describe a situation like no one else. We can tell you what intangibles feel like and secret flavours taste like. We can describe for you, in unbelievable depth, the intricate details of our favourite obsessions." (Kluth, 2003, p.2)

"Stereotypical movements aren't things I decide to do for a reason; they're things that happen by themselves when I'm not paying attention to my body" (Kluth, 2003, p. 13)



Reproduction of Figure 1. Autism Collaboration Model. Simpson, de Boer-Ott & Smith-Myles. 2003. p. 118.