

# Understanding Autism in Equine-Assisted Services

Correct Terminology • Support Levels • Sensory Processing  
Participant-Centered Supports

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# Learning Objectives

- Use respectful autism terminology
- Understand autism as a spectrum
- Identify DSM-5 support levels
- Apply EAS supports
- Promote inclusive, safe programming



# Why Understanding Autism is Important

- According to the PATH Intl. 2025 Fact Sheet 92% of individuals served in our industry have a diagnosis of ASD
- Individuals who have ASD require specific supports and consistency



# DSM Definition of ASD

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in communication, behavior, and sensory processing.

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.).



## Brief History of Autism

- 1912: the word “Autism first coined by Dr. Paul Beuler
- 1943: Dr. Leo Kanner identifies autism as "early infantile autism"
- 1944: Dr. Hans Asperger described a similar profile later called “Aspberger’s Syndrome”
- 1980 (DSM-3): Autism was formally recognized as a developmental disorder
- 1994 (DSM-4 / DSM-4-TR): Multiple diagnoses existed
- 2013 (DSM-5): All subtypes were combined into Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Aspberger’s was no longer a diagnosis subtype
- 2022 (DSM-5-TR): Autism defined by support needs (Levels 1–3) rather than labels like “high” or “low” functioning.

# Why It Became a Spectrum Disorder

- Wide variability in presentation
- Overlapping diagnoses removed
- Focus on support needs
- Improves consistency and care



# DSM-5 Autism Levels

## Level 1: Requiring Support

- Characteristics:
  - Mild social communication challenges
  - May need help with transitions, flexibility, or social cues
- Common EAS considerations:
  - Clear expectations and routines
  - Visual schedules or verbal previews
  - Choice-based instruction

# DSM-5 Autism Levels

## Level 2: Requiring Substantial Support

- Characteristics:
  - Noticeable communication differences
  - Sensory sensitivities may significantly impact participation
- Common EAS considerations:
  - Increased staff or volunteer support
  - Simplified instructions
  - Consistent horse and environment
  - Sensory accommodations (helmets, tack, arena noise)

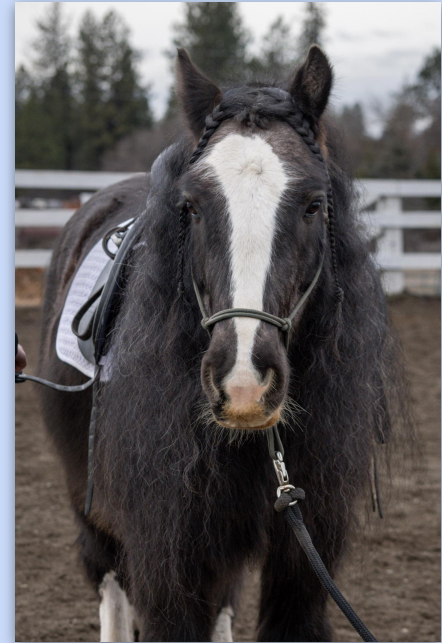
# DSM-5 Autism Levels

## Level 3: Requiring Very Substantial Support

- Characteristics:
  - Limited verbal communication or use of communication device
  - Significant sensory and behavioral support needs
- Common EAS considerations:
  - Highly structured sessions
  - One-to-one or two-to-one support
  - Emphasis on regulation, safety, and comfort
  - Ground-based or non-mounted activities may be appropriate

# Correct and Respectful Terminology

- Person-first language vs. identity-first language
  - (“Person with autism” vs. “Autistic person”)
  - Respecting individual and family preference
- Terms to **use**:
  - Autistic, neurodivergent, support needs, non-speaking
- Terms to **avoid**:
  - “High-functioning” / “Low-functioning”
  - “Suffers from autism”
  - Non-verbal
  - Special needs



# Correct and Respectful Terminology

- Language considerations when speaking with families, volunteers, and participants
  - Families and participants: Use the above recommended terms. Speak directly to the participant.
  - Volunteers: We have a high volume of volunteers in this industry that are from generations that used different terminology for Autism. We need to incorporate the new terminology into trainings.

## Supporting Participants in Equine-Assisted Services

- Individualized assessment over diagnosis-based assumptions
- Predictability and routine in sessions
- Sensory-aware environments:
  - Sound, touch, movement, visual stimuli
- Communication strategies:
  - Visual supports
  - Short, concrete instructions
  - Allowing processing time
- Building trust and emotional safety with both horse and participant

# Role of the Horse in Supporting Autism

- Horses as non-judgmental partners
- Rhythmic movement and sensory regulation
- Opportunities for:
  - Emotional regulation (rhythmic movement, heavy work)
  - Social connection (playing games with peers)
  - Confidence and independence
- Importance of appropriate horse selection

## Level 1 Case Study – Liam

- Verbal, enjoys horses
- Needs routine and clear expectations

### Supports:

- Visual schedule (white board, pictures vs. words)
- Verbal previews (heads up a few minutes prior to transitions)
- Choice-based activities (giving 2-3 choices of main activity for the day)

### Outcome:

- Increased independence and leadership

# Example of ASD 1 Level Lesson Plan

Goal: To follow verbally given steps to a multi-step test demonstrating clear use of aids to communicate with the horse for each aspect of the test with intermittent verbal cues for directions.

Warm-up: varying the speed of the horse at the walk and trot, circles each direction with an emphasis on why this helps the horse.

Activity: Instruction on a multi-step dressage test. Discuss what dressage is and how the riding skills they have learned can be used.

Cool-down: Have horse walk and teach the student how to encourage the horse to lengthen and stretch

## Level 2 Case Study – Maya

- Limited verbal communication
- Sensitive to noise and change

### Supports:

- Simple instructions (first -then, 1 step instructions)
- Consistent horse/team (same horse, volunteers, instructor)
- Reduced stimuli (keep in mind who the other students are in a group class)

### Outcome:

- Improved engagement and regulation

# Example Lesson Plan for ASD Level 2

Goal: To follow 1-2 step directions with moderate verbal cues for implementing regulation skills and recall of steps.

Warm-up: Present a visual schedule of the activities for the day. Mount and ride around arena 1-2 laps. Incorporate walk/halt transitions.

Activity: Allow rider to choose between two activities, steering through cones or around barrels.

Cool down: 1-2 laps at a slow pace with verbal cues for upcoming transition.

### Level 3 Case Study – Noah

- Non-speaking, high support needs
- Sensory processing challenges

#### Supports:

- Ground-based start (gives them a chance to settle into the environment)
- Structured routine
- 1:1 support (often best served in a private lesson)

#### Outcome:

- Increased regulation and participation (over a long period of time, may not be ready to ride right away)

# Example Lesson Plan for ASD Level 3

Goal: To sit on horse for 5 minutes with minimal dysregulation with max VC for implementation of coping skills.

Warm-up: Have client greet horse on ground, have client engage brushing the horse or lifting large cones to set in arena.

Activity: Riding at a slow pace around the arena with minimal sudden turning or sudden stopping.

Cool-down: After getting off have rider help put saddle away.

# Importance of Selecting the Right Horse

## Physical Safety

- Reduce risk of overstimulation or escalation
- Support participant stability and regulation
- Provide predictable responses during lessons



## Importance of Selecting the Right Horse

### Emotional Regulation

- Help calm the nervous system
- Increase engagement and focus
- Build trust and confidence

The wrong horse may:

- Increase anxiety
- Create sensory overload
- Lead to dysregulation or fear



# Importance of Selecting the Right Horse

## Sensory Processing

- Provides vestibular input
- Provides proprioceptive input
- Both of these:
  - Reduce anxiety
  - Provide a feeling of safety and body awareness
  - Improve balance and movement



# Preferred Horse Traits for ASD Level 1

- Responsive but predictable
- Forward-moving without being overly sensitive
- Able to tolerate rider inconsistency calmly
- Able to be ridden independently



# Preferred Horse Traits for ASD Level 2

- Calm, consistent temperament
- Predictable movement and reactions
- Moderate energy level
- Comfortable with repetitive routines and slower pacing



# Preferred Horse Traits for ASD Level 3

- Extremely calm and tolerant
- Slow, rhythmic movement
- Comfortable standing quietly for long periods
- Unbothered by adaptive equipment, vocalizations, or unusual movement patterns



# In Conclusion

- Autism is a spectrum disorder with variability of supports required throughout the spectrum
- Use of appropriate terminology provides respect and dignity to individuals
- Horses play an important role in assisting with regulation, building social skills, improving cognition and independence



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