

AUTISM CRITERIA CHANGE FAQ

When will the new autism criteria be in effect?

The revised autism criteria became effective August 23, 2019.

Will students who were identified as a student with autism prior to August 23, 2019 have to meet the new criteria?

Students identified prior to that date would not have to meet the new criteria unless their IEP team determines that a reevaluation is necessary to determine if the student continues to have a disability of autism.

Why has the OPI changed the educational criteria for autism?

The previous criteria were 19 years old and a blending of the DSM IV psychological criteria for Aspergers Disorder and Autistic Disorder. In the past 19 years we have learned a great deal more about autism and felt that new criteria language was needed.

What are some of the bigger changes in the criteria?

Age 3 – The previous Montana criteria required that documentation must support the existence of autism before age three . . . but also said that if the child did not manifest the characteristics of autism before at 3 but still met the rest of the criteria, he or she could still be identified as having autism. That language was confusing and unnecessary and was removed as it allowed a student to be identified regardless of the age at which autism characteristics became evident.

Emotional Disturbance – The previous criteria stated that the student “may not be identified as having autism if their educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the student had an emotional disturbance.” That language has caused confusion over whether a student could be identified as having both autism and emotional disturbance (they can.) That language was removed.

Simple Language - The previous criteria contained language from the DSM IV that was unclear to most readers, such as, " Significant delays in nonverbal

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communication are manifested by a marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors . . . " The proposed criteria has tried to use more simple language and behavioral descriptions of characteristics.

How was the new criteria developed?

The OPI conducted a review of the educational autism criteria for all 50 states, the DSM 5 and the IDEA criteria for autism. The OPI then held seven meetings across the state to gather input. In the meetings over 50 parents and educators* reviewed 164 potential characteristics of autism for language and whether the characteristic was more descriptive of, "classic autism" or "Aspergers-type autism." Based on their feedback and input the OPI then developed the revised criteria.

The revised criteria was then made available for two rounds of public comments, which were reviewed by the OPI and used to craft the new educational criteria for autism.

* Parents, special educators, special education administrators, speech-language providers, school psychologists and representatives from the Montana Council of Administrators of Special Education, Parent's Lets Unite for Kids (PLUK), the Montana Speech and Hearing Association and the Montana Association for School Psychologists.

The criteria states that the student must have "Significant difficulties ". How do we determine if a difficulty is significant?

The Evaluation Report team makes the determination as to whether difficulties are significant for a particular characteristic. This is not a substantial change in wording – the previous rule used the term, "Significant delays."

Why didn't the OPI just adopt the DSM-5 criteria for autism?

The DSM-5 criteria were developed for use by trained clinicians. The Cautionary Statement for Forensic Use of DSM-5 states: "Use of DSM-5 to assess for the presence of a mental disorder by nonclinical, nonmedical, or otherwise insufficiently trained individuals is not advised." (American Psychiatric Association, 2013.) Through an intensive review of criteria for autism used in other states, and the input of a large group of stakeholders, the

proposed criteria were developed to be closely related to the DSM-5 criteria, without confusing the educational evaluation process with a medical evaluation and diagnosis.

10.16.3011 CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENT AS HAVING AUTISM

(1) The student may be identified as having autism if the results of a comprehensive evaluation document significant difficulties in social communication; social interaction; and in restricted and repetitive behaviors and interests. A student must have at least one characteristic in each of these three areas and a total of eight or more characteristics to be identified as a student with autism.

(2) The characteristics below are those which most frequently occur with the student but may not occur in every situation.

(a) Significant difficulties in social communication must be documented for at least one of the following characteristics:

- (i) initiating or maintaining eye contact while interacting with others;
- (ii) use of facial expressions to communicate with others;
- (iii) identifying and/or understanding the communicative intent of another person's facial expressions;
- (iv) using gestures to direct attention to an object (for example, showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest);
- (v) using gestures for communication;
- (vi) responding to or interpreting other's use of gestures;
- (vii) noticing or interpreting other's use of body language;
- (viii) use of own body language for communication;
- (ix) expressive verbal or alternative communication;
- (x) receptive verbal communication or;
- (xi) interpretation of other's verbal communication (often concrete and literal; for example: does not understand idioms or sarcasm).

(b) Significant difficulties in social interaction must be documented for at least one of the following characteristics:

- (i) seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with others;
- (ii) initiating social interaction unless seeking preferred items or help;
- (iii) responding to social interactions initiated by others;
- (iv) initiating a conversation on non-preferred topics;
- (v) sustaining a conversation on non-preferred topics;

(vi) explaining another person's perspective (for example, what other people are thinking or feeling);

(vii) joining play activities of others (solitary play preferred);

(viii) play lacks elements of make-believe;

(ix) participating in make-believe play with others; or

(x) engaging in social imitative play (for example, playacting, fantasy characters, animals, pretending adult role).

(c) Significant difficulties resulting from restricted and repetitive behaviors and interests must be documented for at least one of the following characteristics:

(i) makes repeated vocalizations or verbalizations (for example, repeats same word, phrase, or sound);

(ii) persistent preoccupation with specific objects or parts of objects;

(iii) engages in repeated, repetitive movements with objects such as sticks or string, lining up toys, flipping objects, spinning objects;

(iv) preoccupation with particular interests causes difficulties in social interaction and/or academic performance;

(v) resists when asked to discontinue preferred or special interest activity;

(vi) prefers consistency and resists expected and/or unexpected changes (for example: changing activities, leaving activity unfinished, changes in routine or daily schedule); or

(vii) engages in repetitive physical behaviors such as body rocking, spinning self, finger flicking, and/or hand flapping.