Department of Teaching, Learning & Leading

TLL 1505/2505 Autism: Characteristics and Interventions

SPRING 2026

Instructor: Johanna Higgins, PhD, BCBA-D Assistant Professor of Practice Department of Teaching, Learning & Leading **Email:** jhiggins@pitt.edu	**Day/Time:** Tues & Thurs 9:30 – 10:45 AM **Location:** 5601 Wesley W. Posvar Hall **Office hours:** by appointment **Phone:**

School of Education Mission

We ignite learning. We strive for well-being for all. **We teach**. We commit to student, family, and community success. **We commit to educational equity**. We advocate. We work for justice. **We cultivate relationships**. We forge engaged partnerships. **We collaborate**. We learn with and from communities. **We innovate and agitate**. We pursue and produce knowledge. We research. **We disrupt and transform inequitable educational structures**. We approach learning as intertwined with health, wellness, and human development. We address how national, global, social, and technological change impacts learning. **We shape practice and policy**. We teach with and for dignity. We think. We dream. **We lead with integrity**. We are the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh.

Course Description

This course presents information on the characteristics of and supports for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Introductory material includes a focus on monitoring, screening, and diagnostic tools. Participants learn how to observe young children to identify criteria. Evidence-based supports for autistic learners are described. Representatives from the community share knowledge and skills, including the various roles professionals may serve when guiding children with autism and their families.

Course Objectives

As a result of active participation and successful completion of requirements, students will:

Define the diagnostic and educational process and criteria for ASD	Understand the impact of having a child with autism and caregiver support	Determine evidence-based supports for children with autism	Identify environmental adaptations and accommodations to guide autistic children	Connect with and listen to community providers supporting children and families	Reflect to grow after learning from providers supporting children and families

Important Course Information

Disabilities Studies Certificate: This course meets the criteria for the Disabilities Studies Certificate Program.

Description of the Program: *Equity, inclusion, and understanding are at the heart of Disability Studies. As a powerful challenge to the assumptions about people with disabilities, Disability Studies looks at disability as a facet of society and culture, and as an individual experience that is not solely governed by a medical model. The significance of disability is important in all professional and academic contexts such as cultural studies, law, health research and practice, and education.*

Disability Studies & This Course: An underlying theme of this course is to prepares students to ethically and accurately represent autistic individuals through a neurodiversity-affirming lens, emphasizing respectful language and authentic perspectives. Students identify environmental, social and policy barriers that impact access and participation, and apply evidence-based and inclusive strategies (e.g., behavior intervention plans, universal design for learning, communication supports) to increase equity and accessibility across settings for people with autism. The course builds advocacy skills by addressing legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and connects real-world education to practical community contexts.

Meetings

Classes are held in person on *Tuesday* and *Thursday*, 9:30 – 10:45 AM. Exceptions are noted on the course schedule.

Communication

Announcements will be posted weekly on Canvas (Learning Management System; LMS). Please change your settings so these are pushed out to you via email immediately after they are posted.

- **How to Manage Canvas Notifications**: https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Canvas-Basics-Guide/How-do-I-manage-my-Canvas-notification-settings/ta-p/615326

Communicate with your instructor directly via email at jhiggins@pitt.edu. If there is something that impacts you (e.g., for example, you use an autism strategy at work or in your placement that we discussed) please email to share! Your instructor appreciates hearing about the application of this class outside of your learning environment at Pitt.

Office hours

Please schedule an individual meeting anytime. Generally, I will be in my office (5th floor of Posvar) immediately following class. Stop by to say hello. I am also happy to meet with you in person at a time that works for your schedule or arrange a Zoom web conference.

Participation Expectations

Learning is a social process. You are expected to attend class, use Canvas regularly, and explore the content shared weekly. Be an active participant with seminar presenters and collaborate with other learners. In the event of prolonged absences in which you do not participate in the prior (due

to sickness or family emergency), contact me via email (jhiggins@pitt.edu). Extreme emergencies will be handled on an individual basis.

Feedback

For most assignments, the instructor provides a group-level summary for the class and/or individual feedback rubrics. The instructor analyzes highlights, patterns of strengths, points of improvements and posted as an announcement. Individual written feedback can be requested by a student at any time.

Assignment submissions in Canvas

PLEASE include your first and last name at the top of any document you submit. Save any file you submit with LAST name followed by the assignment title (e.g., **Higgins_Reflection)**.

Assignment Extensions

Need an extension? **Your instructor is happy to provide one!** Given instructor permission, assignments will be accepted within two weeks of the due date. Below is an example of the email you can send to an instructor:

Dr. Higgins,

I have been sick this week. May I have an extension on the Observation Report assignment until this Friday? Thank you!

Gianna Mitchell

Confidentiality

You are responsible to maintain the confidentiality of all the students you work with in field placements related to your coursework at the University of Pittsburgh. When writing or completing assignments for courses or speaking about your field experience and the students you work with, use **pseudonyms** (not initials) for student, teacher, and school names. In public, it is your responsibility to keep written assignments and any other materials bearing the names of students, teachers, or staff secure from the view of others.

Grades

To receive a course letter grade of A-C, all required assignments, projects, and course materials must be completed. The instructor can consider an incomplete only if a substantial portion (50% or more) of the class assignments is completed with a satisfactory grade (A-B) at the time of request. In all other circumstances, students should plan to withdraw from the course.

Percentage (%)	Letter Grade
99	A+
94 - 98	A
90 - 93	A-
87 - 89	B+
83 - 86	B
80 - 82	B-
74 -79	C
69 -73	D

Technology Requirements

Students will need the following technology to participate fully in this course.

- Active Pitt email address (if you forward your mail make sure to check regularly)
- Access to Canvas LMS (Learning Management System)
- Internet connection (preferably high -speed broadband wired or wireless)
- Supported Web browser (Google Chrome is strongly recommended)
- Word processor (such as Microsoft Word)
- Adobe Reader (to view PDF files)

Notes: The University of Pittsburgh has many computer labs that students may use. There are also printing stations throughout the buildings. The instructor recognizes that not all students may have access to the technology listed above. Please reach out to the instructor to discuss accommodations if needed.

Tech Support

Contact Pitt IT for technical assistance by submitting a ticket to the helpdesk. Students may also contact 412-624-HELP (437) or email helpdesk@pitt.edu.

Course, School, and University Policies

Online Conduct

Appropriate online academic conduct means maintaining a safe learning environment based on mutual respect and civility. All participants in Pitt online courses are expected to behave professionally by adhering to these standards of conduct: Never transmit or promote content known to be illegal. Respect other people's privacy as well as your own. Forgive other people's mistakes. Never use harassing, threatening, embarrassing, or abusive language or actions. Online communication that fails to meet these standards of conduct will be removed from the course. Repeated misconduct may result in being blocked from online discussions, receiving a grade penalty, or being dismissed from the course. Such misconduct online may be reported to officials for action in accordance with University policy. If you ever encounter inappropriate content in our course, please contact your instructor with your concerns.

Academic Integrity

Students in this course will be expected to comply with the University of Pittsburgh's Policy on Academic Integrity. Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level,

as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity. This may include, but is not limited to, the confiscation of the examination of any individual suspected of violating University Policy.

Disability Services

If you have a disability that requires special testing accommodations or other modifications, PLEASE notify the instructor and Disability Resources and Services no later than the second week of the term. Having challenges keeping up? Meet with the DRS Specialists to discuss next steps and support. The Disability Resources and Services office is located in 140 William Pitt Union on the Oakland campus. Explore the website for how to Get Started with DRS https://www.wellbeing.pitt.edu/disability-access/disability-resources-services.

TLL Departmental Grievance Procedures

The rights and responsibilities of faculty and students are described in the University's Academic Integrity Guidelines at: https://www.provost.pitt.edu/academic-integrity-guidelines. The purpose of the guidelines is to ensure the rights and responsibilities of faculty and students in their relationships with each other. When a student in TLL believes that a faculty member has not met their obligations (as an instructor or in another capacity) as described in the Academic Integrity Guidelines, the student should follow this procedure:

1. The student should talk directly to the faculty member to attempt to resolve the matter.
2. If the matter cannot be resolved at that level, the student should talk to the relevant program coordinator.
3. If the matter remains unresolved, the student should talk to the Dr. Sheila Conway, TLL Student Liaison.
4. If needed, the student should next talk to the SOE associate dean of students (currently Dr. Andrea Zito).
5. If the matter still remains unresolved, the student should file a written statement of charges with the dean's designated Academic Integrity Administrative Officer (currently Dr. Andrea Zito).

Civility Commitment

As future or current teachers, we will operate from a standpoint that everyone believes that all students deserve a quality education in a safe setting. The same can be said for university learning. A university classroom is, by definition, space where a free exchange of ideas must happen, but where consideration for others, their views, and their life experiences is also paramount. When you are uncomfortable with an idea, it is your right to speak up about that. As we learn with and about people with very different life experiences and beliefs from our own, it is imperative that we respect these perspectives and use respectful language in discussing challenging ideas. Carefully consider your language choices to ensure that all learners feel safe and valued. If at any time you are uncomfortable please feel free to speak out and/or speak to me privately.

Sexual Harassment

The University of Pittsburgh is committed to the maintenance of a community free from all forms of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment violates University policy as well as state, federal, and local laws. It is neither permitted nor condoned. It is also a violation of the University of Pittsburgh's policy against sexual harassment for any employee or student at the University of Pittsburgh to

attempt in any way to retaliate against a person who makes a claim of sexual harassment. Any individual who, after thorough investigation and an informal or formal hearing, is found to have violated the University's policy against sexual harassment, will be subject to disciplinary action, including, but not limited to, reprimand, suspension, termination, or expulsion. Any disciplinary action taken will depend upon the severity of the offense. For more information, see the Web site: https://www.policy.pitt.edu/cs-20-sexual-misconduct-formerly-06-05-01

Diversity and Inclusion Statement

I consider this classroom to be a place where you will be treated with respect, and I welcome individuals of all ages, backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, genders, gender identities, gender expressions, national origins, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, ability – and other visible and nonvisible differences. All members of this class are expected to contribute to a respectful, welcoming and inclusive environment for every other member of the class.

Names and Pronouns

I will gladly honor your request to address you by your name and pronoun (that may differ from the school records). Please advise me of this preference early in the term so that I may make appropriate changes to my records. You may email me or tell me in person in class, whichever is most comfortable to you! I want to be sure you feel yourself and comfortable in our class community.

Statement on Classroom Recording

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

Copyright Statement

These materials may be protected by copyright. United States copyright law, 17 USC section 101, et seq., in addition to University policy and procedures, prohibit unauthorized duplication or retransmission of course materials. See Library of Congress Copyright Office and the University Copyright Policy.

Food/Housing Insecurity

Many students, both undergraduate and graduate, experience housing and/or food insecurity that can impact their academic work and general health. Please know there are resources available to you that are confidential. Of course, you are welcome to speak with me if you need support in contacting the right people/offices. You may also consider exploring the Pitt Pantry or Off-Campus Housing Office.

Course Statement and Information on GenAI Usage

Some Use of Generative AI Permitted Under Some Circumstances or With Explicit Permission
During this class, we may use Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT. You will be informed as to when, where, and how these tools are permitted to be used, along with guidance for attribution. Any use outside of this permission constitutes a violation of Pitt's Guidelines on Academic Integrity [PDF].

While AI can be a useful tool, there are some key things to remember when using these models.
AI outputs may…

- not always be reliable or accurate. Always double check the facts.
- create fake citations and references. Cross-reference the quotations and sources with reliable sources.
- be inequitable and unequal in representation. Diversify your sources to ensure equitable representation of cultures, viewpoints, data, and more.

Be careful about material you share. Do not put anything personal about yourself or others into the AI tool. Stay aware of the data usage, security, and privacy policies of the tools you use.

Hold yourself accountable for your work. When you are permitted to use GenAI, create a citation and include the prompt you used and, if possible, a link to the chat. It is best to be up-front about AI usage in your work because using outputs without citation can be flagged as plagiarism. Plagiarism is against the University's academic integrity policy.

Note the citation formats below for your convenience:
MLA citation format: "Prompt text" prompt. *AI tool*, version of tool, company that made the tool, date text was generated. URL.
APA citation format: Company that made the tool (date text was generated). *AI tool (*version of tool) [Large language model]. URL.

Resources:

Anders, A. & Dux Speltz, E. (2023). "AI Ethics: Student Guide."

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Information Literacy. (2024, June 17). https://lib.guides.umd.edu/AI