Dear Classmates:

I understand that we will be going to school together this year! Sometimes school can be a very difficult place for me, but here is some information that might help us be successful together in our learning community.

As you probably know, a hidden disability called Autism challenges me. There are other names like Aspergers, and PDD, but Autism is the umbrella word for all of us with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Autism makes it hard for me to understand the environment around me. I have barriers in my brain that you can’t see, but which make it difficult for me to adapt to my surroundings.

School is a difficult place for me to be. With large crowds in the hallways I can easily become confused about what is going on. The loud noises and everything I’m seeing can also confuse me. Sometimes people pressing up to me to pass, or even bumping into me can scare me or even feel painful. I know that they don’t mean to upset me, but it’s hard for me to think about that in the hall. It may make me want to run away. If there are strong smells like perfumes or colognes, I may become overwhelmed and feel sick to my stomach.

Sometimes I may seem rude and abrupt, but it is only that because I have to try so hard to understand people and at the same time, make myself understood. People with Autism have different abilities: some may not speak, some write beautiful poetry, others are whizzes in math (Albert Einstein was thought to be Autistic), or may have difficulty making friends. This is what it means to be a spectrum disorder. We are all different and need various degrees of support.

I get easily frustrated too. Sometimes when we are learning new things in class I am trying so hard to focus on what we are learning, but also trying to be a good classmate as well. Sometimes when I’m having a hard time learning or being a good classmate I might make noises or move a lot. I don’t mean to disrupt your learning. Sometimes when you make noises or move a lot it is more than I can handle, but I do my best to extend the same courtesy you’ve given me by being patient.

Being with lots of other people is like standing next to a moving freight train and trying to decide how and when to jump aboard. I feel frightened and confused a lot of the time. This is why I need things the same as much as possible. Once I learn how things happen, I can get by OK. But if something, anything, changes, then I have to relearn the situation all over again!

When you try to talk to me, I often can’t understand what you say because there is a lot of distraction around. I have to concentrate very hard to hear and understand one thing at a time. You might think I am ignoring you – I am not. Rather, I am hearing everything and not knowing what is most important to respond to. This makes me frustrated sometimes and I might get upset.

When there are changes in the routine in class, or pep rally’s, or drills, it may be fun for most people, but for me it’s very hard work. Even when we are playing games for review it’s very hard work and can be extremely stressful. I may have to get away from all the commotion and calm down. Some times sitting for even 5 minutes is very difficult for me. I feel so antsy by all the smells, sounds, and people around me.

Lunch is hard for me not only because of all the noise, smells, and tastes, but because I want to be part of the group so much and don’t know how to join in at a table. I’m not sure where to sit or who to sit with. Sometimes I don’t know what you are talking about and might change the topic without realizing it.

It may seem that I am bossy or controlling, because that is how I fit into the world around me. Things have to be done in a way that I am familiar with or else I might get confused and frustrated. It doesn’t mean that you have to change the way you are doing things – just please be patient with me, and understanding of how I have to cope.

Teachers have no control over how I feel inside. People with Autism have little things they do to help themselves feel more comfortable. The teachers call it “self regulation” or “stimming” I might rock, hum, flick my fingers or any number of things. I am doing what I can to get my brain to adapt to your world. Sometimes I cannot stop myself from talking, singing, or doing an activity I enjoy. Teachers call this perseverating because I cannot stop myself from doing something that makes me feel comfortable.

Teachers have to watch me more closely for my own good and my own safety. Sometimes they have to help me quickly, and my have to interrupt what they are doing to help me. If I fall apart or act out in a way that you consider socially inappropriate, please remember that I am not able to follow some of the social rules. I am a unique person – an interesting person. I will find my place in this school that is comfortable for all of us, as long as you’ll try to view the world through my eyes.