



General Strategies for Students with Autism

No two students with autism or autism spectrum disorders (such as Asperger syndrome and high functioning autism) are the same. While those with autism often have many difficulties in school setting, they also have many strengths that can be incorporated to enhance their education. Sometime, educators focus on the things a child can't do, won't do, or has difficulty with. When working with students with autism, it is essential to identify, and utilize their many strengths (that sometimes are unnoticed or forgotten). The following suggestions are intended to provide some general ideas about how to work with areas that many kids with autism find difficult. They are suggested as starting strategies only, and may not apply to every child. It is important that the student's team work together to ensure the strategies chosen are right for each child.

Transitions and Change

Some people with autism explain that the way that they make sense of the world is by looking for and creating structure and order. Many students with autism find new activities, change, and unstructured activities puzzling and anxiety provoking. In order to ease anxious feelings, the following strategies are effective.

- Provide Structure
 - An environment where rules are absent or inconsistent is confusing for a child who makes sense of the world through order. Ensure that classroom rules, steps in assignments, or tasks in the day are clearly explained in sequence. Visual reminders such as lists are often very helpful for the student to refer to.
- Advance preparation (Verbal or Visual)
 - Whenever something out of the ordinary happens (e.g. an assembly) it is important to prepare your student in advance. This will decrease anxious feelings and let the child mentally prepare for change.
- Use Schedules
 - Schedules provide students with a visual cue of what is to come.
- Use additional visual cues (Sign language, pictures, gestures) that always mean the same thing to prepare a child for change
- Modeling-demonstrate skills and behaviours you would like your student to engage in first. Always demonstrate the proper behaviours (demonstrating negative behaviours may result in copying poor habits)
- Pre-teach coping skills (e.g. when the firebell rings, this is what we do....)
- Work with parents to prepare kids for change. Parents know their child best and spend most non-school time with the child. Often, the transition between home and school can be problematic, particularly if consistency between home and school is poor. Also, some kids seem to be able to 'hold it together' at school, but fall apart at home when they are upset or stressed by happenings at school.

Social and Language Issues

Kids with autism often interpret language literally. For example, if you say “take a seat” your student may pick up the seat and take it. Speech and language Issues vary from child to child, but many kids with autism speak late and require intensive speech and language intervention. Ensure that you work together with your classroom teacher and speech and language pathologist (SLP) to provide appropriate instruction.

- Avoid use of ‘sayings’ (pull your socks up, etc)
- Try to be aware of the sayings you may use
- Explain commonly used expressions
- Model correct speech

Making sense of social situations is often difficult for kids across the autism spectrum. Many social expectations that most people learn automatically are not immediately observed by those on the spectrum. As a result, social skill interventions are often needed. Various social skill training programs are available and most provide specific suggestions. In general, some suggestions are:

- Explain the unspoken rules that guide social situations
- Determine whether the child has difficulty knowing what is appropriate or doing what is appropriate
 - If a child doesn’t know how to behave, then teach them
 - If a child can’t apply what he knows about social situations, then you need to provide lots of practice situations that are similar to real life scenarios
- Teach key words intended to cue certain behaviors
- Break skills into steps and teach them in this manner
- Explain the ‘why’ of social behavior. Explain what others might think about the way a child behaves (in positive terms).
- Use visual prompts (e.g. a symbol, a sign)
- Make unspoken expectations EXPLICIT and Clear
 - You can teach these ‘rules’ for behaviour. For example: “at recess, when there is a mini-hockey game on the paved area, we walk around, not through, the game”

Sensory Issues

Children with Autism often have varying sensitivities to touch, taste, visual distractions, and noise. Behaviour problems are commonly triggered by sensory issues and most often, these are not easily observed.

- Check with parent to understand specific issues for each child
- Watch the child and note stressful reactions such as humming, engaging in stereotypic behaviors, etc.
- Notice patterns in these behaviours

You may find you need to:

- Avoid bright lights
- Monitor noise levels and intervene when needed



- Be aware of the child's sense of touch, which may include the clothing that they wear
- Don't force a child to engage in an activity if they are resisting

When a child is having an outburst, look to sensory explanations first!

Social Interaction/Social Skills

Kids with autism often have trouble relating to others. They need to:

- Be made aware of social conventions in a direct and explicit way
- Be assisted in social interactions
- Be taught situation specific skills. For example, how you move in the pool environment, change room rules, library rules, etc.
- Use rules and steps to guide behavior
- Reinforce correct interactions (verbally or with tangible rewards)
- Eye contact may be hard to maintain and should never be forced. In this case proximity and verbal cues are needed
 - Or, use alternate, pictorial visual cues
- Pre-teach and prepare students in advance



Repetitive behaviors

Many kids with autism respond to stress and anxiety by engaging in unusual behaviors like hand-wringing or rocking. Many researchers believe that these behaviors are linked to sensory stressors and change (things that make children with autism feel uncomfortable). Some people like to change or stop repetitive behaviors, however, this is not always a good idea. Many kids who are discouraged from engaging in a behaviour they find comforting will find a substitute for that behaviour. Sometimes, the new behaviour is more disruptive or disturbing than the old.

- Repetitive behaviours may include hand wringing, face touching, humming, repeating words, noises or phrases
- These behaviors may seem disturbing, but it is usually best to ignore them and address the stressful situation.
- When evaluating a behavior, it is helpful to judge it by the following standards:
 - Does it hurt anyone?
 - Is it disruptive to learning?
 - Can it be managed with a verbal or visual cue?
 - When does it happen?
- If the behavior is not dangerous or interfering with learning, it is probably not necessary to change it.

Areas of Interest

Many kids with autism spectrum disorders focus on areas of interest that seem more intense and in-depth than typical children. They may not be easily distracted from the topic and will discuss it at length.

In these cases, it is useful to:

- Thanks the child for discussion, but provide an alternate time to talk about topic
- Relate instruction to topic of interest when possible

- Provide times when the student is encouraged to share their topic of interest. If a child has an area of expertise, work together with the teacher to find ways to encourage this and celebrate it as a strength. Sometimes, an area of interest can be used to direct learning.



Physical Issues

Many kids with autism also have additional physical issues. Some kids have toileting issues, some have intestinal problems, or other physical concerns. A variety of abilities exist in gross and fine motor skills. Many kids with autisms may seem uncoordinated or physically disabled when motor skills are observed. Muscle tone may also be an issue. In these cases it is important to remember:

- Practice will increase skills
- Modeling skills and breaking movements into minute steps may be helpful
- Consult with parents as to child's physical limitations
- If a child has an occupational or physical therapist, you may be required to carry out an exercise or treatment program designed to improve motor skills.

Attention

Many Children with autism may also have attention problems or they may seem like they have attention problems. The additional handout on working with children with attention problems may be useful for you.

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