Strategies used in the classroom for supporting children with Autism

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What is autism?

Autism is a life-long developmental disability that prevents people from understanding what they see, hear, and otherwise sense. This results in severe problems with social relationships, communication, and behavior.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) defines autism as a pervasive developmental disorder characterized by:

- Impairments in communication
- Impairments in social interaction, and
- Restricted, repetitive, and stereotypic patterns of behavior, interests, and activities.

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASDs) handle information in their brain differently than other people. ASDs are “spectrum disorders.” That means ASDs affect each person in different ways, and can range from very mild to severe. Children with ASDs share some similar symptoms, such as problems with social interaction. But there are differences in when the symptoms start, how severe they are, and the exact nature of the symptoms.

It is a spectrum condition, which means that, while all children with autism share certain difficulties, their condition will affect them in different ways. Some people with autism are able to live relatively independent lives but others may have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of specialist support.

Children with autism may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colors

What is ASD?

ASD stands for *Autism Spectrum Disorder* and can sometimes be referred to as *Autistic Spectrum Disorder*. In this text Autism and ASD mean the same. ASDs are any developmental disabilities that have been caused by a brain abnormality. A person with an ASD typically has difficulty with social and communication skills.

A person with ASD will typically also prefer to stick to a set of behaviors and will resist any major (and many minor) changes to daily activities. Several relatives and friends of people with ASDs have commented that if the person knows a change is coming in advance, and has time to prepare for it; the resistance to the change is either gone completely or is much lower.

The support strategies

The support strategies for children with autism are good for all students and are simply good teaching practices!

The primary support for students with ASD involves the development of visual *support strategies* to compensate for their impaired communication and to assist in social interaction and in the establishment of routines. Visual support strategies are an integral part of communication as they enhance the effectiveness of both receptive and expressive communication (Hodgdon, 1995). Visual support strategies provide a point of reference for students who have difficulty processing spoken language or who rely on reinforcement of routines to be successful. Students often demonstrate relative strengths in concrete thinking, rote memory, and understanding of visual-spatial relationships, and difficulties in abstract thinking, social cognition, communication, and attention. Pictographic and written cues can often help the student to learn, communicate, and develop self-control.

Visual aids and symbols range in complexity from simple and concrete to abstract. The continuum moves from real object or situation, color photograph, color picture, black and white picture, line drawing, and finally to graphic symbol and written language. Some uses for visual supports in the classroom include: schedules (and calendars); rules/routines; and choice time selections.

Schedules and Calendars: Schedules and calendars are routinely used in classrooms to help students learn to organize their time and to teach independence.

Moreover, they communicate information about daily, weekly and monthly events and provide order and an understanding of sequence. Most importantly, they assist students to manage themselves thereby decreasing problem behavior associated with a lack of understanding or apprehension about future events.

Picture schedules are even more powerful because they help a student visualize the actions. Schedules can be broad or detailed. You can use them with any sequence of events.

Example of a broad schedule:

Classroom on Monday:

Picture of “Unpacking school bag”

Picture of “Floor time”

Picture of “Snack”

Picture of “Music class”

Picture of “Math”

Picture of “Lunch”

Picture of “Playing at recess”

Picture of “Reading a book”

Picture of “Geography”

Picture of “Packing school bag”

Picture of “Saying goodbye”

Routines: Adherence to routines can be both strength and hindrance to progress for children with autism. Routines help children with autism regulate their behaviors by providing structure and reminders about what is expected. Furthermore, routines are useful for teaching new skills which are complex, but which may be broken down into smaller chunks.

Choice Time: Choice time or centre offers a chance for the typical child to engage in imaginative play. Choice time for a child with autism can be very difficult because of the lack of structure inherent in the activity. On the other hand, choice time may be presented as a contingency to work completion, using preferred activities as a motivator for completing less preferred activities. In scenarios, centre or choice time, providing guidelines for choice can help the child with ASD anticipate what to do, thereby decreasing the probability of challenging behaviors. Whether choices are being used as a motivator for work completion or for centre, the possible selections should be presented prior to work commencement so that the student with autism has an opportunity to process the information.

Visual support strategies are one easy method to support both typical children as well as children with autism to learn routines, calendar concepts, time concepts and to help them learn to anticipate their day.

Use concrete language:

Always keep your language simple and concrete. Get your point across in as few words as possible. Avoid using sarcasm. If a student accidentally knocks all your papers on the floor and you say “Great!” you will be taken literally and this action might be repeated on a regular basis. Avoid using idioms. Give very clear choices and try not to leave choices open ended. You’re bound to get a better result by asking “Do you want to read or draw?” than by asking “What do you want to do now?”

Children with autism are not rude. They simply don’t understand social rules or how they’re supposed to behave. It can feel insulting when you excitedly give a gift or eagerly try and share information and you get little to no response. As an example, if you enthusiastically greet a child with autism and you get the cold shoulder, create a “Greeting Lesson”. Take two index cards. Draw a stick figure saying “Hi” on the first card. On the second card draw a stick figure smiling and waving. Show each card to the child as you say. “When somebody says Hi, you can either say “Hi” or you can smile and wave. Which one do you want to do?” Praise the child highly after a response and have your cards ready for the next morning greeting! Keep it consistent by asking the parents to follow through with this activity at home.

Alternatives to Verbal Communication:

Many students with autism have impairments in communication, particularly expressive communication. For those who are non-verbal, an augmentative communication system must be in place. The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS has been very effective. Voice output communication devices may be very appropriate. For those students who do have verbal communication skills, many benefit from having some form of augmentative communication available as a back-up system for times when expressive communication may fail them. It is very common for students to be unable to access verbal communication when in a stressful emotional state. Having a back-up visual form of communication can assist with expression and reduce aggressive behaviors.

This approach encompasses as many communication modalities as possible (e.g. sign, visuals, speech etc) to try and give as many cues as possible.

Functional Curriculum:

Children with autism have a great deal of potential to live and work independently as adults. The curriculum should place a strong emphasis on following a functional curriculum. Skills that emphasize daily living skills, community skills, recreation and leisure and employment need to be incorporated into the curriculum. Students in inclusive settings can follow the regular curriculum, but emphasis should be placed on those skills that are the most functional. Functional academics should always include literacy (reading and writing, basic math, time and money skills. Self-care skills, domestics, recreation and community experiences should also be emphasized. Older students should have formal employment opportunities beginning in middle school.

Physical contact:

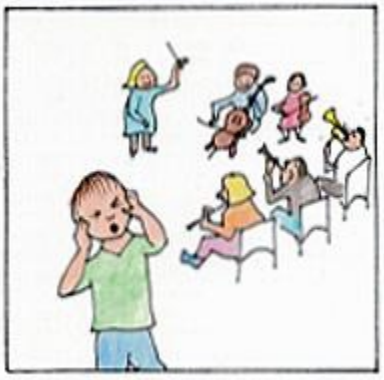
A number of children with an ASD do not like cuddling or being touched like other children do. It is wrong to say that all children with autism are like that. Many will hug a relative - usually the mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, teacher, and or sibling(s) - and enjoy it greatly. Often it is a question of practice and anticipating that physical contact is going to happen. For example, if a child suddenly tickles another child's feet, he will most likely giggle and become excited and happy. If that child were to tickle the feet of a child with autism, without that child anticipating the contact, the result might be completely different.

Transitions:

Children on the autism spectrum feel secure when things are constant. Changing an activity provides a fear of the unknown. This elevates stress which produces anxiety. Example: you can use a timer. Explain that when the timer goes off, it's time to start a new activity. As an example you can say "In 3 minutes we're going to pick a toy and then we're going down the hall to music class". Using schedules helps with transitions too as students have time to "psyche themselves up" for the changes ahead.

Sensory Sensitivity :

Before you design a program and implementing an Individual Education / Learning Plan (IEP / ILP) and putting strategies into place, you have to have an in-depth knowledge of the child. You have to have an awareness of the child's sensory needs and sensitivities. For instance, if the child has sensitivity to light, you have to look at their placement in the classroom and also at things like curtains and blinds. Special glasses may also be appropriate for light sensitivity. If the child has sensitivity to noise, the other students have to have an awareness of their own noise levels. The child with ASD may not be able to take part in lessons such as music, if they have noise sensitivity. A sensitivity to touch may mean that certain art subjects are not appropriate.



Rewards before consequences:

We all love being rewarded and people with autism are no different. Rewards and positive reinforcement are a wonderful way to increase desired behavior. Help students clearly understand which behaviors and actions lead to rewards. If possible, let your students pick their own reward so they can anticipate receiving it. An example of this type of reward system is where a student will begin with a blank sheet of paper. For each good behavior the

student will receive a smiley face or a star. When used correctly, rewards are very powerful and irresistible. There are many wonderful ideas for reward systems. Ten tokens might equal a big prize. Choice objects to play with after a student does a great job. Rewards don't have to be big. They do have to be something a student desires and show students they have done a great job. Every reward should be showered in praise.

Adaptation of materials:

Some materials will need to be adapted to help learning. Certain tasks may need visual guidelines. Some children with autism will learn more effectively using "hands-on" tools, for instance using play-dough to shape letters, or sand to draw the shape of letters with their fingers.

Physical Structure:

Physical structure refers to the way in which we set up and organize the person's physical environment. Organizing the environment in a way that makes sense to the child with autism.

The amount of physical structure needed is dependent on the level of self-control demonstrated by the child, not his cognitive functioning level. As students learn to function more independently.

Physical structure consists of:

Location: Physical structure should be considered in any environment in which the person with autism interacts, including classrooms, playground, workshop/work area, bedroom, hallways, locker/cubby areas, etc.

Design/Layout.

- *Clear visual and physical boundaries:* Each area of the classroom (or environment) should be clearly, visually defined through the arrangement of *furniture* (e.g., bookcases, room, dividers, office panels, shelving units, file cabinets, tables, rugs, etc.) and use of boundary markers, such as carpet squares or colored floor tape. Children with autism typically do not automatically segment their environments like typically developing children. Large, wide-open areas can be extremely difficult for children with autism to understand.

Conclusion:

You can facilitate your student's progress with autism disorders by knowing his weak and strong point, as well as basing ones' teaching approach in making use of his strong points. You should use a common and predictable practice or approach throughout the day, especially during the lesson. You should use modifications and facilitations so that the child with autism disorders grasps the material successfully.

It is important to note that various instructional interventions, such as sensory integration, Picture Exchange Communication System - PECS, Teach, Greenspan's Floor time, discrete trial, etc., can easily be incorporated into the structured teaching approach.

Never speak about a child on the autism spectrum as if they weren't present. People with autism often have acute hearing. They can be absorbed in a book on the other side of the room and despite the noise level in the class, they will easily be able to tune into what you are saying. Despite the lack of reaction they sometimes present, hearing you speak about them in a negative way will crush their self esteem.

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