

Talking Matters

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Helping your child to reach their potential



Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in the classroom.

Children with Aspergers Syndrome or Autism understand the world and social relationships in a different way. By better understanding these differences and how we can manage certain situations may assist children with ASD to manage a busy classroom better.

Students with autism spectrum disorder often have poor listening skills. This will impact on their ability to understand and follow instructions at home and within the classroom. The following strategies may be helpful:

- Gain the student's attention before giving instructions
- Use short simple instructions
- Be very concise and specific
- Use simple sentence structures
- Avoid using abstract concepts
- Break down longer instructions into a series of steps.
- Support verbal instructions with visuals and or gestures
- Repeat information as required



Explicitly teach listening behaviours: The child needs explicit teaching and use of visual reminders regarding good listening behaviours (e.g. 5Ls of listening).

1. Legs still
2. Hands in Lap
3. Look at person talking
4. Lips quiet
5. Listen to teacher

Students with autism spectrum disorder often have uneven language skills. They often have strengths in the area of vocabulary, particularly around their special interests, and some use quite complex sentence structures. Often however they have weaknesses in comprehension, particularly of more abstract concepts and tasks. They also often have difficulty understanding how social context impacts on the meaning of language and so often are very literal in their interpretation. The following points may be helpful:

- Remember to check the student's comprehension of information or tasks
- Ask the student to tell you their understanding of information. Information may be interpreted in a concrete or personal way. If context or social cues are misunderstood then information may be interpreted incorrectly.
- When introducing new topics of work remember to check understanding of vocabulary and concepts and teach as required.
- Encourage students to develop strategies such as highlighting key points, checking understanding and using a dictionary.
- Providing visuals such as Boardmaker symbols alongside texts can help with understanding.

Students with autism spectrum disorder often find sensory stimulation such as noise or visual information distracting, over stimulating and sometimes stressful. Likewise the constant social contact which occurs in the classroom can be stressful for children with ASD. You can help with this as follows:

- Talk to the child's occupational therapist if they have one. If they do not a referral may be helpful.
- Be aware of the individual child's particular sensory sensitivities such as: oversensitivity to noise, sensitivity to specific noises, sensitivity to certain visual information, sensitivity to smells or touch, and minimise the student's exposure to these things as much as is possible.
- Seat the student in a position where exposure to uncomfortable sensory information is reduced as much as possible. This may mean providing the student with a table by themselves.
- Provide the child with a place where they can take a break from sensory or social stimulation for short periods of time. This may be a pile of cushions in a quiet spot in the classroom, or a pop-up tent to minimise visual stimulation. Providing the student with a set number of "timeout cards" to request a break and a timer to indicate when the break is over, allows control of the time spent in the quiet spot, and encourages the student to regulate management of their own sensory needs.
- Build into the student's schedule some quiet, relaxed activities, perhaps based around their special interest, to wind down from activities which are demanding in terms of social or sensory requirements. The student may be to cope with more stimulation if they know that an opportunity to wind down is coming soon.
- Be aware of which activities may be over stimulating such as assemblies, music lessons, unstructured playtime, group work, and work in noisy areas such as art or science areas and provide support strategies as much as possible.

Some students with autism spectrum disorders seek sensory stimulation through movement and touch particularly. These behaviours may include wriggling, fiddling, touching others and mouthing objects. The student's occupational therapist can often provide strategies for managing his behaviour. Providing acceptable sensory input such as sitting on a "sit and move" cushion or holding a sensory toy may help reduce unwanted behaviours.

Social Stories are a tool for teaching social skills to children with autism and other learning difficulties. Social stories provide an individual with accurate information about those situations that he may find difficult or confusing. The situation is described in detail and focus is given to a few key points: the important social cues, the events and reactions the individual might expect to occur in the situation, the actions and reactions that might be expected of him, and why this is expected. The goal of the story is to increase the individual's understanding, comfort, and possibly suggest some appropriate responses for a particular situation.

Students with autism spectrum disorders have difficulty developing social skills. The following may be helpful:

- Explicitly teaching social skills
- Using visuals such as picture cue cards
- Using social stories to teach and reinforce appropriate behaviour
- Pairing students with other students that are good role models
- Using repetition, practice and rewards
- Helping generalisation to different situations



Students with ASD often have difficulty coping with changes to routines. You can help with this by:

- Having a consistent and predictable routine as much as possible.
- Whenever possible alerting the student to any changes which are coming up. Some students may require a number of warnings at varying time periods prior to the activity change.
- Provide pictorial timetables so the child knows what will happen next. Use movable symbols so that any changes can be shown.

- Using social stories to help students feel more comfortable with change and unpredictable situations.

Students with ASD often have uneven learning patterns. They find abstract thinking challenging, yet often have good recall for facts. They are more comfortable with concrete activities and rote learning than with creative activities, such as experimenting, predicting and estimating. They may find whole word approaches to spelling preferable to invented spelling. As visual learners, phonics can often be difficult also. They find writing recounts and procedures easier than story writing. They often read aloud fluently but have difficulty comprehending what they read.

- Be aware of the child's strengths and weaknesses and allow success through strengths and support for weaker areas.
- Providing a concrete model, visual cues and opportunities for repetition and practice are helpful.
- Once skills are developed opportunities to practice skills in different ways and settings are important as transferring skills can be difficult.

Students with ASD are often reluctant to produce written work. The following may be helpful:

- Be very clear and specific about what is required.
- Incorporate interests whenever possible.
- Break the task into small, specific and achievable steps.
- Use a checklist to help with organising materials and moving through the stages of writing.
- Avoid beginning with a blank page. Provide planners, story maps, sentence starters.
- Help the student with the brainstorming and planning stages. Provide visuals at this stage such as symbols or word lists for vocabulary, sequence pictures for story lines.
- Provide concrete rewards for completing steps i.e. write three sentences then get a stamp or token. When a number of tokens or stamps are collected they can be exchanged for a concrete reward such a few minutes of computer time.
- Computer programs are often motivating. Typing and presenting work illustrated with clip art is often more motivating than writing and allows a well presented final product when the student's expectations do not match their motor skills.



Rewards help students learn about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Students with ASD do not always respond to social rewards such as praise in the way that other students do. They may need concrete rewards around their areas of interest. Gradually the frequency of rewards can be reduced.

Students with autism spectrum disorder often have difficulty expressing their feelings such as happy, sad, or angry, using words. They may also have difficulty indicating basic sensations such as hungry, sick, hot, cold, tired and thirsty. When these things cannot be expressed in words they may be expressed through behaviours such as hitting out or withdrawing. Providing the student with visuals such as symbol cards to represent these concepts can help reduce negative behaviours and develop expressive communication skills. Symbol cards can also be used to facilitate expression of social skills such as asking for turns, requesting help in refusing unwanted items or actions.