



- Advise
- Strategies
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Understanding and Supporting Individuals and Families living with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Proactive classroom management strategies for a student with Autism Spectrum Disorders including Asperger Syndrome.

When a student with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) can visually comprehend what is expected in the classroom setting they are able to understand what is happening, what will happen, their learning is enhanced and behaviour problems caused by lack of understanding can decrease. Being able to visually understand what is happening also assists the student to become more independent and confident within the classroom setting.

Use of strategies to enhance the learning outcomes for the student with ASD include: understanding the nature of autism, understanding the unique needs of the individual through both informal and formal assessment, making events predictable, clarifying instructions, structuring assignments and tasks to promote achievement and fully utilising the individual's special interests as a way to promote a willingness to learn and enhance academic skills.

Students with ASD are often seen as non-compliant, stubborn, unmotivated and naughty rather than as confused, focused on repetitive routines and focused on less relevant aspects of a situation. Even students with High Functioning Autism and Asperger Syndrome have basic impairments in communication, comprehension, social interaction, cognitive difficulties, atypical behaviours and find life distressing, which cause major difficulties when required to cope in mainstream situations such as school settings. Students with ASD have difficulty with language and communication that interferes with their ability to attend to, process, understand, or remember verbal instructions and information. Many have difficulty with receptive language in the fact that they find comprehension difficult.

Many characteristics of ASD are similar however; no two individuals present with the same difficulties and differ greatly in terms of cognitive, social and behavioural characteristics. Therefore it is important to develop individual interventions after formal and informal assessment. Formal assessments include those written by psychologists, therapists and autism professionals. Informal assessments are those obtained by discussion with parents, and observation of the student in the classroom environment.

Routines:

Routines can enhance predictability for students with ASD. When a classroom is ordered and predictable it can reduce the stress and anxiety levels for the student with ASD. With strengths in rote learning students with ASD can benefit from having practical, predictable routines in place throughout the school day.

Schedules:

The use of visual and written schedules increases the predictability of the day for the student with ASD. They can benefit from having individualised session, daily, weekly and monthly schedules that assist them to know what to expect at any point in time. The student should be able to check off each activity as it is completed. Avoid using times on the schedule as this can create stress for

the student if an activity goes over time. When a change is anticipated this should be noted on the schedule as soon as possible.

Seating arrangements:

Whenever possible the student's desk should be placed in the classroom to maximize their ability to attend during the sessions. This could be achieved by placing the desk at the front of the room close to the teacher. The teacher then, as required can offer assistance. Being placed at the front of the room also reduces the level of distraction from noise and movement of other students. A single desk placed at the side of the room can be used when the student is required to concentrate on more complicated tasks, or can be used as a place for the student to go when they require some down (quiet) time. It is recommended that the desks remain in a similar predictable position at all times.

Communication:

It is important to ensure the students comprehension, for the teacher to use shorter less complicated instructions, spoken at a slower pace and use of less sophisticated vocabulary, as well as using written instructions to enhance understanding. The most effective way to communicate with a student with ASD is to use written or visual instructions. In the classroom, written information can be provided by way of handouts, worksheets, question sheets etc. If a student is not at reading stage then the use of line drawings will be sufficient.

Written task Cards:

For independent work, tasks cards can assist the student process what is to be done and organise how to go about it. Task cards, can assist with planning, organizing and choosing, generally termed executive functioning skills. It is important for the student to know how much work they are required to do, what needs to be done and what will happen when the work is finished. Laminated task cards can be used or simple instructions can be written on index cards. The use of task cards can create a sense of independence and confidence in the student. Care should be taken to write clearly, allow space in between instructions and provide a way for the student to check off the task as it is completed.

Written communication:

It is beneficial to all involved if a communication book is used to discuss issues that arise for the student with ASD. Parents and teachers should discuss concerns by writing and commenting in a communication book or student diary, email contact can be used as an alternative to the communication book. This alleviates the problems caused by discussing issues in front of the student. Homework and assignment requirements can also be included in the communication book or written on a separate monthly student calendar. Appointments, special events and excursions can also be written on the student calendar to pre-warn the student of coming events or change of plans.

Modified curriculum.

Students with ASD can often stress because they are unable to complete set tasks in an allotted time. This can be avoided by simple curriculum modification. This can be as simple as reducing the number of questions on a math's sheet or stating how many sentences are required for a story. Choice of topic may also promote success when completing an activity. If the student's special interest can be used for an assignment or task then completion of the project is more achievable than if you request the student to complete a project on a topic that is not of any relevance or interest to the student. Use of the special interests can encourage the student to more readily participate in the academic curriculum. If a student is interested in the "Titanic" for instance, the same key learning outcomes can still be addressed such as research, written information, presentation, public speaking etc. by simply modifying the topic of the assignment. In addition, special interests can be used to reinforce less preferred activities by way of reinforcement or motivator.

Teacher – student relationships:

It is important for the teacher to understand the difficulties faced by the student with ASD. It is imperative for the teacher to remain empathetic towards the student and limit criticism of the student and or his/her behaviours. A caring, calm and controlled manner is required when working with a student with ASD. The teacher must be aware of the students over sensitivity to criticism and avoid negative remarks and corrections.

Peer relationships:

Teachers should be aware of the students needs in relation to the playground. Students with ASD are more often than not targets for schoolyard bullies and peer teasing. Peers pick up on the student's difference and can use this as a way to antagonize the student with ASD, thus creating a negative reaction from the student. Students with ASD are often aware of their disability, although they do not understand the negativity shown toward them from their peers. Teachers should ensure that the classroom and playground environments are safe and accepting for the student with ASD. It may be beneficial to have the student's parent come and speak to the class at a time when the student is absent, to explain the student's difficulties. This may assist the student's peers to gain an understanding of the student, ask questions and discuss any fears or concerns that they may have.

Quiet time:

Teachers should remember that some quiet time might assist the student with ASD to cope more effectively throughout the school day. Quiet time, can offer some solitude for the student as well as act as respite away from the confusion of the classroom at a time when the student is stressed or anxious. This can be a separate desk or simply some cushions in the corner of the classroom.

Visual aids:

Visual aids, should be simple to understand and easy to use. Colour coding can also make it easier for the student with ASD to recognise different schedules. For example the three sessions for a school day can be different colours, thus promoting the students recognition and understanding that a particular colour denotes a particular time of day. The activities scheduled for the session can be written in the task column and as each task is completed it can be checked off in the finished column. At the end of each session, an 'end point' should be included, such as recess at the conclusion of the morning session, lunch at the conclusion of the middle session and home time at the end of the day. The student with ASD will often work towards the 'end point' reward. A volume control meter can be used to assist the student know what volume they should be using during a particular session. For example, inside voice used in group-time, quiet voice when talking to the person next to you etc.

The individual task cards can be used for each separate activity. For example:

Math's task:

- Name on sheet
- Answer questions 1 – 10
- Colour in the animals on the sheet
- Return the sheet to Mrs. Smith
- Move onto next task

Writing task:

- Name on sheet
- Write ten sentences about the Titanic
- Draw a picture of your favourite scene
- Colour the picture
- Remember to use correct spelling and punctuation
- Return the sheet to Mrs. Smith
- Time for recess

Each step can be checked off as completed.

Relaxation and calm cards can also be included as visual aids for the student with ASD. At times when the student is stressed the use of words may only make the situation worse, use of the visual cue card can show the student what you would like them to do to calm down without verbal overload.

Proactive management:

Proactive management is the best behaviour management plan. All of the above strategies are aimed at creating predictability into the student's day, using written instructions, modifying the curriculum, providing structure and routine are all ways to create positive proactive strategies for the student with ASD. The primary goal of proactive management strategies is to help the child find the classroom environment more meaningful, thus reducing frustration and outbursts, which are frequently related to confusion, and misunderstanding.

These recommendations are only guidelines of what can be done to make the inclusion of a student with ASD's classroom life more predictable and understood. These strategies are only ideas and there are many more that can be used to assist the teacher to modify the classroom environment so that it is more structured and predictable. Increasing awareness and understanding of the difficulties faced by the student with ASD will enhance the knowledge of the class as well as encourage acceptance of the student with ASD into the school environment as a whole.

Reference:

Kunce, L., & Mesibov, G. (1998). Educational approaches to high-functioning autism and Asperger syndrome. In E. Schopler, G.B. Mesibov, & I. Kunce (Eds.), *Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism* (pp.227 – 261). New York, Plenum.

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