

Welcoming the student with ASD to your classroom

10 STRATEGIES TO SMOOTH THE WAY FOR A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL EXPERIENCE FOR BOTH STUDENT AND TEACHER

by Leslie Broun and Pat O'Connor

1. Learn about ASD

EVEN A LITTLE understanding about autism will give you more confidence. The brain of the person with ASD is different in some of its structures as well as at the cellular level. Access information through your school board resource staff or call Geneva Centre for Autism or Autism Ontario for print information and videos (information on the Internet is not always reliable).

2. Get to know your student

Because of communication difficulties inherent to ASD, your student may be unable to share personal information and interests. Talk with parents about the child's interests and preferred activities, toys and habits. What are his strengths and areas of particular difficulty? What kinds of things has he enjoyed at school in the past? Look for ways to accommodate special interests to enhance his interest in classroom activities. It can very helpful to let the student know some information about you. Do you have children or pets? What are their names? What are your hobbies?

3. Prepare the environment

While brightly decorated posters, student work and art samples can be stimulating for typical learners, for students with ASD this may be very distracting, preventing him from being able to focus and attend to tasks. Whenever possible, allow for an area in the room where a visual barrier to the other activities can be created. On a plain wall surface, attach the student's schedule and work exemplars. Keep the area uncluttered. To help the student build good habits, use work bins: new work on the left, finished work on the right. (Ask a resource person for information on Structured Teaching strategies.)

4. Understand the learning style of your student with ASD

For most students with ASD, the visual learning style is the most effective and efficient.

- Think about translating what you say into what your student can see (e.g., pictures, text, charts, diagrams and exemplars).
- Keep verbal instructions short and simple. Give the student time to process the information and provide a visual guide whenever possible.
- Many students may not be able to learn to read efficiently through a phonics-based approach. Be open to alternative approaches, such as whole word sight recognition.
- Many students with ASD experience difficulty with printing and writing. Encourage the development of keyboarding skills and allow written work to be done on a keyboard, rather than with a pencil.

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5. Establish effective home/school communication

At the beginning of the school year, meet with the student's parent(s) to discuss the manner and model for home/school communication. Traditionally, a home/school communication notebook is used. Ideally, preparation of the daily communication should involve the student and be a component of his daily routine. It is crucial that the teacher read and sign the book every day and write in it often. Call the parents regularly to share good news as the student may be unable to share information himself. Discuss difficult issues by phone or in a personal meeting. It is essential that the communication not be comprised of a litany of the student's misdemeanors. Let parents know what learning was demonstrated, what story was read, what new words were learned and other small achievements. The parent's involvement in sharing information from home should also be discussed.

6. Facilitate peer awareness of ASD

Peer awareness training can significantly increase understanding of the student with ASD. Ask parents how and if they would like information about their child to be shared. While many parents are agreeable to this, others are not and their wishes must be respected. Demystification of ASD for neurotypical students paves the way for successful inclusion. Videos, such as those created for the *Toonie for Autism* initiatives of Autism Ontario, provide excellent information and are a useful springboard to class discussion.

7. Access assistance in understanding behaviour

Students with ASD occasionally have difficulties with behaviour caused by factors such as environmental or sensory irritants, frustration with not being able to communicate, health issues and incorrect perceptions of social situations. Remember that the student with ASD may not perceive the world as others do. If necessary, learn about doing a Functional Behaviour Analysis to discern the purpose of student behaviour: What is the student trying to achieve? Attention? Avoidance? Escape? Many students with ASD do not like (or perhaps even understand) verbal praise. Often, a tangible reinforcer may be necessary and this may include food. If a small portion of a preferred food (such as a chip) provides an effective incentive or reward, then that is what needs to be used. Other students do understand and it is fair.

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8. Work with a teaching assistant

Often, students with ASD and other developmental disabilities benefit from teaching assistant support to help them participate in academic tasks as well as social activities. Teaching assistants help to control the student's environment and experience to reduce the chances of behavioural difficulty. For some teachers, having a student with ASD in their class for the first time may also mean that they are working with a teaching assistant for the first time. You may spend more time with the teaching assistant than you do with your family so this extremely important relationship must be carefully fostered and maintained. Courtesy, consideration and communication are critical.

9. Work with resource personnel

A team approach to service delivery is ideal. Be prepared to welcome support personnel to your classroom to assist in the programming for your student with ASD. These may include an Itinerant Resource Teacher, an ASD Consultant, a Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP), an Occupational Therapist, a Behaviour Therapist and occasionally a Physiotherapist. These persons will contact you to make appointments to visit the student. It is useful to maintain a binder in which consultation notes can be stored and which also provides a ready reference. Make appointments to accommodate your planning time so that you can have direct conversations with the service provider.

10. Use a visual schedule

Depending on the age or ability level of the student, the visual schedule may be comprised of objects, photographs, picture symbols or words. The schedule is used to show the child what activities will take place during the day and in what order. The student's anxiety is reduced by letting him know that the immediate future is not an unknown void, but that there are activities, most of which he will like and through which he will progress.

And finally, NEVER say, "But I have 25 other students!" Regardless of whether or not the student has teaching assistant support, you are his teacher. He needs to know that he, too, is worthy of your individual attention. The look on your face and the sound of your voice as you welcome your student who has ASD to your class each day sets the example for everyone.

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