

Strategies in the classroom and curriculum adaptation

Most children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) will require the curriculum to be adapted in some way so that they can understand and achieve. For many, it is important to have a trained teacher aid to guide them, as well as specialist input such as speech and language, and occupational therapy. The other pupils should also have an awareness that the child with autism might behave differently and have different needs.

Sensory Sensitivity

Before we design a program and put strategies into place, we have to have an in-depth knowledge of the child. We have to have an awareness of the child's sensory needs and sensitivities. For instance, if the child has a sensitivity to light, we 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 a 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.



Understanding

We must also have an awareness of the child's level of understanding. Some children on the autistic spectrum will not be able to follow classroom instruction at all and will need constant one-to-one guidance, preferably from a trained teacher aid. It is important not to assume the child understands what is going on if they do not question classroom instruction. To help with understanding and following a timetable a child is likely to need written instruction and/or visual aids. As well as this, verbal instruction should be kept short and simple (possibly using the minimal speech approach). The child should be given time to process verbal information, and visual cues should be used to enhance the message. For more information on autism, the minimal speech approach, visual aids and communication, see www.icommunicatetherapy.com .



Visual Aids

Visual aids and supports can be used in many ways to facilitate learning and understanding. Single visual pictures can be used as tools to help understanding and, visual timetables can be used to help children follow a daily routine. A visual breakdown of an activity can facilitate a child to follow a sequence of activities to complete a task. A token system with rewards can be used to encourage motivation and attention. A visual clock can be used to help with attending to a single task. See www.icommunicatetherapy.com for lots of ideas on visual aids and strategies to help children in the classroom.

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.

Social stories

Social stories are a great way to teach and communicate with children with ASD. Social stories are easily produced, focus on real life situations and can be used repeatedly, whenever they are required. The stories are based on a written story form, but can contain visuals to help with understanding. They offer the individual information on **what** is going to happen, information on a particular social situation, and focus on **who** is performing certain actions and **why** they are performing those actions. Stories can provide place and time related information about **when** and **where** things might happen. The story can focus on particular areas of need such as social skills or communication, and can also provide the individual with socially appropriate responses. See www.icommunicatetherapy.com for more information and ideas on social stories.

Imaginative Writing

For most children with ASD it is difficult to write from imagination. One way to overcome this is to act out a scene or scenario prior to writing it down. The child then has a “blueprint” to work from.

The Curriculum

For some children, strictly following the curriculum is not advantageous if they lack skills in communication, social skills, attention skills and difficulties with learning. Time would be much better spent learning some functional skills and trying to adapt subjects so that they incorporate aspects of communication and social skills learning. This can be achieved with small group work and involving class mates. Functional skills refer to skills that the child is going to need every day, skills that are important and useful, and skills that can be generalized to help with other aspects of their life. For instance, is it important that the child knows that the Normans invaded in 1066, or is it important that the child knows how to ask for help when he does not understand, or that he can tell you that he needs to go to the toilet rather than urinate in his pants.



Communication

If communication is an issue then a communication strategy and communication aids should be in place. A speech and language pathologist/therapist can plan, implement and support this strategy and program. Using a total communication approach can greatly enhance communication and understanding. This approach encompasses as many communication modalities as possible (e.g. sign, visuals, speech etc) to try and give as many cues as possible (see www.icommunicatetherapy.com for more information on the total communication approach).



Other issues to remember

Teachers must also be aware of other issues around the child. Knowledge of motivators and agitators are useful when planning lessons for the child. Obviously if some lessons are motivating and others are not, we try and mix these up, with a motivating lesson following one that is not so motivating. The reason for this, is that we can use the motivating lesson as a reward for completing the non-motivating one. Teachers should also be aware of diet and medication, not only for general health but because they may effect the child in various ways. The child may also display challenging and/or inappropriate behaviour so it is important to have a behavioural plan in place with strategies to deal with this. An Educational Psychologist can devise a suitable behaviour plan, and a speech and language pathologist/therapist can put visual strategies in place to help with understanding and communication breakdown so that challenging behaviour does not occur.

Trips out of school or transitioning

Making trips outside school or transitioning to a new classroom can be stressful for many children on the autistic spectrum. To help the process, warn the child well in advance of a trip or change, schedule it in on their visual timetable and if needed, write a social story. Transitions to a new classroom can also be planned in a similar way, and the new teacher must have a good knowledge of the child prior to the move (see www.icommunicatetherapy.com for more detailed information on transitions).

For much more information on classroom strategies and the use of visuals aids and social stories see www.icommunicatetherapy.com



See www.icommunicatetherapy.com for more information on Autistic Spectrum Disorders and programs for adults and children with communication difficulties.

To learn more about Autism, classroom strategies, and communication, click this link to see our [Suggested Reading](#) list and look at, and purchase books.

Suggested Reading:

1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders by Veronica Zysk and Ellen Notbohm

Enabling Communication in Children With Autism by Carol Potter and Chris Whittaker

Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Different Sensory Experiences, Different Perceptual Worlds by Olga Bogdashina

Using Intensive Interaction and Sensory Integration: A Handbook for Those Who Support People With Severe Autistic Spectrum Disorder by Phoebe Caldwell and Jane Horwood

Functional Behavior Assessment for People With Autism: Making Sense of Seemingly Senseless Behavior by Beth A., Ph.D. Glasberg

Visual Supports for People With Autism: A Guide for Parents and Professionals by Marlene J. Cohen and Donna L. Sloan

Making Visual Supports Work in the Home and Community: Strategies for Individuals with Autism and Asperger Syndrome by Jennifer L. Savner, Brenda Smith Hyles, and Brenda Smith Myles

A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism (Topics in Autism) by Andy, Ph.D. Bondy and Lori Frost

Solving Behavior Problems in Autism (Visual Strategies Series) by Linda A. Hodgdon

Visual Language in Autism by Howard C. Shane and Sharon Weiss-Kapp

The New Social Story Book : Illustrated Edition by Carol Gray

My Social Stories Book by Abbie Leigh White, Carol Gray, and Sean McAndrew

The Social Skills Picture Book Teaching play, emotion, and communication to children with autism by Dr. Jed Baker

Comic Strip Conversations by Carol Gray