

Teaching Students with Autism

A Comprehensive Guide for Teachers



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Adjusted from: *Life's Journey through Autism* and *Autism Speaks-Community Tool Kit*.

Introduction

Every child learns differently and at a different pace. To determine how students learn best, I believe the only answer lies within the students themselves. Public education is about providing the building blocks necessary for whatever future might be in store for every child. Thus, education is not so much about how much is taught but how much learned. Every student has the capability to learn, develop, and grow in some way. As educators, it is our job to harvest the development of our students, no matter how big or small. We must determine how to reach children in a way that is meaningful to them and suitable for their progression.

Teaching students with autism or an autism spectrum disorder can prove to be quite a challenge. Fortunately, you are not alone in the endeavor. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, approximately 417,000 students in the United States are diagnosed with autism and attend public schools every year. (2012) However, as with any child, these students are all unique and provide a wide variety of strengths, weaknesses, and challenges that require your consideration. In this guide, you will find resources, tips, tricks, and information that will better your ability to adapt the education of your students and their overall development. The areas of focus include sensory needs, communication development (expressive and receptive,) improving social interactions, and relationship skills.

You will also find additional resources that may aid in your educational goals.

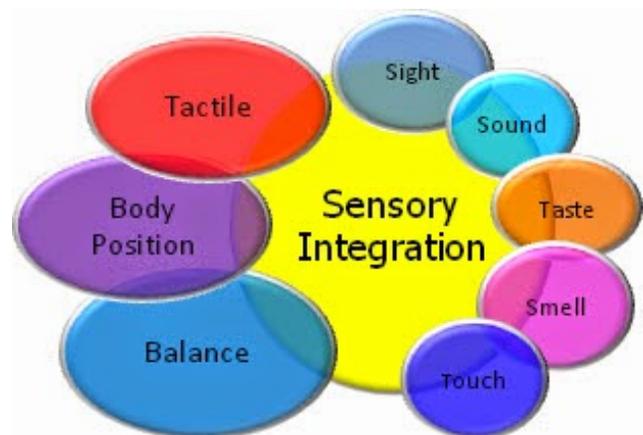




Supporting Sensory Needs

By developing and supporting sensory stimulation, you are laying the foundation for more complex learning and positive behaviors. For most students, effective sensory stimulation occurs automatically. However, for many students with autism, the process demands much more effort and attention. Sensory challenges can affect the student's ability to take in information, respond to requests, participate in social situations, write, participate in sports, and maintain a calm and ready to work state. Research is still exploring the impact and factors associated with sensory challenges in autism but there has already been enough research to know how important sensory stimulation is to education and learning.

It is also valuable to understand that sensory and emotional regulation of a student with autism can become overwhelmed and result in anxiety and distress because of either internal imbalances or responses to environmental sensations. Working to maintain a sensory friendly classroom can be a widely effective strategy for maximizing your student's ability to learn, maintain focus, and reduce negative behaviors. In this section, you will find helpful tips and tricks for supporting the sensory needs of your students.



Sensory Tricks

- First and foremost, be aware of the sensory issues of your students and adjust their environment as necessary.
 - For example: You might want to use low-odor dry erase markers, adjust the lighting using lamps, selective seat arrangements, et.
- A sound sensitive student might find a gym teacher's whistle overbearing and the echoes of a locker room intolerable. Making small adjustments like allowing the student to dress in the locker room while it is empty might be helpful.
- Highly decorated classrooms can be visually over-stimulating and even distracting for some students.
- Allowing for students to unwind before a lesson may also be helpful.
 - After lunch, recess, or walking in the hallways, or stimulating environments, the students may need a chance to unwind.
 - In my experience, we allowed students to rock, swing, or sit in a beanbag chair after lunch and after recess. Then we had 20 minutes of sensory time, which allowed students to play with a sensory friendly object, like play-dough or rice bags, before we began a lesson.

- Below are examples of sensory friendly toys/objects.



Improving Social Interaction & Development



Skills Necessary for Relationships

- Sharing
- Ability to Compromise
- Consideration of Another's Perspective
- Companionship
- Empathy
- Conflict Resolution
- Reliability
- Ability to Exchange Feelings

Supporting the social interaction of your students is vital to their educational plan. Student's with autism often wish to interact with others, but do not have the skills to engage in a way that is appropriate or they often become overwhelmed by the process. Some students are overly aware of their social shortfalls and will avoid interactions all together, even though they crave connections with others. Still there are other students who will engage in attention seeking behaviors to connect with peers until they build the more desirable skills they need to interact.

Sometimes, for autistic students, the notion of unpredictability and noise of the other students can be stressful and unsettling. Working through these sorts of sensory issues, will be your first task in building social skills. Imitation and reciprocity will also build upon their other skills in developing these vital social interactions.

This section of the guide will provide information about specific strategies for supporting social skill development, as well as, considerations in addressing social abilities.



Strategies for Strengthening the Development of Social Skills

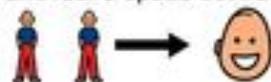
- Reinforce what the student does well socially- use behavior-specific praise (and concrete reinforcement if needed) to shape the positive behavior
- Model social interaction, turn taking, and reciprocity
- Teach imitation (motor as well as verbal)
- Teach context clues and references those around you
 - For example: “If everyone else is sitting quietly, you should be too.”
- Break social skills into smaller parts, and teach these skills through supported interactions. (Use visuals as appropriate.)
- Praise strengths and use these to your advantage. Many students with autism have a good sense of humor, a love of or attraction to music, strong memorization skills, or heightened sense of color or visual perspective. Use these to motivate interest in social interactions or give students a chance to shine and be viewed as competent and interesting.
- Focus on social learning during activities that are not otherwise challenging for the child.
 - For example: conversational turn-taking may not occur if a child with poor fine motor skills was being asked to converse while cutting.
- During group activities define the student’s role and responsibilities within the group.
- Use social narratives and social cartooning as tools in describing and defining social rules and expectations. See the example below.
- Provide structured activities during recess, or conversation starters during lunch to include everyone in their group’s conversation.
 - For example: Create groups for your class to sit in at lunch. At each of their lunch tables, have a box of questions like, “ My favorite movie is...What is my favorite game?...etc.”
- Support peers and students with structures social situations. Define expectations of behavior in advance.
 - For example: First teach the necessary skill, like how to play Uno, individually, and then introduce it in a social setting with peers.

Body Space

Sometimes I stand or sit too close to people. 

This can make my friends upset or bother them. 

I will try to give my friends personal space and leave space between us.





Supporting Communication

Communication skills provide a variety of challenges for students with autism, from intake and processing information, verbal or representational output, to reading and writing skills. It even proves to be a challenge for them to pick up on non-verbal cues, body language, and interpretation.

By definition of their diagnosis, students with autism have communication and social deficits, which may require the help from other professionals, like a speech pathologist. However, the communication skills of an autistic child should not be the sole responsibility of a speech pathologist,

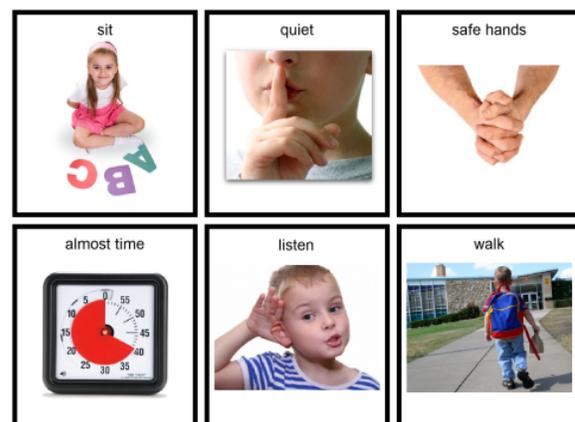
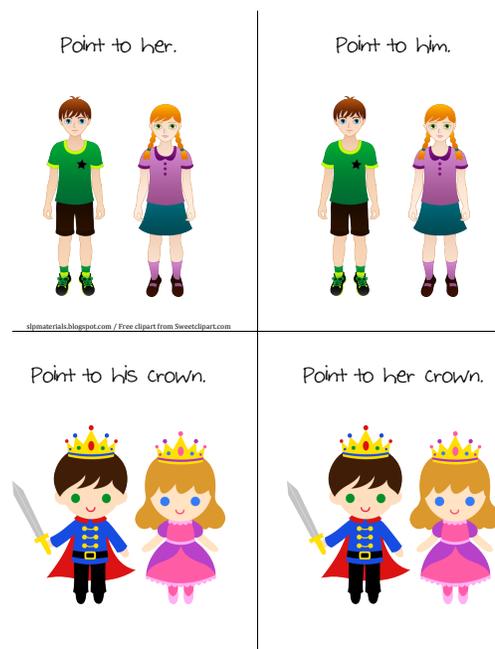
for several purposes. The main reason is because communication regarding a child's wants and needs, as well as social interactions will occur throughout their daily routines. Thus it is heavily your (the teacher's) responsibility to develop daily communication skills.

There is no doubt this task will prove to be challenging and even frustrating. However, on the next pages, you will find helpful tips and information to guide you in your student's **receptive** and **expressive** language skills.

Developing Receptive Language Skills

Receptive language is the ability to understand what is said or written. Below are tips to support and develop receptive language skills for students with Autism.

- Make sure you have the student's attention before you give an instruction or ask a question.
- Consider the student's processing challenges and timing.
 - For example, you may find it helpful to say the student's name before giving an instruction because it increases the likelihood that he or she may be attending by the time you give the direction.
- Avoid giving complex verbal directions or information.
 - Keep your instructions short or give the information in chunks.
- Give positive directions to allow for students who struggle with language processing.
 - For example: minimize the use of words like 'stop' and 'don't'. Instead of saying, "stop writing your name in the margin," you could say, "please write your name on the line."
 - This may be especially helpful for the students' with behavioral challenges.
- Allow for 'wait time' (be prepared to wait for a response, whether it is an action or an answer.)
 - Avoid immediately repeating an instruction or question. Sometimes it is helpful to think of a student with an auditory processing challenge like a computer- when it is processing, hitting the command key over again does not make it go any faster, but rather send it back to the beginning to start the process all over again.
- Model and shape correct responses to build understanding.
 - For example, for a younger child, to teach the meaning of 'stop': run on the playground holding hands with the student, say 'stop'; stop yourself and the student; repeat until you can fade the handholding and then fade the modeling.
- Enhance verbal information with pictures, visual schedules, gestures, and written direction. See the example to the right.



Boosting Expressive Language Skills

Expressive language is spoken language, as well as, any communicative output such as picture exchange, written language, sign language, or other means. Below are examples, tips, and tricks related to expressive language.

- Take responsibility for finding a way to access the student's need for communication. Many people with autism have word retrieval issues- even if they know an answer, they may not be able to come up with the words. Offer visual supports, cue cards, multiple choice options, etc.
- Use visual supports to prompt language or give choices.
 - For example: if you are teaching a child to ask for help, have a cue card available at all times, and prompt its use whenever it is time for the student to request help. This can be used by the student instead of spoken language, or as a support for developing language, and teaching when it might be appropriate to use this phrase.
- Teach and use scripts- words, pictures, etc. for communication needs or exchanges.
 - For example: "I like...what do you like? I like..." Use cue cards and fade over time as the student develops an understanding of how to use the phrase or the pattern of exchange.
- Teach the students to say, "I don't know" to reduce the anxiety associated with not being able to answer a question.
 - Later teach the student how to ask for additional information: (Who? What? When? Where? How? And so on.)
- Add visual supports to the environment as needed
 - Alphabet letters, number lines, drawer labels, name place cards, etc.
- Teach the students to look for and use visual supports that already exist in the classroom: calendars, signs, door numbers, name place cards, drawer labels, etc.
- Use a communication board, pictures or sign language to support or provide communication options for students with low verbal output.
- Sing! Musical processing occurs separately from language processing and singing can be used to promote both *receptive* and *expressive* skills.
 - For example, for younger children, "Your name goes at the top, your name goes at the top, hi ho the dairy- o, your name goes at the top."
- Always look for the student's communication intent.
 - For example: if a child reverses the pronouns or employs functional echolalia, then- "Does your stomach hurt?" might be his or her way of telling you the his/her stomach hurts.
- Many students with autism have a favorite subject or special area of interest that may interfere with schoolwork or social interaction. To shape the student's expectations and to minimize the impact of this obsession:
 - Provide scheduled opportunities to discuss the topic and set a timer
 - Support strategies for expanding to other topics
 - Reinforce the student for talking about other subjects or the absence of the topic.

"I need help."

Other Helpful Resources

All About Autism:

- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism>
- <http://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/Autism/>
- <http://www.autismsciencefoundation.org/what-is-autism>

Sensory Needs:

- http://www.naeyc.org/yc/files/yc/file/201305/Meeting_Sensory_Needs_Thompson_0513.pdf
- <http://www.childmind.org/en/posts/articles/2014-4-28-how-sensory-processing-issues-affect-kids-school>

Tips, Tricks, and Printables:

- <http://www.educateautism.com/>
- <https://www.nea.org/home/15151.htm>
- <http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/education.aspx>
- <http://www.aspergersyndrome.org/Articles/Tips-for-Teaching-High-Functioning-People-with-Aut.aspx>
- https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/sctk_educating_students_with_autism.pdf

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