

10 Practical Tips for Classroom Aids of Autistic Children

Ten Simple Tips

1. **Speak less.** Require the child to look at you for more information. When you do speak, insert lots of pauses for the child to react. Remember, even autistic children with good speech still have a communications deficit.
2. **Try to make your speech similar to that of speech to a typical child.** This means fewer commands and more commentary. e.g. “There is the potty room” instead of “Go potty”. Or “Bears are brown” instead of “use the brown crayon”.
3. **When walking to places, make your travel as typical as possible.** Avoid hand holding, instead use tricks like speeding up, slowing down, unexpected stops or turns, to teach the child to regulate to you. If you need to hold hands, use the hand holding as a means to close the zone of connection. Do not physically lead the child with your hand, rather just have it act as a connection for the child to regulate his/her distance. It is best that the child hold your hand or finger instead of you grasping theirs.
4. **When trying to get the child's attention, avoid repeated use of the child's name.** Other sounds, like clicking your tongue, clearing your throat, snapping fingers, etc. are processed by different areas of the brain. Thus, a non-speech sound often gets the child's attention. Follow up with a, “there you are so-and-so” to reinforce the child's name.
5. **If the child is getting self absorbed, interrupt his activity.** If drawing for example, briefly hold his pencil hand until the child looks at you to figure out why you are holding his hand. When the child references you, try to point out something novel. A new color, do a funny face, etc.
6. **If a child gets beyond a threshold of excitement or emotion, remove the child to a quiet place and give him/her 10 or 15 minutes to recompose.** Do not try to console or calm. Just leave them to themselves and supervise from a distance. For many children this is a biochemical weakness where the adrenal / cortisone system cannot properly shut down. Let the chemistry work out then return to the activity of the day.
7. **Create lots of situations where the child needs to look at you or observe another person for instruction.** This can be as simple as you shaking your head yes or no for a snack, or as complicated as observing a classmate write letters. In all cases, reinforce the idea that others have a mind and that the child can understand that mind by observation.

8. **Reward and praise actual accomplishment. Be tepid about mediocre effort.** True feelings of success and competence are very motivating. Autistic children are more than smart enough to feel patronized.
9. **Do NOT set up social situations where the child is bound to fail.** For most children this would be social situations. Keep social interactions with peers short with specific goals in mind and be there to mediate and repair the interactions. Every attempt to play with a child that fails is de-motivating socially for the child. Do set up social situations where success is likely.
10. **Don't get hung up prompting the child on greetings and partings.** There are many encounters in a school day and few autistic children understand them or their meanings. Instead the aid can do the greetings and partings, modeling them for the child. Create a pause for the child to participate but do NOT train the child in a script of "good-bye or hello". If the child shows true pleasure at a meeting or discomfort or longing at a parting, then the people involved are doing a GREAT job because it means the child is developing emotional bonds. A single big smile from the child when greeted is worth 1,000 monotone "hellos". The child will develop natural utterances over time if the emotional response is fostered.

The Rational Behind the Tips

Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are becoming more and more understood. New research and clinical practices are showing the way to have very effective communication with autistic individuals and there are real reasons for optimism with regard to this generation of autistics. A great deal of the reason for hope deals with biomedical intervention and the new understandings of genetics and metabolism and how these compromised systems result in ASD symptoms. New therapies, drugs, supplements, and diets are producing wonderful results and the knowledge base for these interventions is growing daily.

On the behavioral front, there are also real reasons for optimism and very practical strategies for dealing with ASD individuals. For years, as the ASD epidemic has emerged, professionals have been developing plans and compensations for helping ASD children. Some of the early strategies have proven flawed and replacements have been developed. One of the profound shifts in thinking regarding autism has been the specification of the core deficits of autism and adjustments to the compensations for the deficits. Specifically, autism is not a language disorder, it is a communications disorder. Autism is not a lack of social ability, it is a lack or loss of fundamental social skills. Autism is not a lack of intelligence or imagination, it is a loss of connection with the motivations of the human neuro-typical world.

Therefore, modern autism intervention deals with very fundamental social skills and communications skills. These are skills that are typically acquired in the first 18 months of age, long before language develops. These skills focus around understanding significant individuals and reading their faces and bodies for information. They focus on using imitation for learning,

sharing emotions, regulating to the actions of another. The modern models suggests and has shown in some studies that ASD individuals readily develop a theory of mind when these fundamental skills are taught and developed. The lack of language or delayed language appears to be primarily a physical problem based upon imbalances in glutamates to GABA in the brain sometimes influenced by difficulties in motor planning. Thus, it is very likely in most ASD individuals that the core social skills training can take place and the ability to communicate can be fostered at the same time that the biological barriers to language development are compensated for by language therapy, biomedical interventions, speech substitutes like sign language, picture exchange, or supplemental language devices.

Therefore, the overarching strategy is to support or compensate for physical or biomedical issues in the ASD child, while, at the same time, going back to very early developmental skills training to fill in the skills necessary for successful communication and social development. The trick is to separate and recognize missing skills from biomedical problems. This is where professionals can supply a great deal of insight. For example, is hyperactivity a metabolic problem, or is it a behavioral problem, or both. Can a behavioral tactic be applied even in a situation where a metabolic problem exists.

The list of suggestions above are designed to keep the relationship between the school aid and the ASD child as productive and positive as possible. The idea behind speaking less is that the ASD child has difficulty in understanding speech or the meanings behind speech. Furthermore, sound is omni-directional. Sight, on the other hand is directional and requires the child to pay attention to the “transmitting” individual. When we speak less, we encourage the ASD child to look for other ways to gain understanding, much like an 18 month or less child would have to do. This encourages the development of fundamental skills. Even when speech is involved, we want thoughtful interpretation of speech. Verbal ASD children often fail to be conversational. They request and respond but do not communicate in a typical way. Thus, slower, deliberate language that departs from scripted speech, exercises and encourages thoughtful language. Many ASD children also have language processing delays that are likely neurological or biologically induced. Thus, slowing speech and providing processing pauses creates success for the ASD child. For an individual with slower language processing, every utterance to them “restarts” the processing clock. So, as unnatural as it may feel, when talking to an ASD child with slow language processing we must avoid rephrasing, or re-asking questions until the child has had the 5 seconds or so that they need to process the first speech.

For ASD children with severe speech difficulty, it is best to concentrate on nonverbal communication to keep the relationship healthy. Touch, pointing, facial referencing, body posture, imitation, and simple verbal interactions are all ways of minimizing speech and yet encouraging communication. There is a great deal of communication and learning that can take place in the absence of speech. In fact, many autistics learn to read and write prior to the emergence of language. The classroom aid can hasten the development of non-speech language by finding ways of communicating that minimize the load on speech processing.

One of the biggest challenges an aid to an ASD child faces is coming up with more typical motivations for the child. In order for a child to develop “interests” they must experience success.

So, the aid must teach the child significance. Furthermore, most of a young child's motivations are based upon the reactions of significant others, like their parents. An aid to an ASD child has to develop ways for the child to experience the pride of others, to experience success in activities and while being taught. Some of the simplest ways of promoting this type of relationship involves or relies upon regulation. Regulation is the ability of the child to modify his/her actions to be in accord with another. Sharing is a very advanced form of regulation. Walking side by side is a simple form of regulation. Maintaining focused attention involves regulation. Following another's gaze requires regulation as well. By using simple novel approaches, the aid can use movement from room to room as a tool for developing regulation. Speeding up or slowing down, doing a hop instead of a step, turning the wrong direction in a routine path are all examples of opportunities for the ASD child to regulate. Most often the ASD child will find the modification fun and novel. Some of the first real emotion sharing many ASD children experience comes from these sorts of simple exercises. Small two minute games in the halls of the school may do more to move an ASD child along than hours in the therapy room. This is not to say that conventional therapy is not useful, just that movement from one place to another is a great opportunity for teaching regulation.

Another big problem with ASD children is that they are often very content or used to being alone or at least emotionally alone. Breaking into their world is a big challenge. Most ASD children have an appreciation for new things. So, this can be used to the aid's advantage when trying to involve themselves in the child's world. Interrupt the child's activity in a very low energy way, but in a way that might be unexpected to the child. Even the most challenged ASD subject usually responds to the unexpected. This can be mixing up things (putting the red things in the pile with the blue things), Dropping the pencils, holding their hands when they are doing something, Turning the book upside down, Putting your face in front of theirs. All are examples of introducing novelty and trying to use that to enter the ASD child's world. Next is to make this brief moment count by sharing a laugh, doing a tickle, pointing out something the child is interested in, sing a little song, and so on.

Games of hide and seek are great here too if you can set one up. Say an ASD child loves dinosaurs, hide two dinosaurs in plain sight in a room while the ASD child is stemming or absorbed in some activity. Now invade his space by interrupting the activity in an unexpected way. When the child looks to figure out what is going on, look to one of the dinosaurs. Provided the dino is not hidden too well, the ASD child will eventually get the game and enjoy it. School problems can be used instead of Dinos. For example, a more advanced ASD child could be interrupted and asked what five plus two is. The two of you can figure it out together and celebrate that with a high five or a low five. Ironically, these interruptions tend to lengthen the child's attention span.

Take time to teach the child how to ask for permission. Exercises where the child must see you shake your head yes or no are great for a variety of reasons. But one of the best reasons is that the child is learning and respecting your point of view. Don't forget to suggest new and exciting things also. Maybe even participation in class can be new and exciting. For advanced ASD children the classroom teacher can coordinate with the aid to teach hand raising and permission to answer. Many low functioning ASD children will be below grade level, but a discussion about

Florida could be introduced with a picture of an alligator that the ASD student can identify in class.

Social situations are of particular interest for aids to the ASD child. When trying to introduce an ASD child to a social situation, there are many, many potential pitfalls. Were the ASD child at all equipped for social interaction they would not have the ASD label. So, how can a school aid overcome such a fundamental area of weakness? A few guidelines can help. Even one successful social interaction provides a very lasting base for new social interactions to build upon. Thus the efforts in this area are very worth while. The first guideline would be to look for situations where success is possible. For most ASD individuals and their peers this would likely involve only one other peer who has an interest in interaction with the ASD child. The peer needs to understand the ASD child will have difficulty and the peer needs to be given permission to try. Choose an activity that is not based upon speech. Hopscotch, climbing the monkey bars, chase, digging in sand, drawing circles on black top are activities which an ASD child could likely grasp, imitate and enjoy. Keep the activity short and end it while it is still fun and successful. A five minute activity between an ASD individual and a typical peer is a long activity. Find the strength of the ASD child and utilize it in the activity. If the strength is physical, choose a physical activity, if it is intellectual, see if a game can be chosen where the peer will find the ASD child an asset to the play. For most ASD children, this sort of peer play should not be attempted too often, unless a lot of success is being had. It is counter productive to introduce ASD children into social situations and have them end up playing by themselves. A one minute game of pat-a-cake is a success, if the aid ends it while everyone is still playing. It is a failure if the game decays to nothing.

In the areas where ASD children have deficits, it is important to motivate them with the feelings of success and competence. This is not as easy as it sounds, though. ASD children are surprisingly bright and seem to understand when praise is simply patronizing. Thus, the aid and teacher have to set up situations that are challenging, but not overwhelming. This is not all that different from the challenges placed before typical students except that they deal with areas of social and communication skills that typical peers already possess. This introduces the idea of the “regulatory pattern” and “variation” which are techno-speak for introducing a lesson based upon that which is easily grasped and then escalating its complexity in small achievable steps. Offer praise and celebration only when warranted, but put great effort into creating the success that warrants praise.

Given the severity of some of these deficits, it is truly amazing how fast an ASD child can progress when a proper understanding is achieved and a good therapeutic relationship is established. It is also amazing how many times the skills and perspectives mastered while working with ASD children can be applied to typical development children. I wish the best of luck to all aids working with ASD children. Whether the aid has looked at it this way or not, they are likely to learn as much, if not more than the child and their life will likely be blessed many times over by the knowledge they gain.

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