

## Autism Spectrum Disorder: Strategies that Work!

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### Words that describe autism:

- Puzzle
- Enigma
- Patterns
- Spectrum
- Life altering

### What is autism?

Autism is a complex biological disorder that generally lasts throughout a person's life. It is called a *developmental disability* because it starts before age three, in the developmental period, and causes delays or problems with many different ways in which a person develops or grows.

### What is a spectrum disorder?

- Autism is considered to be a spectrum disorder because the characteristics range in severity and in type.
- They can be mild such as in the case of some children with Asperger's Syndrome or quite severe.

### Types of ASD

- Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDDNOS)
- Asperger's Syndrome
- Rett's Syndrome
- Childhood Degenerative Disorder

## PDDNOS

- Diagnosis used when there is a severe and pervasive impairment in the development of reciprocal social interactions or verbal/non-verbal communication skills
- May occur with stereotyped behaviors, interests and activities are present but do not meet the DSM-IV criteria



## Asperger's Syndrome

- Children present classic autistic behaviors but later become verbal and can socialize
- Lack of empathy
- Inappropriate one-sided interaction
- Intense absorption with items or routines
- Cognitive, self-help and adaptive behaviors develop somewhat normally.

## Rett's Syndrome

- Girls only
- Head-growth decelerations
- Loss of previously acquired behaviors
- Hand-wringing
- Eating jags
- Severe-progressive dementia

### **What autism is not!**

- a. Curable
- b. Preventable
- c. Life-threatening
- d. Contagious
- e. Caused by over-reactive parents
- f. More common in one race
- g. A disease

## Social Interaction



- Social interactions with other people, both physical (such as hugging or holding) and verbal (such as having a conversation).
- Children with ASDs do not interact with other people the way most children do, or they may not be interested in other people at all.
- Children with ASDs may not make eye contact and may just want to be alone.
- They may have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings.
- A child with an ASD may not like to be held or cuddled and may not form the usual attachments or bonds to other people.

## Communication

- Communication, both verbal (spoken) and nonverbal (unspoken)
- About 40% of children with ASDs do not talk at all. Other children have echolalia, which is when they repeat back something that was said to them.
- Or a child may repeat a television ad he heard sometime in the past.
- Children with ASDs may not understand gestures such as waving goodbye. They may say "I" when they mean "you" or vice versa.
- Their voices may sound flat and it may seem like they cannot control how loudly or softly they talk.
- Children with ASDs may stand too close to the people they are talking to, or may stick with one topic of conversation for too long.

### **Communication:**

#### **Why do children with autism have so much trouble communicating?**

- Effective communication is more than just sending and receiving messages.

- It requires that one person, either the sender or the receiver of the message, interact with the other person.
- Actually, in order for the interaction to be successful, the other person must reciprocate in some way.

### **A child will communicate when:**

- He is able to attend to what is being said.
- He is able to understand what is said
- He experiences the responsiveness of others to his attempts at communication.
- He has a reason to communicate.
- He is motivated.
- Look for reasons why he might or might not communicate.
- Learn to recognize that children with autism do not communicate in the same way as their peers.

### **Stages of Communication**

1. “It’s all about me” – Egocentric Stage
2. “I want it” – Requesting Stage
3. Actions and reactions – Emerging Communication Stage
4. Two-way street – Reciprocal Communication Stage

### **Behaviors**

- Routines or repetitive behaviors, like repeating words or actions over and over, obsessively following routines or schedules for their actions, or having very specific ways of arranging their belongings.
- Children may want to have routines where things stay the same so they know what to expect.

### **Behavioral Issues/Solutions**

- Increase sensorimotor skills
- Modify tasks for both success and sensorimotor feedback
- Establish an effective system of communication.

- Extinguish destructive behaviors.

**Questions to ask yourself:**

1. Are behaviors linked?
2. Do they occur in response to the same situation?
3. Do they occur in a predictable pattern?
4. What activity or event preceded the behavior?
5. What environmental factors impact behavior?
6. What was the child reacting to?

<p><b>Warning signs or predictors of the behavior</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Restlessness</li> <li>•Eye aversion</li> <li>•Distractibility</li> <li>•Pause</li> <li>•Louder voice</li> <li>•Hand flapping</li> </ul>
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**Sensory Integration Issues**

**How Do I Know If A Child Is Over-Sensitive Or Under-Sensitive?**

<b>Sense</b>	<b>Over-Sensitive</b>	<b>Under-Sensitive</b>
Vision (sight)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Covers his eyes when the lights are too bright</li> <li>•Overwhelmed by too many colors and items in the classroom</li> <li>•Rubs his eyes or squints his eyes frequently</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Does not respond to light</li> <li>•Holds items close to her face as if he can't see them</li> <li>•Stares at flickering fluorescent lights</li> </ul>
Sound	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Covers his ears</li> <li>•Responds to sounds other children ignore</li> <li>•Will act as if he can't hear when you call his name, but then responds when a child drops a toy</li> <li>•Yells with fingers in ears</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Speaks loudly</li> <li>•Turns the volume up on the TV or computer</li> <li>•Sings loudly</li> <li>•Always plays with toys that make loud noises</li> </ul>

Sense	Over-Sensitive	Under-Sensitive
Smell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holds his nose at common odors</li> <li>• Sniffs the air or sniffs other people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignores bad odors</li> <li>• May sniff people or toys</li> </ul>
Touch (Tactile)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gets upset when someone touches him</li> <li>• Very sensitive to textures and materials</li> <li>• Opposed to getting dirty or touching certain toys</li> <li>• Scratches at his skin or startles when something touches him</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bumps into people</li> <li>• Chews on items frequently</li> <li>• Unaware of temperature changes</li> <li>• Seemingly unable to tell when he is in pain or hurt</li> <li>• Does not cry when he falls down</li> </ul>
Taste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gags when he eats</li> <li>• Only eats food of a certain texture</li> <li>• Sensitive to hot or cold foods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wants only spicy food</li> <li>• Adds lots of pepper or salt to his food</li> <li>• Licks objects or toys</li> </ul>
Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not like to move, dance, climb, or hop</li> <li>• Sways</li> <li>• Seems to walk 'off-balance'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child does not get dizzy when he whirls or turns around</li> <li>• Loves to move fast</li> <li>• In constant motion</li> <li>• Rocking</li> <li>• Moves his body all the time</li> </ul>

## **Adaptations to Create Positive Environments for Children with ASD/SPD**

### **Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)**

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) is difficulty in using the information that is collected through the senses (vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell, movement, and body awareness) in daily life.

## **Sensory Avoiders**

The Sensory Avoider is over-responsive to sensations from one or more sensory systems.

## **Sensory Seekers**

The Sensory Seeker craves excessive stimulation from one or more of the sensory systems.

**Children with ASD are typically Avoiders AND Seekers.** They may seek one type of sensory input (Ex. Proprioception) and avoid another type of sensory input (Ex. Tactile)

### **Low Tech/No Tech Adaptations for the Visual Environment**

- Reduce bright lighting
  - limit use of fluorescent lighting
  - use natural light
  - use table/floor lamps
  - use incandescent bulbs
  - use tinting on light covers
- Decrease clutter
  - use solid storage containers
  - use fabric/paper to cover open shelves

### **Low Tech/No Tech Adaptations for the Auditory Environment**

- Use sound soaking carpet/rugs, pillows, curtains, plants, fabrics
- Do not use fluorescent lighting (humming is distracting)
- Place child's desk away from doors or high traffic areas
- Allow child to use ear plugs/headphones in loud areas

### **Low Tech/No Tech Adaptations for the Vestibular (movement/balance) Environment**

- Give child regular "movement breaks"
  - 2-3 minutes of walking
  - run errands for teacher
  - Rock in rocking chair
- Allow child to sit on pillow, cushion, or therapy ball at table
- Allow child to stand for academic tasks
- Playground activities in morning and afternoon
  - swinging, running, skipping, climbing

## **Low Tech/No Tech Adaptations for the Proprioceptive (body position) Environment**

-Heavy Work Activities are a MUST for children with ASD and should be provided throughout the day!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

- Place chairs on desks at the end of the day
- Carry books to the library
- Washing down desks, mopping floors
- Pushing another child in wheelchair/stroller
- Jumping on a mini-trampoline
- Squeezing putty/play dough
- Playground Activities in morning and afternoon
  - climbing, rolling, pushing others on swing

**Crash Pad-** Acts as a safe indoor spot for preschoolers to receive proprioceptive input. A big, soft pillow made out of flat sheets and stuffed with pillows and/or scrap foam.

**Body Sock-** Inspired by Kimberly Dye's Body Sox. A large, rectangle sock, made out of Lycra material. The child climbs inside and can walk, run, roll or hop inside it.

(Complete directions for the crash pad, body sock and other adaptive equipment can be found in *Sensory Integration: A Guide for Preschool Teachers, 2007*).

## **Sensory Diet**

“Sensory Diet” – An Activity Program that an Occupational Therapist develops in collaboration with teachers/student to meet the sensory needs of an individual child who has Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD).

- To assist a child to be more focused and skillful in everyday tasks.
- (Wilbarger & Wilbarger, 1991)

## **Calming Sensory Inputs for Children with ASD: To be used to help child focus/attend**

- Heavy Work Activities, such as jumping, rolling, climbing, pushing and pulling objects, animal walks, and catching and throwing a heavy ball
- Eating chewy foods, such as dried fruit, granola bars, cheese sticks or blocks, bagels, or chewing gum
- Listening to Baroque or other rhythmic music
- Using a picture schedule of the typical daily schedule
- Drinking thick liquids through a straw
- Rocking in a rocking chair
- Swinging on playground



- Firm rubbing of the back or “bear hugs”
- Smelling a calming scent, such as vanilla

### **Alerting Sensory Inputs for Children with ASD: To be used when child is sleepy/lethargic**

- Movement with or without music
- Eating crunchy foods, such as raw vegetables, pretzels, crackers, or popcorn
- Drinking cold beverages or eating cold or spicy foods, such as Popsicles or salsa
- Bouncing on a large exercise ball
- Smelling an alerting scent, such as peppermint
- Jumping on a mini-trampoline

### **Body Sock**

The body sock is a fun piece of indoor equipment used to promote proprioception (body awareness) and provide tactile input to preschoolers. The preschoolers can climb completely inside the sock or leave their head outside. The child can see through the material when it is stretched. As preschoolers move inside the body sock, they can develop balance, coordination, and motor skills, such as walking, running, rolling, and hopping. When you are finished making the body sock, remaining strips of Lycra make fantastic scarves for dress up.

#### **Materials**

- 1½ yards of Lycra material (at least 56” wide)
- 24” of hook Velcro
- 24” of loop Velcro
- thread and needle or sewing machine

#### **Procedure**

1. Cut Lycra material to 41”x56”.
2. Fold in half (41”x28”) and sew the side and bottom of Lycra material together. Fashion the top edge of the tube, leaving a 24-inch opening in the middle for Velcro closure.
3. Sew hook Velcro on one side of the top opening and loop Velcro on the other side of the top opening. This provides a way for the preschooler to climb inside the body sock and close it up.

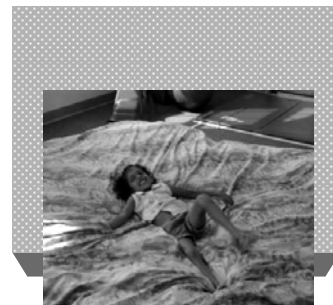


## Crash Pad

The crash pad acts as a safe indoor spot for preschoolers to receive proprioceptive (body awareness) input. Young children can gain a greater awareness of their bodies by jumping, rolling, and crashing into this big, soft pillow.

### Materials

- 2 full- or queen-size- flat sheets (size selected will be determined by the size of the space available)
- 2 twin- or full-size flat sheets (one size smaller than the other two sheets)
- scrap foam or pillows
- thread and needle or sewing machine



### Procedure

1. Sew the edges of the smaller pair of sheets together, leaving a large opening on one end.
2. Stuff the sack with large pieces of scrap foam or pillows, filling the sack as full as possible, as some settling will occur.
3. Sew the opening of the crash pad closed.
4. Sew three sides of the larger pair of sheets together, leaving one end completely open, to make a washable cover for the crash pad.
5. Stuff the crash pad inside the cover, which may be removed and washed as needed.

**The Top “10” Things For Teachers To Know about Autism Spectrum Disorder**  
**by Clarissa Willis**

- 1. Autism is a spectrum disorder:** Children with autism display a range of behaviors and abilities from very mild to quite severe. In other words, the word autism can describe a child who fits anywhere within that range.
- 2. Always use ‘child-first’ language or people-first language, when describing the child:** The child in your classroom with autism is just that – a child with autism and not an autistic child. People-first and, in this case, ‘child-first’ language helps others see that you view the child first and the disability second.
- 3. Focus on the child’s interests:** When trying to encourage a child with autism to play, focus on the interests of the child and make interactions with others as natural as possible.
- 4. Novel situations can be overwhelming:** Recognize that children with autism may have difficulty adjusting to new play situations and new play materials.
- 5. The environment is important:** Children with autism need a special place in the room where they can go without distraction and without all the sensory input they receive elsewhere.
- 6. Social skills training should begin early:** Learning how to respond in social situations should begin as early as possible. It is a critical skill for children to possess and enables them to interact with others more easily.
- 7. View parents as partners:** Parents often agree that the one thing a teacher can do to understand their perspective is to be respectful of their opinions and treat them as valued contributors.
- 8. Value the uniqueness of each child:** Each child is unique, and while she may have characteristics typical of other children with autism, she will have other characteristics that are not.
- 9. There is no one single method that works:** There is no magic pill or specific program that can *cure* or *fix* autism. While many programs and methods have been tried and are successful with some children, they may not be successful with others. Look for methods with a solid research base.
- 10. Learning about autism is a process:** Learning about autism is not about a product; it is about a process of gathering information and making informed choices, based on the needs of the individual child.

## Good Morning! Good Morning!

**Objective:** To greet the child with autism and start the day out on a positive note.

**When to use this strategy:** When the child first arrives in the morning. Remember, sometimes the child may arrive upset and needs a few minutes in the quiet area before the day begins.

Step 1: Start every day with the same routine. It is important that you use the same words and phrases each day. You might try something like, “Good morning \_-\_-.” Wait to see if the child responds. “Let’s check and see what we do first.”

Step 2: Either kneel down to eye level and show the child a picture schedule of what you want him to do, or, if you wearing a **picture apron**

Step 3: If the child does not respond to a spoken welcome, he may respond to a song. Try the following, sung to the tune of *Three Blind Mice* (first verse).

Welcome Song (sung to the tune of *Three Visually Challenged Mice*)

Hello \_\_\_\_\_ (child’s name) Hello \_\_\_\_\_  
(child’s name)

I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you’re here.

Let’s put your things away  
and find out what to do today.

I’m glad you’re here!

I’m glad you’re here!



Step 4: Direct the child to his cubby. If he hesitates, walk with him and show him. Putting a picture of the child above his cubby helps him identify it more easily.

Step 5: Tell him what to do next, “After you put up your backpack, go to the \_\_\_\_\_ center.”

Step 6: Say or sign thank you. Step 6: If the child does not move independently to a learning center, walk with him. Show him the picture cards that relate to putting up his backpack, coat, etc., and then guide him to the center where he will begin his day.

Step 7: A child with autism likes structure and set routines. Even if you start the morning with independent center time, direct the child to a specific place each morning.

Step 8: After he is accustomed to the routine, you can vary the welcome, by giving two or more center choices. However, initially, if you tell him to choose where he wants to go, he is more likely to stand in the middle of the floor or go hide in his cubby.

### **Helpful Hints**

Keep focused on your primary objective, which is to start each day with a calm and predictable sequence. Regardless of how you start the day, consistency will make the child with autism feel more secure.

Face it, some children, even children with autism, are just not *morning people* and need a little more time to *wake-up*. If the child is prone to *rugged* mornings, then begin each day by allowing him to go to his quiet center for a few minutes, until he has adjusted to the routine.

Don't forget that when you are absent, it is crucial that your substitute or teacher's assistant follow the same morning welcome routine that you follow.

### **All About Me!**

**Objective:** To enable the child with autism to feel part of your class and to help his classmates get to know all about him and his family.

**Materials needed:** Pictures and information about the child, ribbon, paper, or other materials to decorate a bulletin board.

**When to use this strategy:** When you want to help the children in your class get to know more about the child with autism. This strategy also helps the child with autism feel special and valued.

### **What to do?**

Step 1: Talk with the child's family and ask them to send some pictures of the child and his family to school. Action pictures work best, because they show the child doing things.

Step 2: Ask the family to write a few sentences to go along with each picture, which describe what the family is doing, and include names of the people in the pictures.

Step 3: Feature a different child each week on the bulletin board. Put up pictures of his family and pictures of what the child enjoys.

Step 4: After you have displayed the pictures, build an activity around them. Talk about the child's siblings, pets, or activities. This helps the child feel more comfortable and helps all children in the class see the child with autism as being more like them.

Step 5: Another adaptation of this exercise is to have each child in the class make a picture book about their family. Be sure to include grandparents, pets, and activities or customs that the family enjoys. This Book About \_\_\_\_\_ (child's name) can be used throughout the year.

Step 6: Making a book about a child also helps connect his family to your classroom, and can be used to help children discover things they have in common with their classmates, such as the number of brothers and sisters, types of pets, family customs, family activities, etc.

Step 7: An additional benefit of this activity is that, as you get to know more about the child with autism and his family, you can plan activities centered on familiar things.

### **Helpful hints:**

Be aware that not all children come from traditional families. Family is defined by the child and those he lives with, not by any traditional rule.

Some children may be in foster care or come from families that are not currently intact. In this case, the *All About Me* activities could center on what the child likes to do and what activities he enjoys at school.

It is also not uncommon for a child to be in a blended family or be in a situation where he spends some time with parents in two separate households. In this case, try to include all family members from both households.