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Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 3

Strategies for teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other students with special needs

By Sue Larkey*

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder do not experience the same emotions and thought processes that we expect of most school age children.

If a student is visually impaired, we use braille and a range of special adaptations to enable them to be independent. In the same way we need to adapt the environment of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder to set them up for success.

What does a student with Autism experience?

The nature of Autism is such that during schoolwork, students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder often:

- demonstrate poor organisational skills,
- do not feel rewarded by the social interaction surrounding schoolwork,
- need expectations spelled out very clearly,

- have no way of predicting how long an activity will last,
- are unsure where to start and when to finish an activity,
- will often repeat an activity as they are unaware it has ended (hence many autistic repetitive behaviours such as spinning),
- have no way of knowing or anticipating the order in which demands will be made,
- have no anticipation of when they will get to do what they want to do, and
- are uncomfortable with uncertainty and unable to concentrate on work to the best of their ability.

We now also know that most students with autism have visual strengths and it is vital to use a range of visual strategies to improve their understanding and positive interactions with learning.

Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder have given us a great understanding of the extent of their visual strengths and confusion with the spoken word.

Temple Grandin (an adult with autism who has written a number of books about her experiences) said, "I used to think adults spoke a different language. I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me."

Strategies to help students complete tasks

Work tasks and homework can be a very stressful time for schools and families of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. There are a number of strategies that can help students with Autism Spectrum Disorder successfully complete tasks.

The strategies can be grouped into four areas – workload, work tasks, work environment and feedback and rewards.

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.

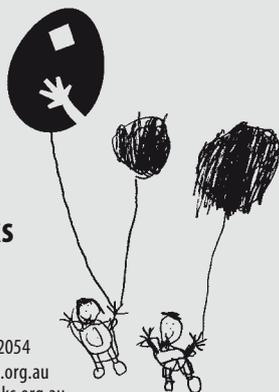
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Workload

- It is very important that a student with autism is given an achievable workload and has some control over the work. For example, give the student some area of choice. This may mean they can order the tasks or the reward when they complete the work.
- There should also be a definite end to the work – clearly defined by such things as reinforcement, a special activity or playtime.
- Work tasks should be ordered using a schedule (see later in the article). Alternatively you can have a start and finish box or pile so a student can see that they need to do 'x' number of worksheets and that they have also completed 'x' number.
- An analogue clock is useful as you can put a red dot to indicate when the session will finish (such as when the big hand gets to the five).

Work Tasks

- Ensure there is one familiar aspect and tap into an area of interest or a student's strengths (such as a counting activity if this is a strength) in order to reduce stress.
- Present the same concept in many different ways. Long term exposure to the same task can create rigidity, boredom and difficulty with generalisation.
- Use a student's interests and/or fixations (such as a picture of their favourite Pokeman on the corner of a worksheet) to introduce a new or difficult task. This creates a calming effect in a demanding situation.
- Balance the work tasks to include tasks of high, medium and low interest.
- Make tasks functional and relevant wherever possible. Students will resist tasks that have minimal meaning or relevance to them or have an unclear start and finish point.

Work Environment

- Allocate a specific area for specific tasks.
- Use visual schedules.
- Ensure a student can predict what will happen next in the sequence of activities.
- Ensure a student can understand what is required of them.

Feedback/Rewards

- Verbal information can be abstract or open to misinterpretation. Use statements of what you want, not what you don't want. For example, say, "draw a circle" and don't add "not a square" as they might only hear the word square.
- Demonstrate rather than explain. Remember to use visuals whenever possible.
- Trial rewards to ensure they are motivating.
- Compile a list of rewards. You may be surprised what motivates the student.
- Choose rewards that are functional, concrete and capable of immediate sensory feedback.
- Change the rewards frequently (you can repeat them later).

Schedules

Work procedures pose additional difficulties for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder usually have a limited understanding of the concept of time and know what is happening or will happen. Sequencing, predicting and organising the order of events are also difficult.

Another issue facing students with Autism Spectrum Disorder is difficulty with communication, including difficulty understanding verbal explanations of what will happen at certain times during the day.

"I used to think adults spoke a different language. I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me."

Temple Grandin, Adult with Autism

Change can also create considerable stress and students with Autism Spectrum Disorder generally feel more comfortable with sameness or rigidity in their routine.

Schedules help reduce the stress associated with these feelings and increase a student's opportunities for success.

A schedule enables students to keep track of the day's events and activities as well as develop an understanding of time frames and an appreciation of environmental sequences.

The Advantages of Schedules

INCREASE

Independence
Understanding
Success

Access to school curriculum
Participation in school community

DECREASE

Dependency on teacher/teacher aide
Dependency on verbal prompts
Questioning
Behavioural Problems

Schedules can cover various time periods – yearly diaries or timetables, term diaries, monthly calendars, weekly calendars or timetables and/or schedules of short periods of time such as one hour, ten minutes or less.

You can also use a variety of visuals in schedules.

Most students with Autism Spectrum Disorder are visual learners, so where possible use pictures or written words in conjunction with verbal communication.

Visuals can include some or all of the following.

- Compic (a computer line drawing that represents words, objects, activities and concepts – see box)
- Written word
- Objects
- Boardmaker
- Remnants (part of an activity, ie. block from train set)
- Photographs
- Comic Strip illustrations

**“Being autistic doesn't mean being unable to learn.
But it does mean there are differences in how learning happens.”**

Jim Sinclair, Adult with Autism

Three types of commonly used schedules are a general daily classroom schedule with activities and individual tasks, an individual work skill schedule and sequence charts or a schedule of daily routines.

How to use a Schedule

A range of formats can be used with schedules including posters, blackboards/whiteboards, diaries, strips, small photo albums, business card holders, cardboard strips or books.

Schedules can be the cornerstone of management practices for students with challenging behaviours. They can be used to clarify expectations, set limits, or reduce negative teacher attention for undesired behaviour. As a behaviour management tool, schedules can also indicate that a preferred activity will follow a non-preferred activity.

Schedules can be used in a large variety of ways to develop language and aid comprehension depending upon the individual student's needs. For students with limited verbal language, schedules can provide an opportunity to interact and communicate.

For students who have difficulty writing stories (especially creative stories), schedules provide an excellent opportunity to develop written skills. Many students are motivated to write as they can relate to the text and have repeated opportunities to write about the day's events. This can be an excellent homework activity.

For students who have difficulty writing you could have the words/Compic cut out and they can either paste or attach them to the schedule.

Schedules are also excellent to use to teach time, numbers, days of the week and months of the year – all important life skills.

A calendar can be used to fill in the dates and events. A daily schedule sheet also provides an opportunity for the student to fill in what they should do in numerical order – 1st, 2nd, 3rd etc. Clock stamps on a schedule can be used to help learn to tell the time.

Schedules in the Playground

The playground can be an extremely challenging time for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and they often find this an extremely overwhelming experience.

Using a schedule of activities to do in the playground can considerably reduce anxiety.

The schedule can include a range of appropriate activities (written words, Compics, photos depending upon students' needs) and the order.

An example could be:

Lunch Time
1st Ball
2nd Monkey Bars
3rd Climbing

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Compic pictographs are a communication resource developed in Australia and consist of 1670 pictographs.

For more information on Compic or computer line drawings visit www.compic.com



Successful strategies for transition to a new classroom/teacher/school for children with autism spectrum disorder

By Sue Larkey

The nature of Autism is such that transition can be extremely stressful.

Changes big and small can trigger confusion, anxiety and problems. A new teacher, new classmates and a new classroom can be particularly stressful.

If the student is keeping the same teacher or teacher's aide this is one less change, however for some students it is the change of students or classroom that creates the confusion.

Any of the following changes in a typical school year can create huge anxiety: changes in timetable, different playground, new school books or pencil case, new classroom rules, new arrangement of objects, new teachers (e.g. specialist teachers), new school administration (e.g. Principal), new students in class and/or new play areas.

Successful Strategies

- Use visual timetables and visual cues to indicate changes.
- Schools should send home the timetable as soon as possible. Then the parents can discuss changes and the student can learn the timetable.
- Use photographs for example, new teachers, students in class or playground.
- Ensure the student has strategies to stay calm. This may include a quiet area, walkman with calming music and favourite book or activity.
- If the student has difficulty finding their way from one class to another, allocate a 'Hall Buddy' who helps the student find the next class.

Autism Interest Group

Are you a family with an interest in Autism?

If you are happy to have your contact details on a database with the intention of informing you, by post or email, of events/conferences/workshops and articles relevant to Autism Spectrum Disorders, please give your details to Veronica Borham, Learning Links, 12-14 Pindari Rd Peakhurst NSW 2210, phone 9534 1710 (Tues/Wed/Fri) or mail@learninglinks.org.au

- Allocate a place where the student can go if they get lost or to get help (e.g. Front desk, School Library, Special Education Teachers' classroom). Choose a place that is easy to find and always has an adult to quickly help the student before they become anxious. Ensure the staff in this area know the student and can help. It is a good idea to have a folder with the student's timetables, information and strategies at this place to help ensure the student can be assisted quickly. Practise with the student going to this area when they are calm.
- If the student has difficulty with organisation, put strategies in place to help such as for each class have the required materials in separate bags in their locker (e.g. in the Art bag have a smock, pencil case, map to find classroom etc).
- The playground can be a very frightening place for a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Allocate an area in the playground for the student to play that will be within eyesight of teachers and has activities the student will enjoy. Other strategies include getting them to use the library at lunch times or joining clubs.
- Ensure communication is established with parents for example via a journal.

Organise visits now

This is vital for new teacher and student.

Organise visits to the new teacher/classroom during the last month of school. Make sure the student has pre-warning and visuals are a great way to do this.

At first you may just send them to the teacher to 'share a success' or 'show a special interest'. Make it VERY positive. Where possible keep the first visits brief so the student doesn't get too overwhelmed.

If you have a Principal who doesn't know who the teachers will be, explain the **EXTREME** importance for this student! Difficulty with change is part of this student's disability. It is VITAL and just as important as glasses to other students to make reading more successful.

A student with Autism Spectrum Disorder needs transition and so does the teacher.

Many teachers have never experienced students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Knowing they are having a student as early as possible allows them to talk to other staff, professionals, attend workshops BEFORE they have the student in their class.

If possible send the new teacher to OBSERVE in the current classroom for a day!!

Information on Autism Spectrum Disorders

Learning Links has information sheets on Autism Spectrum Disorders on its website www.learninglinks.org.au in the publications section (just click on the link in the top black menu bar). These information sheets can be downloaded as they are pdfs. These sheets contain references to a number of websites with useful information on autism and feature articles by Professor Tony Attwood, Sue Larkey and Dr Jacqueline Roberts.



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