

## How to prepare for teaching a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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The following article offers advice and practical suggestions for teachers who have a student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in their class or school.

### Educational Strategies

- Learn about the diagnosis of ASD, and how the characteristics can impact on the child in the environment.
- Parents will usually be hoping for a collaborative and consistent approach with teachers and the school, so aim to meet with the parents before the school year begins and schedule regular meetings throughout the year.
- Find out what additional supports the child will require (e.g. an aide for some or all of the school day). The school may need to make an application for additional funding through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Parents are very experienced at managing their child, and many of them will be able to give you some great tips that will be useful in the classroom. You may wish to keep these in a book or folder for easy reference.
- Structure the classroom environment to meet the student's needs.
- If you are prepared for the child, it is much easier to avoid problems. Avoiding

problems is far easier than trying to fix them after they occur.



- Talk to the family about whether you should inform the child's classmates of the diagnosis. There are a number of books for children when explain ASD's and offer tips for effective friendships. Contact the Autism Victoria Library for more information on these titles.
- Acknowledge that there will be tough moments! Try to remember that the child with ASD is probably not trying to be difficult. The world is very confusing for them and their attempts to navigate it can cause frustration for them and you.

## Essential components in supporting a student with ASD

1. **Structure:** rules, schedules, timetables, checklists, activities and concise questioning all help provide a structured environment that will aid decision making and task focus.
2. **Meaningful communication:** Words are difficult for children with ASD as they tend to be visual thinkers. Augmentative communication systems, such as signs, picture cards and 'situational narratives' can assist in getting your message across. If unsure, check that what you have communicated has been understood.
3. **Predictability:** Variety is not usually the spice of life for children with an ASD. Change must be introduced in a clear and concrete manner, and constant reassurance should be given. The child's ability to generalise skills from one environment to another may not be well developed, so do not assume a learning skill will be transferred (or punish the child for failing to transfer skills).
4. **Positive Support:** Students with ASD can have low self-esteem, so it is important they feel supported at school. It is more effective to use a reward system of stars for good behaviour, rather than black crosses for bad behaviour (e.g. "I'd love to see how well you can hold my hand" not "You must hold my hand!") Reinforce all the child's attempts at positive communication. It is easy to focus on negative communications but we often ignore or fail to acknowledge positive attempts.
5. **Mutual Trust:** Students with ASD need to trust the people who are helping them interpret their environment, showing respect to the student and confidence in your ability as a teacher can help the child feel more comfortable in the classroom.

## The importance of a structured environment

It is important to create an environment that is **meaningful, predictable** and **manageable** for the student. The learning environment should also take into account the student's developmental and chronological age, and their strengths and weaknesses.

In order to achieve this, teachers need to:

- Understand the difficulties that are part of the student's ASD.
- Help the students to understand their strengths and work on weaknesses.
- Set up the environment in a way that facilitates learning and minimizes frustration.
- Help the student compensate for the difficulties they experience.
- Become aware of ways in which we need to modify **our own** behaviour.
- Clearly set out the student's role in a given task.
- Impose expectations which are realistic and achievable.
- Aim to teach the student strategies for independent functioning.

The student with an ASD often has a specific pattern of strengths and weaknesses. These include a need to experience **consistent consequences**, difficulty in understanding large amounts of **random information**, strengths **visual abilities** and **rote learning**.



To help meet the student's needs, we need to be aware that:

- a) Spontaneous learning may not occur, as the student lacks the ability to **generalise** skills or information.
- b) Students with an ASD can **lack motivation** and teachers need to redirect and use their individual interests as motivation tools.
- c) Teachers need to consistently apply **relevant skills practice** and maintenance strategies.
- d) You can **simplify** the environment and reduce irrelevant stimuli to assist the student with an ASD.

All of these tools can help structure the environment and maximize the student's capacity to learn whilst reducing anxiety and providing order.

## How do we structure the environment?

### 1. Set clear goals

- Employ strategies which empower all parties.
- Using strategies that will be used again in other situations (maximizing efficiency).
- Accurately documenting progress to see how goals are being achieved.
- Make sure that the student knows what goals you have agreed to set. This can be supported by use of a daily visual schedule, outlining what they should be doing, as well as clear, unambiguous language used by the teacher. New material should be demonstrated, and a class schedule can be used so the student knows exactly what the class is expected to be doing e.g. assembly. Use concrete examples the student can understand and related to.

- Setting annual goal in June or July of each year will allow you to avoid the difficult change over period associated with the Christmas and New Year holidays, and beginning a new grade.

### 2. Modify the learning environment

- Minimise background noise so it is earlier for students to select relevant auditory cues/stimuli.
- Reduce unnecessary visual stimuli in the classroom to encourage students to stay on task.
- Ensure classroom activities and directions are developmentally appropriate for the student with ASD. Making sure tasks are easily understood or from frustration.
- Give clear instructions about personal space when in unstructured groups, for example when students are sitting together on the floor.
- Facilitate learning by actively doing and showing.

### 3. Use consistent communication

- Be sure you have the student's attention before giving instructions or asking questions.
- Allow time for information to be processed/don't give several instructions at once.
- Use language that is simple, clear and within the student's knowledge base.
- Use gestures and modelling to help understanding.
- Give warning of change – tell the student what will be happening next, and what they will be expecting to do when finishing and starting activities.
- Use consistent consequences for behaviour that is inappropriate.

- Use consistent positive reinforcement.
- If engaging in inappropriate behaviours, suggest a positive alternative (rather than focusing on the negative).
- Use *Who, What, When, Where* and *How* to establish context.

#### 4. Give tasks that are manageable, and plan for extension

- Break tasks into manageable steps.
- Use a methodical approach to complete each step in the task.
- Don't do anything for the students that they can do themselves.
- Give students tasks where at least one element is easily achievable and is something the student will recognised as success.
- When planning long or complex tasks, consider the student's attentions span and whether this would be more appropriate broken down into a number of tasks completed at different times.
- Teach the student appropriate ways to ask for help where required.
- Be aware that the student's behaviour usually has a purpose, so look for the reward or incentive that is available to them.
- Use some tasks involving a degree of risk, and praise conscious of teaching acceptance when mistakes do occur.
- Be mindful of the student's individuals stress indicators. Teach ways to express or indicate feelings, so you can prompt appropriate action before an outdoor or episode of withdrawal.

#### How can we extend our knowledge?

Teachers can extend their knowledge and develop confidence in dealing effectively with students by undertaking professional development. By completing learning modules teachers can expand their

knowledge and have the opportunity to discuss strategies for effective classroom learning. Participants also gain valuable skills and experience in creating visual schedules, student profiles, Individuals Learning Plans and other tools designed to help students with ASD.

While this kind of training equips teachers for helping the student with an ASD in the classroom, there will be other staff outside the classroom, there will be other staff outside the classroom that the student regularly interacts with. It is essential for the **whole school** to be united in their approach to helping students with ASD's, which means making sure that all staff are reasonably well-informed and feel comfortable interacting with the student in an appropriate and consistent way.

Autism Victoria offers an introductory module on ASD's which will help staff in understanding and relating to individuals with ASD's. This Professional Development session is suitable for those who interact with the student less regularly, such as administrative staff, canteen volunteers and classroom helpers.



For more information about Professional Development and Training offers by Amaze Knowledge please call 1300 262 935 or email [info@amazeknowledge.org.au](mailto:info@amazeknowledge.org.au)

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