

TIPS FOR TEACHING HIGH FUNCTIONING PEOPLE WITH AUTISM

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1) People with autism have trouble with organizational skills, regardless of their intelligence and/or age. Even a "straight A" student with autism who has a photographic memory can be incapable of remembering to bring a pencil to class or of remembering a deadline for an assignment. In such cases, aid should be provided in the least restrictive way possible. Strategies could include having the student put a picture of a pencil on the cover of his notebook or maintaining a list of assignments to be completed at home. Always praise the student when he remembers something he has previously forgotten. Never denigrate or "harp" at him when he fails. A lecture on the subject will not only NOT help, it will often make the problem worse. He may begin to believe he cannot remember to do or bring these things. These students seem to have either the neatest or the messiest desks or lockers in the school. The one with the messiest desk will need your help in frequent cleanups of the desk or locker so that he can find things. Simply remember that he is probably not making a conscious choice to be messy. He is most likely incapable of this organizational task without specific training. Attempt to train him in organizational skills using small, specific steps.

2) People with autism have problems with abstract and conceptual thinking. Some may eventually acquire abstract skills, but others never will. When abstract concepts must be used, use visual cues, such as drawings or written words, to augment the abstract idea. Avoid asking vague questions such as, "Why did you do that?" Instead, say, "I did not like it when you slammed your book down when I said it was time for gym. Next time put the book down gently and tell me you are angry. Were you showing me that you did not want to go to gym, or that you did not want to stop reading?" Avoid asking essay-type questions. Be as concrete as possible in all your interactions with these students.

3) An increase in unusual or difficult behaviors probably indicates an increase in stress. Sometimes stress is caused by feeling a loss of control. Many times the stress will only be alleviated when the student physically removes himself from the stressful event or situation. If this occurs, a program should be set up to assist the student in re-entering and/or staying in the stressful situation. When this occurs, a "safe-place" or "safe-person" may come in handy.

4) Do not take misbehavior personally. The high-functioning person with autism is not a manipulative, scheming person who is trying to make life difficult. They are seldom, if ever, capable of being manipulative. Usually misbehavior is the result of efforts to survive experiences which may be confusing, disorienting or frightening. People with autism are, by virtue of their disability, egocentric. Most have extreme difficulty reading the reactions of others.

5) Most high-functioning people with autism use and interpret speech literally. Until you know the capabilities of the individual, you should avoid:

- idioms (e.g., save your breath, jump the gun, second thoughts)
- double meanings (most jokes have double meanings)
- sarcasm (e.g., saying, "Great!" after he has just spilled a bottle of ketchup on the table)
- nicknames
- "cute" names (e.g., Pal, Buddy, Wise Guy)

6) Remember that facial expressions and other social cues may not work. Most individuals with autism have difficulty reading facial expressions and interpreting "body language."

7) If the student does not seem to be learning a task, break it down into smaller steps or present the task in several ways (e.g., visually, verbally, physically).

8) Avoid verbal overload. Be clear. Use shorter sentences if you perceive that the student is not fully understanding you. Although he probably has no hearing problem and may be paying attention, he may have difficulty understanding your main point and identifying important information.

9) Prepare the student for all environmental and/or changes in routine, such as assembly, substitute teacher and rescheduling. Use a written or visual schedule to prepare him for change.

10) Behavior management works, but if incorrectly used, it can encourage robot-like behavior, provide only a short term behavior change or result in some form of aggression. Use positive and chronologically age-appropriate behavior procedures.

11) Consistent treatment and expectations from everyone is vital.

12) Be aware that normal levels of auditory and visual input can be perceived by the student as too much or too little. For example, the hum of florescent lighting is extremely distracting for some people with autism. Consider environmental changes such as removing "visual clutter" from the room or seating changes if the student seems distracted or upset by his classroom environment.

13) If your high-functioning student with autism uses repetitive verbal arguments and/or repetitive verbal questions, you need to interrupt what can become a continuing, repetitive litany. Continually responding in a logical manner or arguing back seldom stops this behavior. The subject of the argument or question is not always the subject which has upset him. More often the individual is communicating a feeling of loss of control or uncertainty about someone or something in the environment.

Try requesting that he write down the question or argumentative statement. Then write down your reply. This usually begins to calm him down and stops the repetitive activity. If that doesn't work, write down his repetitive question or argument and ask him to write down a logical reply (perhaps one he thinks you would make). This distracts from the escalating verbal aspect of the situation and may give him a more socially acceptable way of expressing frustration or anxiety. Another alternative is role-playing the repetitive argument or question with you taking his part and having him answer you as he thinks you might.

14) Since these individuals experience various communication difficulties, do not rely on students with autism to relay important messages to their parents about school events, assignments, school rules, etc., unless you try it on an experimental basis with follow-up or unless you are already certain that the student has mastered this skill. Even sending home a note for his parents may not work. The student may not remember to deliver the note or may lose it before reaching home. Phone calls to parents work best until the skill can be developed. Frequent and accurate communication between the teacher and parent (or primary care-giver) is very important.

15) If your class involves pairing off or choosing partners, either draw numbers or use some other arbitrary means of pairing. Or ask an especially kind student if he or she would agree to choose the individual with autism as a partner before the pairing takes place. The student with autism is most often the individual left with no partner. This is unfortunate since these students could benefit most from having a partner.

16) Assume nothing when assessing skills. For example, the individual with autism may be a "math whiz" in Algebra, but not able to make simple change at a cash register. Or, he may have an incredible memory about books he has read, speeches he has heard or sports statistics, but still may not be able to remember to bring a pencil to class. Uneven skills development is a hallmark of autism.

Be Positive!

Be Creative!

Be Flexible!