Supporting the Student with Autism Spectrum Disorder in your Classroom

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Teacher, RDSB
What is Autism?

Autism is a life-long developmental disorder varying in range and intensity. All individuals with ASD have noted difficulties in the specific areas of communication, social skills, and behaviour. We, as educators, must provide these students with the tools that they need to succeed in leading fulfilling and productive lives.
Triad of Impairments

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Pattern of Restricted, Stereotypic Behaviours
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder
- Rett's Syndrome
- Autism
- PDD Not Otherwise Specified
- Asperger's Syndrome

Impairments in Communication

Impairments in Socialization
Neurology

Neurology plays a large role in the etiology of ASD. The areas affected include:

The Limbic System
The Cerebellum

As a result of this neurological involvement, the student with ASD differs from the typical child in the way that they learn.
Learning Styles

- **Gestalt learners** (use chunking, rote learning, and repetition)
- **Marked difficulty with generalization** (analysis and synthesis of novel information)
- Learn best when anxiety is low (routine and ritual)
- **Visual thinking** (literal and concrete, auditory weaknesses)
- **Attention shifting difficulties** (get “stuck”, can’t separate whole picture from the detail)
Academic Strengths and Weaknesses

Students with ASD demonstrate strengths in the areas of procedural knowledge and weaknesses in the areas of declarative knowledge.

Strengths:
- Rote memorization
- Word recognition
- Spelling
- Reading Decoding

Weaknesses:
- Complex information processing
- Concept development
- Language/Reading comprehension
- Problem solving
- Inferring
- Analyzing and synthesizing information
Promoting Individual Strengths

Let the individual write out information about themselves.

Make it into a game – Don’t put a name on it, guess whose paper belongs to who.
Differences in those with ASD
1. Behaviour

Behaviour is functional and related to communication.
Understanding Behaviour

- Be aware that typical development and individual personality contributes to behaviour
- Research indicates that an increase in communication skills ultimately leads to a decrease in inappropriate behaviours
- Consider carefully your influence on the child’s behaviour (reaction, expectations, control)
How do I support appropriate behaviour?

- Determine the function of the behaviour
  - Escape
  - Sensory
  - Attention
  - Tangible

- Manipulate the antecedents and consequences
- Reinforce alternative skills
- Explain the DO, as well as the DON’T
Hypothesize the Function

Consider a specific and recent behavioural incident involving a student from your classroom.

Can you hypothesize the function of this particular behaviour?

• Attention
• Escape
• Sensory
• Tangible
The ABC’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antecedent</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(what happened, who was present, where, when)</td>
<td>(operationally define target behaviour)</td>
<td>(what did you do, what did peers/others do)</td>
<td>(what was the communicative intent?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent</td>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object taken away</td>
<td>Hit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Self-injury</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requested to do something</td>
<td>Self-stim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invasion of personal space</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment change</td>
<td>Tantrum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Routine change</td>
<td>Throwing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flopping</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Screaming</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Walks away</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Running</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Consequence
- Redirected
- Natural consequence
- Ignored
- Shown picture/rule
- Time-out
- Differential reinforcement

Function
- Escape
- Attention
- Sensory
- Tangible
- Multiple
Reinforcement

• Vary the reinforcer
  (social, activity, sensory, edible, and token reinforcers are a few examples)
• Reinforce immediately
• Reinforce consistently
• Pair a tangible reinforcer with social praise
• Evaluate the effectiveness
Self-Management Tools

Developing independence is extremely important for ASD students. Developing self-management tools assists them with this goal.

I am upset because the children are too loud.

- I can go the quiet centre and read a book.
- I can go put my earphones on and listen to my favorite tape.
Transition Helpers

- sitting quietly
- video

When
Then
Offering Choice

My Favorite Things

- Music
- Make-up
- Vacations
- Movies
- Shopping
- Eating Out
- Television
- Computers
2. Communication

Don’t assume that a verbal student understands you and that a non-verbal child lacks understanding!
Expressive Communication

Focus on functional language that is both meaningful and motivating.

Methods may include:
  • speech imitation
  • sign language
  • picture systems
  • oral language.

A multi-system approach is considered ideal. Teaching pragmatics or social language including body language, inflections, and the rules of conversation.
Receptive Communication

Visual Aids assist student in many ways by:

- Helping to clarify expectations
- Providing ongoing organization and structure
- Decreasing processing time
- Decreasing reliance on adult prompts and cues.
Examples of Visual Aids:

- Schedules and Calendars
- Choice Boards
- Communication of “No”
- Transition Helpers
- Task Organizers
Consider Carefully...

- Use 3-5 word simple sentences
- Avoid double meaning and sarcasm
- Allow 10 seconds processing time
- Demand only social eye contact
- Increase hands-on life experience
  (a student with ASD cannot imagine that which he/she has not experienced)
- The developmental progression of comprehension
Comprehension Development

- Yes/No?
- Who?
- What?
- Where?

- When?
- How?
- If/Then?
3. Socialization

Social skills are the best predictor of positive, long-term outcomes for students with ASD.
What is Theory of Mind or Mindblindness?

This “...is defined as the ability to infer other people’s mental states and the ability to use this information to interpret what they say, make sense of their behaviour, and predict what they will do next.”

Simon Baron-Cohen. 1995
Activities requiring Theory of Mind

- Reading non-verbal cues
- Pragmatics
- Imagination
- Sizing up social situations
- Inferring the intentions of others
- Predicting behaviour
- Empathizing
- Making adjustments in one’s own behaviour to match a situation
- Making sense of the social world
We, therefore, have to provide direct social skills instruction:

- Greetings
- Asking for and offering assistance
- Turn-taking
- Initiating conversations
- Empathy
- Giving compliments
- Sharing
- Accepting criticism
- Joining others
- Listening with interest
- Farewells

Tony Attwood
Social Scripting

Greetings

1. The first time you see someone during the day, you say, “Hi, how are you?”

   Hi. How are you?

   Fine.

   Fine. How are you?

2. When you pass someone in the hallway, you say, “Hi.”

   Hi.

   Hi.

3. When someone is leaving for the day, you say, “Goodbye.”

   Goodbye.

   Goodbye.
Social Stories

A. Describe a social situation and indicate the social expectations (i.e. what to say, what to do)

B. Clearly explain the social reasoning behind the suggested behaviour (i.e. the feelings of others)
My name is Sally. I go to Wembley Public School. Sometimes I want to talk to an adult when the adult is talking to someone else. I will try to wait patiently and count to 5 in my head before saying, “Excuse me.” This is important! Adults are happy when I am polite.
Sensory differences are found in 90% of individuals with ASD. Whereas, only 10% exhibit sensory differences in the typical population.
## Sensory Accommodations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sense</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Accommodations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hearing</td>
<td>Shouting, humming, constant noise, banging</td>
<td>Headphones, items that make noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch</td>
<td>Wedging body, avoiding touch, hand flapping</td>
<td>Deep pressure, beanbag chair, tight clothing, brushing, fidget toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smell</td>
<td>Sniffing hair, skin, objects, smearing feces</td>
<td>Smelling jars</td>
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## Sensory accommodations

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<td>Taste</td>
<td>Eating inedible, mouthing, sucking</td>
<td>Textured foods, chewy candy, electric toothbrush, “chewelry” (chewable jewelry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>Finger flicking, twirling objects</td>
<td>Pinwheels, bubbles, kaleidoscope, toys with moving parts</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Try:

• Imitate the actions of the child to try to get some insight into the possible sensory functions
• Reinforce alternative behaviours that achieve the same sensory function
• Provide an unstructured time in which the student may participate in needed sensory activities (i.e. self-stimulating behaviours)
5. Anxiety

“Even for the most capable people with ASD, anxiety can be such a problem that they are unable to complete a simple task that they are physically able to do.”

www.autism.net
Signs of Increasing Anxiety

- Avoidance of anxiety producing activities
- Increase in ritualistic, explosive or self-stimulatory behaviours
Anxiety Management

• Develop an IEP Safety Plan
• Teach relaxation methods
• Encourage self-management “Breaks”
• Use social stories and cognitive picture rehearsal
I.E.P. Safety Plan

- Ensures that all staff members react to the evidence of increased tension in a similar manner
- Develop and implement the plan as a team
- Re-assess the plan as required
- Include the student whenever feasible
- Rehearse the plan prior to using it
Tension-Reduction

A Brief Relaxation Exercise

1. Tense your arms... then relax them...
2. "Scrunch" up your face... then relax it...
3. Tense up your shoulders and chest... then release them...
4. Breathe in relaxation... breathe out tension
5. Tense up your legs... then relax!
References

• The Geneva Centre for Autism  
  www.autism.net

• The Autism Society of Ontario

• www.do2learn.com