

Autism Spectrum Disorder Newsletter  
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Why is there such an emphasis on developing social skills in students with an ASD? A recurring long-term goal that appears in almost all IEP's of students who have an ASD is "to improve social skills." For some, this goal translates into learning to share toys. For others, it encompasses learning to substitute Kleenex for fingers when emptying nasal cavities. Whether in elementary or secondary school, it is essential to address social behaviour.

Why are social skills so important? Firstly, social competence or lack thereof is a major defining characteristic of individuals who have special needs. When colleagues ask if you remember "Bobby" or "Jessica," it is generally not physical appearance that you recall right away; rather, it is that Bobby always bombarded you with questions, or that Jessica always smiled when people spoke to her. Also, current literature not only reveals a high correlation between friendship and a positive quality of life, but also suggests that the presence of adequate social skills are the best predictor of positive, long-term outcomes for persons who have an intellectual impairment.

Social skills are a combination of the things that we do, the things that we say, and the way that we look. Deficits in any one area may

lead to difficulties in establishing or maintaining peer relationships. For example, a grade 7 student may hang out by the locker area and greet and introduce himself appropriately to his classmates, but if he is dressed in a suit and tie, he may have trouble making friends on his first day of school.

When addressing social skills, it is imperative to reference age-related peers. Do they tuck their shirts in? How is their hair styled? What types of things are they talking about? What kind of jargon are they using? Collaborate with home to expose the students to trendy music, games, and age appropriate toys so they will have something to talk about. Teach them to comment and to use current phraseology such as "My bad," and "FYI."

During the selection of skills to be targeted, it is also important to evaluate the practicality of the skill. How long will it take for the individual to learn the skill? How much energy will it take for the person to perform the skill? What will the benefit be to the student who is performing the skill? From the student's perspective, will the benefit outweigh the cost? As Bridget Taylor states, "Despite being taught socially relevant behaviour individuals with

autism often continue to lack the motivation to engage in socially meaningful behaviour." Focus first on skills that students will be motivated to use again and again. For instance, if learning to request or sign for help gives a student access to his closed food container or a chocolate bar, there is a high probability that the student will request help again in the future. If, on the other hand, learning to reciprocate a greeting in the hallway results in a bombardment of questions (e.g. What class do you have next? How are you? What are you doing at lunch?), the student might find that it is easier to ignore the greeting than to respond to it.

Finally, incorporate peers from the start. Ensure that students have ample opportunities throughout the day to practice social skills with their peers. **Proximity alone is not enough** – in the absence of intervention, peer interactions will be minimal. Peers need to be trained to ask questions, to make comments, to offer choices, to provide praise and to prompt appropriate behaviours. Peers also need to be reinforced, especially in the beginning, when the students with an ASD fail to respond to their attempts at interaction. By incorporating peers, inclusion becomes not only a valuable experience for students who have an ASD, but it also helps peers to view themselves as competent and important members of the school, as well as to become more compassionate adults in the future.

<p>Table of Contents:</p> <p>Feature Article</p> <p>Occupational Therapy Corner</p> <p>Library</p> <p>Speech and Language Tip of the Month</p> <p>ASD Team Members</p>
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## Occupational therapy Corner

As mentioned in our previous issues, individuals with autism/PDD may have difficulty with registration and interpretation of sensory information. Hypersensitivity to visual input is frequently observed. Students who tend to OVER-REACT to VISUAL input can be recognized as they avoid eye contact, express discomfort/cover eyes/squint at bright lights/sunlight, and are sensitive to changes in lighting. They may prefer to be in the dark, insist on wearing sunglasses, and turn away from television or computer screens. They often look away from tasks to watch all actions in the room, need part of the page covered when looking at books/designs, and have difficulty putting puzzles together. In addition, they tend to become frustrated when attempting to find objects in competing backgrounds, and often avoid scanning their environment. When working with them, don't insist on maintenance of eye contact and minimize worn accessories (jewellery and bold fabric patterns can be distracting). In class, try to cut down visual distractions by keeping art projects/visuals on the wall/their desk to a minimum, and organizing seating so that they are close to the teacher and

have their back facing windows. Allow them to wear sunglasses indoors (if necessary), try using an enclosed study carrel, and experiment with coloured acetates over printed materials. Immediately replace flickering light bulbs, use blinds on windows, and turn lights off for calming. Finally, as a visually calming strategy, allow them to stare at fishes or a turtle swimming in an aquarium.

## Library

We have been accumulating many new books. The following are new ones that are available to you by contacting one of the ASD Team members.

- 1) *Making a Difference: Behavioral Intervention for Autism*
- 2) *Tobin Learns to Make Friends*
- 3) *Autism and Learning: A Guide to Good Practice*
- 4) *Inclusive Programming for Middle School Students with Autism/Asperger's Syndrome*
- 5) *Reaching Out, Joining In. Teaching Social Skills to Young Children with Autism.*

## Speech and Language Tip of the Month

Students within the Autism Spectrum often have difficulty processing and understanding verbal information. Unfortunately, we almost always give information to students verbally. We tell them what we want them to know. **Schedules and Calendars** are a more efficient way to give students information.

Use **schedules and calendars** to tell the student:

- What is happening now
- What is changing
- What behaviour will be expected when something happens
- What will not happen and what will happen instead (preparing for change)
- Who will be there

Depending on the students abilities **schedules and calendars** can include:

- photos, boardmaker pictures, drawings
- Written instructions, checklists

For further information about implementing **schedules and calendars** an excellent resource is: *Solving Behavior Problems in Autism: Improving Communication with Visual Strategies* by Linda A. Hodgdon. (Available through the ASD library)

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