



Autism Spectrum Disorder Newsletter
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Lester B. Pearson School Board

Autism and Literacy Learning

Many children with an ASD learn to read, although their literacy acquisition does not necessarily follow a typical developmental sequence. The extreme of this is *Hyperlexia*, which can be defined as “reading without meaning”. Some children can decode virtually any print or are fascinated with words or the alphabet, but have minimal oral language comprehension, and cannot respond to the content of what they read due to limited expressive language skills. This splinter skill can often be used to increase functional communication. Words paired with simple visuals can be used in individual concept books, personal messages, list of jobs, schedules of class routines, and to give directives which do not rely on a verbal prompt. By labeling materials, embedding print into basic activities, and working on matching of whole words, we can capitalize on the visual strengths of our students and expand opportunities for literacy learning.

Students with significant expressive language difficulties can be taught to read with a modified language experience

approach, first developed by Patricia Oelwein for teaching students with Down Syndrome. In *Teaching Exceptional Children* (Mar/Apr 2004), Autism Specialist Leslie Broun describes this method of whole word instruction of personally meaningful vocabulary. It teaches to the child’s visual strengths and compensates for difficulties with auditory processing and abstract symbols. Once the initial stage of naming, matching, and selecting sight words is mastered, the student can move on to working with simple sentences and reading individual caption books. Phonological skills follow the gestalt learning of words.

More academically capable children often develop beginning skills as participants in classroom instruction. However, language difficulties result in comprehension eventually lagging behind decoding accuracy and fluency. Characteristics of ASD impact on reading comprehension. These include the impact of literal, rule-governed reasoning on understanding abstract information and ideas not explicitly stated in text, problems with perspective

taking (difficulty understanding authors’ or characters’ thinking, motivation, or feelings), and problems with figurative language. Semantic maps and graphic organizers are a key approach for the visual learning style of these students. Direct instruction in vocabulary with multiple meanings and in idiomatic expressions is also needed to build comprehension. Some students may benefit from strategies to keep them motivated and engaged. These include using non-fiction texts, incorporating and building on students’ special interests in text selection, or providing books with photographs or strong visual components.

Each student should be viewed as a unique learner, but all can have a place in the literacy learning community of the classroom.

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Library Acquisitions

New board games which can be accessed through a member of the ASD team: 1) Sequence; 2) Around the World – Identifying the main idea of a text; 3) Vocabulary Building; and 4) Inference

Occupational Therapy Corner

The PROPRIOCEPTIVE SYSTEM, includes two types of sensations: proprioception and kinesthesia. PROPRIOCEPTION is the unconscious awareness of where the body and limbs are located in space. KINESTHESIA is the conscious perception of the movement of individual body parts. Receptors of the proprioceptive system react to gravity, muscle contraction, and movement. The proprioceptive system plays a key role in body awareness, motor planning and execution of movement, and is therefore essential when learning new tasks. Because proprioceptive input has a calming, organizing and alerting effect, and rarely overloads the nervous system, individuals with ASD often seek it in high doses. Students presenting an UNDER-REACTIVE PROPRIOCEPTIVE SYSTEM can be recognized through their poor endurance for tasks, slouched posture, and toe walking. In addition, they often collapse on the floor/furniture, lean into people/objects for support, lock joints to stabilize movement, seek and enjoy falling, and engage in rough and tumble play. They are clumsy and accident prone (“bull in a china shop”), as they exert too much or not enough pressure when handling objects (i.e. weak or tight grasp, rough handling, awkward manipulation), and have poor gross and fine motor control. The occupational therapist working with them may recommend use of weighted wrist/ankle cuffs, weighted lap pads when sitting, a deep pressure vest, and/or weighted/vibrating writing

tools. Providing slight resistance when giving hand over hand instruction, padding the chair or using a bean bag chair during instructional activities may also be helpful.

Speech and Language Tip of the Month

Students within the autism spectrum often have difficulty with comprehension skills. Even students with excellent expressive language skills may have trouble understanding certain types of messages. The following types of messages should be avoided when speaking with students with ASD. If you do use them, follow up with the meaning behind the message.

- **Sarcasm**

Sarcasm may be defined as “conflicting messages in which the information transmitted through the vocal, verbal and visual channels is in disagreement”. The interpretation of these messages requires the ability to integrate verbal, visual and vocal cues to understand the intent of the message. This is very difficult for students with ASD.

Example: “You are such a hard worker” (verbal message)
Frowning face. (visual cue)
Sarcastic voice (vocal cue)

- **Indirect Requests**

Indirect requests are ambiguous because they involve the rephrasing of direct statements into questions when questioning is not intended. Examples: “Must you do that?” (meaning: “Do not do that.”)
“When are you going to put that away?” (meaning: “Put that away.”)
“Where are your shoes?” (meaning: “Put on your shoes.”)

- **Idiomatic Expressions**

Idiomatic expressions are individual words, or groups of words whereby the meaning in one context differs from the usual or the dictionary meaning. Students with ASD may have difficulty understanding these expressions.

Examples: “You monkey”
“Hold your horses”

- **Ambiguous Statements**

Ambiguous statements require interpretation because the precise intent is not always obvious to the student. These often result when the adult wants to be directive in a kind manner

Examples: “We don’t put things in our mouths”

“That’s pretty good but...” (i.e.

The effort was good but the performance wasn’t. The student may not interpret the message and may repeat this performance in an effort to do “pretty good” again.

Centre of Excellence News

- 4 resource teachers had the opportunity to attend a 2-day workshop about the “Relationship Development Intervention Program (RDI)” for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder, presented by Steven Gutstein.
- Best of luck to Holly Barlow in all her future endeavours. Holly Barlow worked as a Consultant for Autism at LBPSB for the past 5 years. She will be missed!

Autism Spectrum Disorders Team

Patricia Assouad, Autism Resource
Andrew Bennett, **Co-ordinator**,
Psychologist
Joelle Hadaya, Occupational
Therapist
Jade Lawsane, Autism Consultant
Helene Packman, Speech-Language
Pathologist
Karen Zey, **Co-ordinator**,
Special Needs Consultant
Please direct questions or requests from other school boards to Karen Zey: 514-422-3000, Ext. 4437