



AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS NETWORK NEWS

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Functional Autonomy

As educators facilitating the inclusion of children with ASDs in our classrooms and schools, we are confronted with many challenges. ASDs are neuro-developmental disorders that cause affected children to experience a *triad of impairments*. These impairments in communication, socialization, and cognitive flexibility/imagination make it difficult for the child to meet the demands of school. Consequently, we invest a great deal of effort to help these children develop the skills necessary to be successful in the classroom. In our pursuit of this central goal it is important to be aware of the concept of *functional autonomy*.

Functional autonomy is essentially the ability to meet the demands of one's life as independently as possible given one's unique pattern of strengths and weaknesses. When working with children with ASDs, it can be difficult to determine how much assistance and what type of assistance is required in order for them to master tasks. Too little help can lead to frustration, failure, and task avoidance while too much support can cause passivity, prompt dependence, and infantilized behavior. According to the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, we can get better at finding the fine line between too little and too much help if we pay attention to the child's *zone of proximal development* (ZPD).

The ZPD is the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with a more capable peer. Instruction and support should be tied more closely to the level of potential development rather than to the level of actual development. Basic task analysis of routine and more complex expectations can be used to help determine when and to what extent the child requires the assistance of the adult. Vygotsky used the term *scaffolding* to describe an adult's efforts to continually adjust their level of support in response to the child's level of performance. According to Vygotsky, scaffolding not only produces immediate results, but also instills the skills necessary for independent problem solving in the future.

It is also important to keep the concept of functional autonomy in mind when we are involved in goal setting meetings with parents (e.g., case conferences, IEPs). As the term *pervasive developmental disorder* implies, children with ASDs are typically behind their neurotypical peers in many areas of functioning. Determining which areas of delayed development to focus available resources can be a difficulty and occasionally, contentious challenge. The question "What skills must be acquired in order for the child to function as autonomously as possible at the next grade, school level, or stage of life?" can help all those involved isolate primary goals for the child. For example, posing this question to parents who are emphasizing their 12 year-old child's acquisition of a particular academic skill (e.g., learning how to do long division) and allocating much of their effort to closely supervising mathematics homework may help them recognize that their time could be better spent in other ways. As the child is on the cusp of adolescence and likely to be entering high school soon, helping him/her to become more autonomous by devising chores that can be completed independently, promoting self-reliance in personal hygiene and basic routines, going on outings during which greater comfort with the social world can be encouraged to develop, or beginning travel training to allow greater personal freedom may be promoting learning that has much greater ecological utility for the child than the acquisition of a particular academic skill.

Supporting the development of children with ASDs is a difficult and complex task. The pervasive impairments that are characteristic of children with ASDs challenge us to select, devise, and implement appropriate interventions. Consideration of the concept of functional autonomy can help those involved with the child prioritize supportive interventions that might be attempted.

Dr. Andrew Bennett
Psychologist

Communication Corner

Many of our students with ASD have difficulty participating in a conversation. Often, the conversation consists of an adult asking the child questions. Some of our students have conversations by asking repetitive questions or by repeating information about their special interest. Before we can help our students have better conversations we need to understand what a good conversation looks like.

A good conversation has three basic parts. One person initiates a conversation. The conversation continues by both partners taking turns and finally the conversation ends when one partner brings it to a close. You can remember these parts using the word ICE (Initiate, Continue, End).

Ways to Initiate a Conversation: When we initiate a conversation we often start with a standard greeting.

- *"hi" perhaps followed by their name
- *Ask an opening question "how are you?" "What are you doing?"
- *Give a compliment "Hey, I like your tower."
- *Share some information *Comment on what's happening

Ways to Continue a Conversation

- *Answer questions

- *Comment on what the other person says

- *Ask a question that's on topic

- *Use fillers "yeah", "okay", "right"

Ways to End a Conversation

Say you're going "I've got to go now."

- *Say something nice "I had fun"

- *Use a tried-and-true closing "See you later", perhaps followed by their name.

Teaching students how to continue a conversation is often the most challenging. These are some examples of cues that we can use to show them that it is their turn in the conversation. 1) Start with daily routines such as starting the day or ending the day. 2) Make a comment and WAIT. Make a comment about something your student is interested in. 3) Ask a question and WAIT for a response. Remember to wait at least 10 seconds.

Remember: Asking too many questions will stop a conversation. Avoid asking questions that test what your student knows (What colour is this?" "What's my name.") or too many yes/no questions. Make sure your student can understand the questions you're asking.

Reference: Sussman, F. "Talk Ability: People Skills for Verbal Children on the Autism Spectrum-A Guide for Parents. The Hanen Centre, 2006

Teacher Tips

Students with autism benefit from a structured and predictable environment. They often have difficulty knowing where to sit, stand or transition between activities. A good strategy is making boundaries around the individual's workspace, using carpet squares, masking tape or furniture. During circle time tape off an area on the floor so it is clear where you want the student to sit. Doing this with your student's desk area and locker space will help organize your student's world and make expectations clear.



Let's Talk O.T.

Calming Corners in Schools:

A calming corner is a pre-determined area, in or outside the classroom, where students with high activity level, sensory or behavioural self-regulation challenges may go to recover from disturbing events, in order to regroup and reach back their optimal level of arousal, prior to re-integrating a group or activity. Ideally calming corners should be located away from traffic, in relatively quiet areas, and placed between distinct physical barriers in order to provide a sense of security and to support centering. It can be made of a mat with pillows or a special blanket; can consist of a small tent, comfortable bean bag or rocking chair; depending on the sensory needs and profile of the stu-

dent. Delineating it with tape on the floor may also assist in facilitating awareness of the student's body position in space. It is important to reinforce its purpose, as being an area where the student goes to calm down (rather than for "time out"). Sensory stimulation should therefore be avoided as much as possible in the calming corner, except for specifically identified toys or equipments that the student uses to center and focus himself/herself (e.g.: foam ball to squeeze, weighted blanket to roll in, sand timer to look at, etc.). As well, a visual strip of pictures/symbols can be available in the calming corner to remind the student of a learned routine of calming activities (e.g.: breathing or Brain Gym exercises).

Top Shelf



Many children, even the most gifted, struggle to comprehend meanings of phrases and words at the literal level. This task of going beyond the literal meaning to grasp the message that is intended is often unattainable without adequate direct instruction and support. Our students with an ASD have notorious difficulty in this area of language development. In our library we have two books that help explain idioms.

Super Silly Sayings that are over your head Written by Catherine S. Snodgrass is a children's illustrated book of idioms. It is very user friendly for the young child.

What did you say? What did you mean? Written by Jude Welton and illustrated by Jane Telford is an illustrated guide to understanding metaphors that may appeal to older children. The illustrations are in black and white similar to those found in comic books. "Expressions that don't literally mean what they say can be confusing at first, but can be fun to use when they become familiar. This book introduces 100 common sayings and explains what people really mean when they use them."



ADVENTURES IN ZIPPING
ZONE OF PROXIMAL CONFUSION

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MYTICAL PUBLICATIONS, INC. 015-949-8707

"What is TEACCH?"

TEACCH stands for Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children. Eric Schopler developed this approach in the early 1970's. With TEACCH the priority is the person, their skills, interests and needs. This approach centres on understanding Autism, adopting appropriate adaptations and a broadly based intervention strategy building on existing skills and interests. The individual is the priority rather than any philosophical notion such as inclusion, discrete trial

training, facilitated communication, etc... Organizing the physical environment, developing schedules and work systems, making expectations clear and explicit, and using visual materials have been effective ways of developing skills and allowing individuals with an ASD to use these skills independently of adult prompting and cuing. Children with Autism are frequently held back by their inability to work independently. To find out more you can visit www.TEACCH.com

Try This! The Addition and Subtraction Board

This visual tool provides a very simple and concrete way of teaching basic addition and subtraction. It allows for counting with 1:1 correspondence and demonstrates the concepts of combining or taking away objects.

Take an 8" x 11" piece of cardstock (regardless of the colour) and trace a thick, black, vertical line down to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the length of the page. Then, from that point, trace a horizontal line across the width of the page, so that there are 3 "boxes" (2 vertical, 1 horizontal) formed on the page. Keep in mind that the horizontal box will always contain the answer to the equation.

Cut out and laminate several sets of small 2" x 2" cards of numbers 0 to 10 to start with, as well as a "plus", "minus", and "equals" sign.

For addition:

- place the board so that the horizontal box is at the bottom of the page.
- as an example, place 1 bingo chip (or any other manipulative) in the left vertical box and 2 chips in the right vertical box.
- at the top of the board, place the corresponding number and sign cards, creating an addition equation, with three possible answers to the equation placed on the side.
- have the student move all the chips to the bottom box, which will give the answer. He then chooses the right answer to the equation.

For subtraction:

- flip the board the other way so that the horizontal box is at the top of the page.

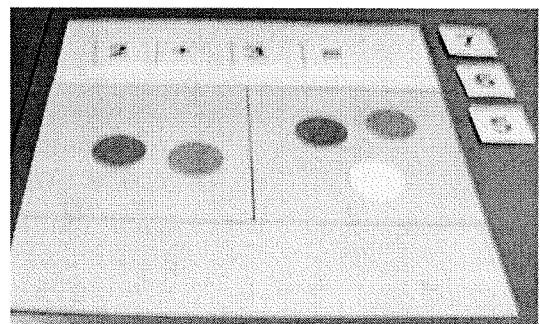
- as an example, place 5 chips in the horizontal box, with a subtraction equation (e.g. $5-3=$) above it and a choice of three possible answers.

- say the equation out loud ("5 take away 3") while prompting the student move 3 chips from the horizontal box and placing them in the left vertical box.

- as the horizontal box contains the answer to the equation, the student can then choose the right answer.

You may have to model the procedure for the student a few times before doing together.

As the student becomes more familiar with the concepts of addition and subtraction, move on to more complex equations.



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Coming Soon!

The Miriam Foundation, Abe Gold Learning and Research Centre invites you to a Conference on **Strategies for Engagement, Intervention and Education across the Autism Spectrum** with keynote speakers **Dr. Rita Jordan** (Professor in Autism Studies, University of Birmingham, UK) and **Dr. Michael Powers** (Director, Centre for Children with Special Needs in Glastonbury, Connecticut). Thursday April 19 & Friday April 20, 2007, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Four Points Sheraton (Plaza Volare) 6600 Cote-de-Liesse, Montreal. The two day conference is \$175.00 for a parent or person with ASD, \$350.00 for professionals and \$175.00 for students. There is a one day fee of \$175.00 being offered to teachers since it is difficult for many to be away from their class for both days. Registration and more information can be found at www.goldlearningcentre.com

On April 24, 2007, The Centre of Excellence for the Physically, Intellectually and Multi-challenged will be hosting their Annual Symposium, which will offer seven sessions on various topics in special education, including two sessions with Dr. Denise Poston, research associate at the Beach Center on Disability at the University of Kansas. Please contact us at (819) 868-0512 or by e-mail buttersl@etsb.qc.ca, if additional information is required.

Our team is comprised of many professionals with a variety of specializations. Designated as a Centre of Excellence within the province, our mandate is to assist schools in the implementation of best practices for the inclusion of students with an ASD and to serve as a resource to the other English school boards in Quebec. Our team provides assistance to students and families and works to support educational personnel in developing their capacity to meet a wide range of needs in the classroom. We do this through direct intervention, coaching, professional development, and the sharing of materials.

BEST WISHES !

We are delighted to announce that Jade Lawsane (ASD Consultant) will be on leave to enjoy the exciting world of motherhood.

Hot Off the Press

Exceptional Family – Canada's Resource Magazine for Parents of Exceptional Children – is a publication which began in 2005.

It is published by the Miriam Foundation right here in Montreal, and is a source of guidance, inspiration, and knowledge as it celebrates Exceptional Families. Parents and educators will enjoy its colourful layout, extensive information about everything from summer camps to specialized equipment, and stories of every day life with exceptional children.

A subscription for your school can be ordered from the Miriam Foundation efmagazine@miriamfoundation.ca, or check out their website at www.exceptionalfamily.ca. There are also copies available to be borrowed through the ASD Library in Student Services. Check it out!

We're on the web!

Unfortunately under construction
until later this Spring

WWW

There are so many great sites out there, but one we wish to recommend that you visit soon is

www.autismawarenesscentre.com.

You will find sections on conferences, their bookstore and newsletter (you can register to have it mailed to you directly). Information is bountiful in many areas and interests in the field of Autism. There is a section designed to assist you in finding help and supports in your area of residence (world wide).

Latest articles and many link are included as well. This website is user friendly, clear and easy to navigate and is equally appropriate for teachers, professionals, support staff and parents.

“Thank you to Nicole Guy, Lester B Pearson Career Advisor and students from Pierrefonds Comprehensive High School for preparing this newsletter for distribution.”

