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Issue 16

Creating an Environment of Acceptance

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The success of inclusion is dependent on the provision of many resources including paraprofessional support, as well as teacher training and education. Another resource that greatly impacts inclusion, and one that is often overlooked, is the role of peers in the classroom. In her book, Kluth (2003) writes that "For most students, the best part about coming to school is seeing and spending time with friends (p.91)." Peers can play a very significant role in improving the quality of life of students who have an ASD; they can stimulate academic growth, foster the development of age appropriate behavioural and social skills, and motivate students to achieve their full potential. The power and importance of peers should not be ignored.

In order to nurture an atmosphere of acceptance and respect in the classroom, it is essential to discuss with students both the nature of ASDs and the unique qualities that each member of the classroom possesses. *Sensitization* refers to the vast array of resources and strategies that can be used to help students to understand inclusion, the characteristics of students with special needs, and about ways to be a good friend.

The information provided to students about a classmate who has an ASD can assume many different forms and must be tailored to the individual situation. Some students who have an ASD fit in quite easily to the peer group and, as a result, simply responding to student's questions as they come up may be sufficient. The term Autism may never be raised in such a case.

In other classrooms, the student who has an ASD might display behaviours which make their differences and their challenges more obvious. In these situations, it is important have an open discussion with the students and to validate their concerns and their fears. Teachers should try to answer questions honestly and provide feedback to the students about ways that they can help. Bobby, for example, is 6 year old student with an ASD. Bobby sometimes pulls hair. In the classroom, the teacher discussed with students that the hair pulling occurs because Bobby does not yet know how to tell us when he is mad. The teacher helped the students to make a list of all the ways that they expressed anger and guided them to recognize that they, too, sometimes resorted to shoving, yelling, or other maladaptive ways of expressing anger. The teacher then taught the students how to sign "STOP" if ever Bobby pulled their hair and then taught him the sign "ANGRY." The students were very proud of knowing how to be a good friend to Bobby. Together, the class supported Bobby and taught him to use "ANGRY" the sign instead of pulling hair. What a tremendous accomplishment and learning experience for this peer group.

Some students have been in the same class as a child within ASD for several years. Even though the class is familiar with the student and sensitization may have been done in Kindergarten, it is important to address sensitization every year. At each grade level, different issues relating to friendship and respect can be addressed. For instance, in a cycle 3 class issues of bullying and teasing may be covered. The Circle of Friends Program can be used to challenge students to find the courage to intervene if a peer who has special needs is being bullied or laughed at on the playground at recess. At the secondary level, teachers can support students to take on a bigger role as peer tutors. Teens who have an ASD are often much more receptive to feedback about social behaviour from peers than from adults.

Several books and DVD's are available in the ASD Resource Library to assist your classrooms with sensitization. The Autism Acceptance Book by Ellen Sabin along with the Teacher's Guide was distributed to all the schools in May 2008. Cassidy's Adventures, is an another great book that would be appropriate for Cycle 1 + 2. For cycle 3 and secondary schools, the DVD and Teacher's Guide 'The Boy Inside' is excellent for addressing high-functioning autism and the social issues related to it. Please check out the website for more information about these resources. If you will be referring to a specific student in the classroom and speaking about his/her diagnosis, it is necessary to receive written consent from the parent to do so. Please download the consent form for this purpose from the ASD Website.

The Consultants for Autism are always available to help organize a sensitization workshop for specific classrooms. In the past, ASD Consultants have also been involved in helping to organize sensitization activities during the month of April, which is Autism Awareness Month, or specifically on April 2, which the UN has declared World Autism Day. Please contact your Consultant for Autism if you are interested in preparing something more formal.

We hope this school year is an enriching one for you and for your entire class!

Jade Lawsane, Consultant for Autism

Reference: Kluth, P. (2003). "You're Going to Love This Kid!" *Teaching Students with Autism in the Inclusive Classroom*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Communication Corner

Answering *Yes/No* questions is a critical communication skill that some children with an ASD may not have mastered. Students who do not have these skills will often display undesirable behaviour to communicate their emotional state. If for instance, they are offered a non-preferred item, they may throw it, have a tantrum, or display aggression. If they are offered something they like they may just grab it.

Before beginning to teach *Yes/No* it is important to find out what your student likes and dislikes. How you teach the response is dependent on your student's verbal skills. If your student is non-verbal it is best to teach the universal gestures of *yes/no* (nodding and shaking your head).

How to begin:

Start with the question "Do you want _____." By teaching this question first, the student gains access to highly motivating items or activities. Teach *yes/no* separately before you mix them together.

If your student is non-verbal, use the 2-person prompting procedure. One person (physical prompter) should stand **behind** the student while the other person (communicative partner) sits or stands in front. Show your student a preferred item and ask "Do you want _____." The physical prompter immediately guides (gently) the student to nod his/her head up and down. The communicative partner immediately gives the student the item and says "Okay". Gradually fade the prompt.

Use the same procedure to teach "no" (i.e. guiding the nod side-to-side). This time the communicative partner immediately responds with "Okay, I'll put it away" or "Okay, you don't have to." It is important that you do not keep offering the same item to the student when practicing the "no" response. The student needs to know that indicating "no" through conventional means is just as effective as screaming.

You can use the same procedure with verbal children. Have the prompter verbally model the "yes" or "no" response for the student to imitate. With verbal children, the "no" response may be harder to teach. Many children react negatively when they hear the word "no" because they associate this word with being told "no". One way to reduce the negative emotions to the word "no" is to make it more neutral. Present the student with several containers. Place a preferred item in one of the containers. Pick up an empty container and ask "Is the _____ in here?" Open the container, show the student that it is empty and say "no". (Pair the verbal response with a head shake) Repeat with the other empty containers. When you get to the container with the preferred item, open it, say "yes" and give the item to the student. Gradually fade your prompts. You may have to prompt the verbal response with the head gesture.

Helene Packman, Speech & Language Pathologist

Reference: Frost, L., & Bondy, A. (2002). *The Picture Exchange Communication System (P.E.C.S) Training Manual*. Newark: Pyramid Educational Products, Inc.

Teacher Tips

When positively reinforcing students using verbal praise it is important to be specific. Name the behaviour they are doing and make sure the praise is immediate. For example, instead of saying "Wow, Jordan you are being so good!" say: "Wow, good sitting at your desk!" or "Good raising your hand". Being specific will help the student to know what 'being good' looks like in a more concrete way.

Let's Talk O.T.

Setting up your Classroom for Students with Sensitivities

With every new school year comes the time for teachers to reorganize their classroom for a number of new students, some with very specific needs. As Paula Kluth mentions in her book *You're Going to Love This Kid!*, "Providing an appropriate learning environment can be as central to students' success as any teaching strategy or educational tool." Therefore, teachers should evaluate a few things when setting up the classroom environment.

First, with respect to the **physical space**, consider the number of students who will be in the class and the different areas needed (for learning centers, desks, reading corner, etc.), then ask yourself how should it best be divided to benefit all. In addition, make sure that the size of furniture and objects that the students will use is appropriate (i.e. chair size, desk height, tables, shelves, etc.).

When **organizing the space**, try to clearly define work, play, reading, calming corner and other areas by using carpet squares, furniture arrangement, masking tape, visuals, etc. Make sure materials are easily accessible when appropriate and that the classroom is not too cluttered. A visually organized classroom will support efficient transitioning and concentration. This includes using a class schedule and classroom rules which are understandable to all. Consider where staff (teacher, integration aide) will be positioned to best address the needs of the students.

Finally, consider **opportunity to interact with peers** and **sensory issues** of students with an ASD when determining seating and classroom man-

agement. For the student with **tactile sensitivities**, arrange classroom seating to minimize the risk of being bumped by peers, try to have the student's back to the wall, or at least avoid high traffic areas around his/her desk. As well, avoid high traffic areas/situations by assigning an end of row locker, first/last placement in line and allowing students to transition within the class and the school before or after their peers. Modifying arts and crafts activities by using tools to reduce direct contact with messy materials (e.g.: use cookie cutters with play dough) may also be necessary. For students with **auditory sensitivities**, avoid a seat close to the door, fan, heater, electric pencil sharpener, or any other source of significant noise. Use rugs/carpets, "Hush-ups" or tennis balls on the feet of chairs to minimize noise. If possible, reduce the volume on intercoms and loud speakers and forewarn the student of any loud noises (bell, fire drill) that may occur. As much as possible, keep the door and windows of the classroom closed. For the student with **visual sensitivities**, keep the visual distractions on desk/wall to a minimum, organize seating in order for the student to be close to the teacher, avoid sitting facing or beside windows or use blinds on windows. Use a simple computer screensaver, and enclosed study carrel for independent work. Experiment with visually calming strategies such as turning lights off at times, using colored acetates over printed materials, or looking at a fish or turtle in an aquarium. Finally, intermittently assess lighting, temperature, smells and sounds within the classroom environment. These simple changes can make all the difference in the ability of children with sensitivities to be successful within a classroom.

Joëlle Hadaya, erg. Occupational Therapist

Top Shelf

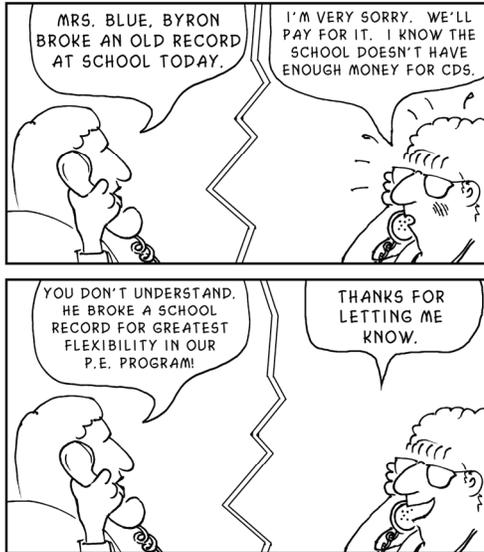


The Autism Acceptance Book- Being a Friend to Someone with Autism

This book is a great resource for teaching both about what autism is and how to create an environment of acceptance by teaching about differences. The Teacher's Guide that accompanies this book includes many lesson plans to complement the ideas and exercises discussed in the text.

This book is available for loan from the ASD library or available for purchase from www.watercanpress.com

Reference: Sabin, E. (2006). *The Autism Acceptance Book- Being a Friend to Someone with Autism*. U.S.A: Watering Can Press.



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MRS. BLUE IS WOEFULLY UNACCUSTOMED TO GOOD NEWS.

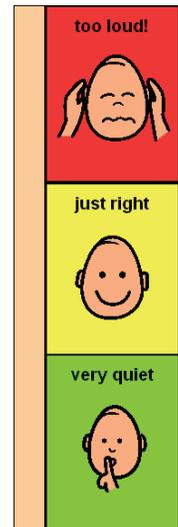
Behaviour Strategies

It is well known that many students with an ASD are sensitive to loud noise levels in the classroom. Often, some students lack the appropriate coping skills to manage and/or express their need to be in a quiet environment. As a consequence, this sensory challenge may result in a display of negative behaviour, such as aggression or extreme agitation in the classroom.

A *noise-o-meter* is a tool often used in the classroom by both integration aides and teachers to help students recognize when they are having a difficulty or need. It is also a tool which helps teach them how to express that difficulty or need, by providing them with a concrete, visual means of doing so. The main goal of using the *noise-o-meter* is to encourage students to self-regulate their behaviour, which constitutes a critical life and coping skill.

The *noise-o-meter* is essentially a noise chart, ranging from "too loud" to "very quiet". Any adult working with the student can practice showing the meter and asking, at any random moment of the day, to point to what they feel the present noise level. If the student feels the noise level in the room is too loud, the adult will then know that the student may need to be moved to a quieter location as a way of preventing negative behaviour. Ideally, the student then begins to recognize his/her needs and initiates use of the meter independently, don't really need this.

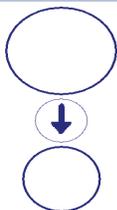
The benefits of using this behavioural tool include allowing the student to monitor and change their own behaviour, to develop coping skills to deal with difficult situations, to gain ownership for their behaviour, and to learn independence and life skills.



Try This!

For those students who are having difficulty learning simple subtraction, the *take-away worksheet* is an easy and concrete tool that assists in learning this concept. This activity incorporates both the strength of ASD students to learn visually, and the use of manipulatives when teaching math skills. To create this simple activity, you can use either the Boardmaker software or simply do it by hand.

Take-Away Worksheet



1. Create a subtraction board similar to the one shown here.
2. Laminate the board for added durability.
3. In the boxes below, write down the subtraction operation you would like the student to complete (with a dry-erase marker) OR create laminated number labels and place them in the appropriate spaces.
4. Using manipulatives, the student places the starting amount in the large circle and then moves the amount "to be taken away" in the smaller circle below.
5. The large circle represents the answer to the operation. The student counts the remaining amount and either writes it down with a marker in the "answer box" below or places the correct number label in the box.

