

October 15th, 2010

Issue 22

## Starting the Year Off Right: Top Ten Things You Need to Know

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#### 1. Take the time to build a relationship with your student with an ASD:

Remember, these students often have difficulty initiating social interactions so they **may not go up to you**, however this does not mean they are not interested in connecting with you. These students are often not equipped with the social skills or the *how to* meet and establish a relationship with their new teacher.

#### 2. Be aware of the sensory needs with students with an ASD:

Most students with an ASD have underlying sensory challenges due to atypical brain wiring and connectivity. In effect, they often have difficulty interpreting sensory stimuli. The way that their brain interprets stimuli dictates their sensory experience of their environment. For example, a pat on the back can actually be an uncomfortable sensation for some students, or what neurotypical students experience as a tolerable noise level can be experienced as a very loud, disturbing and painful noise level to a student with an ASD. These sensory difficulties vary in each child and can impact functioning in their school environment in a number of ways (e.g. emotional, behavioral, and social). Be aware and sensitive to your students' individual sensory challenges.

#### 3. Students with an ASD have expressive and/or receptive language delays, or language disorders:

**Remember to respect the learning style of your students with an ASD:** "Their first language is Vision, second language is Audition" (Myles, B.S., 2010). These students have difficulty processing language. **Language difficulties vary among students!** Some students may have a precocious vocabulary, so they commonly appear to understand what is asked of them. However their communication may not serve to be purposeful or functional to their academic or social demands, and their understanding of what *you* are saying is often limited. Remember Charlie Brown's teacher (wahwahwahwah)? If you give multiple instructions, speaking quickly, your child will process *wahwahwahwah* rather than "take out your agenda, copy your homework and get it signed by a parent by tomorrow". It is important to remember to **chunk instructions** (one instruction at a time or **pause** between instructions), and to check for understanding. Ask them to repeat what their job is and **continue to monitor their comprehension throughout the task**; this is imperative, as students are often able to repeat back instructions, though they still do not understand them. "Verbalization does not equal comprehension". Many will say "yes", when they actually don't understand, to avoid drawing attention to themselves. (Myles, 2005). Remember that students with an ASD are visual learners. **Use of pictos, lists of steps involved in a task, modeling and visual supports in instruction** will create a positive learning experience for your student with an ASD.

#### 4. Remember, transition = ANXIETY, structure = SECURITY:

Anxiety is an underlying issue that is often triggered by the challenges that are associated with the triad of impairments. We all know that neuro-typical students are coming to their first day of school with high anxiety levels. Who will their teacher be? Will their friends be in the same class? Who will they sit next to and what will their day involve? Multiply this by 10 for students with an ASD! These children thrive on structure, routine and often become anxious when faced with novel situations, people or places. The transition from the routine of their summer vacation, to going back to school *alone* causes anxiety as it comes with many changes in the structure of their day. Having new teachers, classrooms and schedules, all exacerbate their anxiety. Coupled with these novelties is the social piece; the first day of school will feel like a social conundrum with many new peers, new social expectations as they climb up a grade, etc. This is why it is **imperative** to have their specific schedule planned out **before** they start their day so as to circumvent any anxiety driven **meltdowns**. **Have their schedule available to them visually; knowing what is coming next greatly reduces anxiety and provides structure.**

#### 5. Be aware that social challenges are one of the main 3 limitations of ASD:

Students with an ASD may not understand the unwritten rules or nuances of their social world. For example, teacher facial expressions or gestures that solicit attention, what to do when the bell rings (no butting in line! No talking in line or we *all* have to wait to go out.). Incidental teaching (In the moment, no planning necessary!), of these *Hidden Curriculum* items can occur daily...even if it is one social skill per day (for example, remind them, "when I get quiet and put my finger to my mouth, it means I am waiting for everyone to be quiet")! This will better explicate the social world of your student with an ASD. (Myles et al, 2004).

#### 6. Anticipate your student with an ASD to have difficulty with organization and following along with the class:

Be sensitive to the fact that **their brains are wired differently from a neurotypical child's brain. They are wired so that their performance of executive functions is limited.** Skills such as planning, organizing materials and sustaining attention, can be more challenging for individuals with an ASD.

*Cont'd..p.3*

## S-LP Corner: Top 3 Strategies for Effective Communication with Students with an ASD

### 1. Speak less:

Even verbal children with an ASD have difficulty processing verbal language. Give small chunks of information and pause. Wait for a reaction from your student. This could be a comment or simply a look in your direction. By speaking less your student is gaining valuable practice in paying attention to non-verbal messages such as your facial expression or eye-gaze. Non-verbal messages could be as simple as a head shake for yes/no. A more advanced skill would include opportunities for your student to interpret what you are thinking about. Try looking intently at something interesting or different with a surprised look and wait for your student to look at what you are looking at. Only *after* they look would you provide verbal information. These non-verbal communication skills are the foundation of the development of social skills.

When students are upset you need to talk even less as language processing is even more difficult for your student when they are in an anxious or agitated state. This is not the time to ask questions or give them a lecture. Use minimal language until your student calms down.

### 2. Use more commentary rather than commands or question:

Try giving information rather than giving commands or asking questions. For example instead of saying "colour the apple red." Try giving information. Point to the apple and say "apples are red." Wait for a response. Make a simple comment about art work that is displayed in the halls. Wait for a response from your student. Remember, the response does not need to be verbal it could just simply be looking in the direction of the picture. (i.e. joint attention)

### 3. Avoid rephrasing or re-asking questions:

Students with ASD need more time to both process information and formulate an answer. When you repeat or rephrase a question the student needs to start the process all over again. Temple Grandin once said that processing verbal language is like piecing together a puzzle. When someone repeats the question it is as if they tossed all of the pieces in the air just as the last few pieces were being placed. Make sure you have your students' attention before you ask a question. Wait 10 seconds before you repeat or rephrase the question. This may seem like a long time but the student needs it. As you wait, look expectantly at your student so they know you are waiting for a response.

Helene Packman  
S-LP

## OT Corner: Setting-Up the Physical Environment for Students with an ASD

There are many things that teachers need to take into account when organizing a classroom. Here are 8 that should be kept in mind for optimal physical set-up of classroom.

### 1. Visual Organization of Space:

Looking at the classroom as a whole, use furniture arrangements, masking tape, carpet pieces, and visuals to clearly define the different areas (learning centers, play area, reading space, etc.) of the classroom.

### 2. Working Area of Student:

Identify where in the classroom the student should be sitting to work at his/her best (i.e. away from sensory distracters; such as windows, electric pencil sharpener or high traffic areas), depending on his/her sensitivities. The student's working area should allow: easy access to all the materials needed (e.g., posted visual schedule, cart of materials, work system, etc.) and following of personal routines with as little disruption to the class as possible.

### 3. Desk and Chair Size:

First identify a chair of appropriate size for your student. The student's feet should be flat on the floor when sitting straight with the back resting on the dorsum of the chair. Then adjust his/her desk/table top to be 1-2 inches above his/her bent elbow (arm along trunk), when sitting on the chair placed sideways to the desk. As good positioning at the table is essential to optimize sitting tolerance and visual-fine motor skills, consider borrowing furniture from other classes if needed.

### 4. Floor Time Activities (Circle or Story time):

Your student may need visual or tactile cues to know where to sit during floor activities (e.g., marked spot with initial/number, rug mat, etc.), specific equipment to support sustained sitting (e.g., in-

flated pillow, bean bag, etc.) or an alternative to floor sitting (e.g., stepping stool).

### 5. Locker, Hook & Cubby Assignment:

Consider the student's sensitivities, as well as their motor planning and sequencing difficulties when assigning a locker/hook. Use visual cues (e.g., pictograms, color codes) to support organization of belongings. In high school, if needed, consider assigning a second locker for classification of supplies per subject.

### 6. Placement in Line-up:

Consider the student's sensitivities, attention and activity level when assigning a place in the line-up. Choose the beginning of the row for closer supervision, the end of the row to avoid unpredictable touch from the back, or between specific peers to provide natural physical boundaries and guidance.

### 7. Calming Corner:

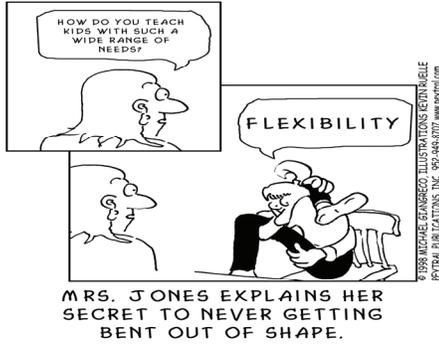
Set up a quiet area with distinct physical boundaries and appropriate equipment depending on the sensory profile of the student (e.g., pillows, beanbag, blanket, rocking chair, etc.), preferably inside the classroom, where your student can go, as needed, to recover from disruptive events.

### 8. Availability of Fidgets:

Verify that the fidgets/adaptive supplies recommended by the OT for your student (e.g., pencil grip, seat pillow, weighted lap pad, foam/bead ball, etc.) are readily available to him/her in the classroom, and used as prescribed.

Although small, these considerations, may have a large impact on the integration and success of students with ASD in your class.

Joëlle Hadaya, erg.  
Occupational Therapist



## Read All About It!



If you are interested in getting a better understanding of Asperger's Syndrome, you may find two shows premiering this Fall worth watching. The first is the Big Bang Theory because of the character of Sheldon Cooper, Ph.D. Although exaggerated for comedic effect, Dr. Cooper embodies the unusual mixture of high intelligence, cognitive rigidity, and social ineptness/naivete typical of some individuals with Asperger's Syndrome.

The second is Parenthood which offers a fairly realistic portrait of a family coming to terms with and beginning to understand the *special* needs of their son. The experiences of Max Braverman, his older sister, and his parents offer a glimpse at the challenges faced by a typically appearing 8 year-old boy who has just been diagnosed with Asperger's. In different ways both shows give color to many of the textbook descriptors of individuals with the syndrome. Please note, both shows occasionally have content that may not be suitable to younger viewers.

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### 7. Use Positive Behavior Supports:

Often our students on the spectrum lack the intrinsic motivation for task completion. They may **require extrinsic motivation**. Discover what your student's special interests are, and **reward positive behavior**. Remember also, if you are rewarding them with verbal praise, emphasize the *specific* behavior so they know *exactly* what you want next time. (Being literal thinkers is a unique characteristic of the disorder).

### 8. Preferential Seating:

Seat your student with an ASD next to a buddy you think can help. Some students on the spectrum are good at peer referencing (looking at the child next to them to see what needs to be done). A buddy who will notice a struggling student and help them along will enable the student with ASD to have more success academically, and it can also foster socialization.

### 9. Sensitizing your class will help students to better understand the needs and challenges of your student with an ASD:

**This will promote peer support, could prevent any anxiety provoking situation, and is an incremental part of successful integration.** We invite you to go on our website and look at the books in our library on sensitization. We would be happy to discuss these books with you .

### 10. Remember that BEHAVIOR SERVES TO COMMUNICATE A NEED:

Children on the spectrum may want to communicate a need, but they often *do not know how to express or show you what they need or what in their environment is affecting them*. This causes tremendous anxiety, and the result is a negative emotional response that intensifies and grows into what we all know as a "meltdown" (Baker, 2008). Learn about your student, inform yourself about some of their limitations and strengths so that you can meet their needs.

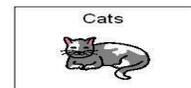
Sabrina Gabriele, Consultant for Autism

#### References:

- Baker, J. (2008). No more meltdowns.: Positive strategies for managing and preventing out-of-control behavior. Arlington TX: Future Horizons.  
 Myles, B.S, Trautman M.L & Schelvan, R.L.(2004). The hidden curriculum: practical solutions for understanding unstated rules In social situations. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.

## Try This!

Once students have mastered the ability to sort identical pictures, the next step is for them to learn to sort similar, but not identical images. Use google images to find pictures and then cut and paste them into a word document or a board-maker template. Laminate them, cut them out, and then have fun sorting them. As a variation to this activity, place them face down on the table, and play memory with the cards. Some good categories that can be used are: hats, shoes, cats, boys, and girls.



## What You Need to Know...

Although more and more people have heard about Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), it is important as a teacher to obtain as much information about your incoming students as soon as possible. In the case of a student with an ASD, some of the information you can seek is: What are the students' strengths, weaknesses, preferences, special interests, triggers, strategies?

Depending on the class composition, needs of the student with ASD and how familiar the peers are with him/her, it would be important to provide the group with an activity where students learn about each other's strengths, areas of difficulty while identifying how they can help one another.

It is helpful for students to know if one of their peers in class has an ASD and it is important to obtain permission from the parent if s/he will be identified.

There are many ways to sensitize a group to help promote a climate of acceptance. Planning, monitoring, support and positive attitude of the responsible adult are key factors in the success of the sensitization. Some tools we have found useful in the past are: Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory, hands-on stations simulating some of the challenges individuals with ASD face, testimonials, as well as books and movies.

For a list of books, visit our Website at: <http://www.lbpsb.qc.ca/eng/asdn/index.aspx>. Until then, here are a few of our favourite titles which can be used for sensitization: *The Boy inside* DVD by Marianne Kaplan, *The Autism Acceptance Book* by Ellen Sabin, *Cassidy's Adventures: My First Day at School* by Gina Graham , *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nigh-Time* by Mark Haddon.



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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 LBPSB 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 augmenting their capacity to meet a wide range of needs in the classroom. We do this through direct intervention, coaching, consulting, professional development, and the sharing of materials.

**We're on the web!**

<http://www2.lbpsb.qc.ca/eng/asdn/index.asp>



Community Corner

One of our partners, WIAIH is offering information sessions for parents who have a child who is under the age of 6 and is on a waiting list for: a diagnosis, CLSC, or other specialized services from a rehabilitation centre. For more information on each session call WIAIH at (514)694-7090 or visit their website @ [www.wiaih.qc.ca](http://www.wiaih.qc.ca)

Teacher Tip: The 10 to 1 Ratio of Positive Reinforcement

Students who have autism are confronted daily with social and cognitive demands which are extremely challenging for them. Repeated failures and difficulties can quickly lead to low self-concept and low motivation. Providing ample positive reinforcement and encouragement will go a long way in fostering a positive relationship between the teacher and the student. Especially in the early weeks of school, for every time you tell a student “no” or “stop,” try to find 8-10 times when you can praise the student for something positive that he is doing. Creating a positive climate will encourage the student to enjoy school and to want to come back. Remember, motivation is half the battle!

Behavior Strategies

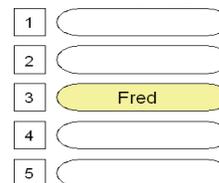
Many students struggle with not being first in line. One way to address this issue is to use visuals to help the student identify *where* he is in line and to anticipate *when* he will have an opportunity to be first. A simple way to do this is to number a sheet of cardboard 1-5 and place a Velcro dot beside each number. Another piece of paper would have the name of the student. Start by placing the student 3<sup>rd</sup> in line. At each subsequent lining up routine, move the child’s name up so that he is 2<sup>nd</sup> in line, and then 1<sup>st</sup> in line. After he has had an opportunity to be 1<sup>st</sup> in line, move his name back to the 5<sup>th</sup> position and start all over again. Once the student readily accepts this routine, slowly fade the procedure so that it occurs only once daily rather than at every line-up opportunity.

Hot Off the Press!

The Spring 2010 issue of *Autism Spectrum Quarterly* includes an article entitled “How to Increase and Generalize Communication across Environments” by Pat Crissey. This article discusses tips and strategies to use with ASD students when it comes to helping them generalize their communication skills as well as the importance of using these language skills in different types of settings (school, home, outside activities, etc.).

Coming Soon!

The Centre of Excellence for Autism is proud to present its first of two lecture series on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010 from 7-9 pm. Several community organizations and agencies will be coming together to present the services they offer to families of Cycle 3 and High School students of all needs. Our guest speakers include representatives from CROM, CLSC Lachine-Lasalle-Dorval, and Action Main d’oeuvre. Other organizations will also be present to answer questions and hand out pamphlets regarding their services.



WWW

Visit [www.autism.net](http://www.autism.net) and click on “visual gallery” at the bottom of the page where you will find an inventory of printable, already-made visual materials to use with your students for a variety of situations. These tools are available in English and in French.