

## Classroom Strategies for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) - PTI Nebraska

Here are some strategies to consider using with students after determining their individual needs.

- Be consistent. Provide clear expectations and rules and keep them the same. Predictability is key with students who have ASD. Remember, that every time someone is inconsistent, it takes 8 times of being consistent to “undo” the inconsistency.
- Use rules to teach and enforce concepts. Many ASD students are rule oriented, but be sure not to overuse rules. Example: Explain the rules and expectations. In order to be respectful to our peers or in order to be safe, we stand in line with your hands at your side.
- Consistent routines and structure can reduce stress for the student and the organization and consistency of the classroom environment is one of the key factors in managing the student’s challenges. Use visual organizers for daily routine, and highlight any changes in routine.
- Wherever possible, prepare the student for potential changes in routine or transitions. Many students with ASD do not handle transitions well so extra verbal and visual cues may be needed, as well as providing direct instruction in how to make a transition. Examples: Provide a warning that the student will be changing activities in 5 minutes. Provide a timer for the student so they can see when the transition will take place. Provide a social story about what will happen during the upcoming fire drill or field trip. Role-play or rehearse what the transition to and from the cafeteria or gym should look like.
- Match the visual supports with verbal instruction. Use verbal cues that are short, direct, and concrete. Examples: Hold up a math book when telling the class to get out their book, and write page numbers and assignments on the board for students.
- When presenting multi-step directions, pause between instructions on multi-step tasks and check for comprehension with the students.
- Some students with ASD need instructions broken down into smaller steps and need more time for processing requests and information. Allow for “wait time” to receive a response. The average processing time is 30-60 seconds. Remember that repeating the request won’t improve comprehension so you need to “wait”.
- Using First/Then statements can be very helpful. Examples: First complete your math worksheet, then it’s recess. First complete this matching task, then take a break.
- Use a variety of stimuli in your lessons. Use visual aids and hands-on materials when possible. Make sure the materials are teaching the skill you are intending to teach.
- Match student work time to their performance time. For example, if a student is able to attend to a task for 15 minutes, then have that much work for them to do (not a lot more or less)
- Start a new skill in an area of success first. Focusing on the positives can go along ways!

- Schedule down time in a student's day. This could be a 30 second break, a 5-minute break, or a 15-minute break depending on the student and their needs. It could also be a sensory-related break.
- Make changes in the school environment. Students with ASD can be sensitive to different things in their environment and have a hard time handling the information their senses are experiencing such as with sound, lighting, physical touch, sight, and taste. Find out what makes a student become overwhelmed, underwhelmed, or both.
- Offer choices when possible. Examples: If two assignments need to be completed, give the student the choice of which one to do first. Give the student a choice on where they can work on their assignment or what seat they can sit in to complete it.
- Do not expect skills that are learned in one setting to generalize to another setting. Teach the skill and practice it in a variety of settings for generalization. It can help to introduce a new skill in a variety of places so the student can see that it applies to more than one setting
- Teach social skills as part of the school curriculum. Students need to be taught knowledge and skills that do not come natural to them. Remember there is no such thing as "common sense".
- Use peer-mediated strategies to help facilitate social interactions between students and help ASD students acquire new social skills.
- Foster social skills through providing direct instruction and teaching the student how to interact through social stories, role-playing, and modeling. Role-playing and modeling different situations helps the student "see" instead of just being told.
- Use videos and video-modeling to help make abstract concepts concrete. If a student has difficulties with picturing things in their mind or giving a definition of something, then you need to make it more concrete for them. Examples: Showing what emotions look like, having a wait card, showing what "there" is, relating the concept to something meaningful and real in their life.
- Because abstract thinking is challenging, incorporate visual cues and graphics organizers for written expression tasks. Visual editing strips can help the student remember what to do and in what order.
- Many students with ASD have handwriting difficulties so it's important to allow extra time for written work. You can also use alternatives to writing in order to demonstrate competence. It's all about finding out what the student knows, and they can demonstrate what they have learned by using different response accommodations. Examples: Use magnetic words/letter, use a word processing device, dictate responses, use symbols, or use other assistive technology accommodations.
- Use executive functioning strategies to help students who have challenges in planning, organizing, initiating responses, utilizing time management, sustaining their efforts, using working memory, inhibiting impulses, and monitoring themselves.

- Students with ASD often interpret language very literally so avoid slang or idiomatic speech. Students may also have difficulty interpreting body language, tone, and facial expressions, so a sarcastic “Oh, that was great!” may inadvertently positively reinforce an inappropriate behavior. Students might also not understand that you’re trying to give them one of those “meaningful teacher looks” that work so well with their non-ASD peers. If the student is doing something inappropriate, do not ask them why they are doing it. Instead help them by telling them in clear, short statements what they should do.
- Many students with ASD may need speech and language services to help address the pragmatics of communication and conversational social skills. Small group instruction and opportunities to practice communication skills are helpful to. It can also be helpful to focus on perspective-taking, flexible thinking, and problem-solving skills.
- Less can be more when it comes to verbal. Even if a student is very verbal, talking too much can create anxiety for them and make things more difficult. It’s important to be aware of possible anxiety, confusion, and stress. Students with ASD can become easily emotional overwhelmed.
- Learn about what triggers a student to engage in inappropriate behavior. Try to understand the function of a behavior. Look for the reason behind the behavior, not just at the behavior itself.
- Sometimes a student gets stressed which can lead to a meltdown or tantrum. Try to prevent this if you can. If you know something is going to set a student off, refrain from doing it if possible. For example, avoid situations that might produce sensory overload for the student. You can also teach a student how to handle a certain situation before putting them in it and you can teach a student how to handle specific feelings/emotions before they experience them. Focus on self-regulation and self-management of feelings, emotions, and behaviors.
- If a student is getting overwhelmed, help the student make a “graceful exit” to go to a safe place that you’ve agreed upon where they can relax and calm themselves for a while. Figure out who a student’s “safe person” is, someone they feel comfortable talking to and who can help them de-escalate when they need to.
- If a student engages in perseverative questioning that interferes with classroom instruction, you can try instructing the student to write the question down and tell them that you will meet with him/her after class to answer their question. If that doesn’t work, talk with the student, state that his/her questions are creating a problem for their peers and for you, and ask him/her what they think would work to help them not ask so many questions during class. You may wish to incorporate a private visual signal.
- Be particularly sensitive to peer rejection and bullying. You may need to ensure that there is added adult supervision in different settings like the playground, in the cafeteria, on the school bus, and in the halls (if the students go from room to room on their own). Pre-plan and rehearse with the student what he/she will say or do in particular situations if you expect that they will be difficult for them, then quickly review with them afterward how their plan worked.

- Eye contact can be difficult for many students with ASD, and on some level, it may be meaningless to them if they don't derive as much information from looking at you as their no-ASD peers do. If you do want them to look at you, rather than cueing or demanding eye contact, try holding a prop in your hand when you're speaking to the student or the class. If you change props or what you're holding, the student will be more likely to look at you.

References:

Leslie E. Packer, PhD and Challenging Kids, Inc.

Mandy Reinke, Autism Consultant, CESA 7 (Wisconsin)