

## ***Working with children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder: teaching them what other children might already know.***

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Autism Spectrum Disorder is a complex developmental disorder that effects about one in every 120 children in a number of ways. Due to changed diagnostic criteria in the new Diagnostic Statistical Manual V (DSMV), there is an increase in the number of children presenting with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Because of this, it is very important that educators become familiar with the condition, and that we develop ways to assist and educate children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

In this article, we will briefly look at Autism Spectrum Disorder, some of the ways it affects a child's behaviour, and what we can do about it. We will also reflect on the need to adopt a new approach toward assisting these children learn to cope in educational environments.

According to the DSMV, there are three levels of Autism Spectrum Disorder: High functioning/low support, moderate functioning/moderate support and low function/high support.

Nevertheless, what is important to remember is that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder need us to have a range of different responses for them because this condition never appears the same in all children. Our goal is to give the child as typical

an educational experience as we can. This means that we should strive to actively include them in all aspects of our educational environments.

Keep in mind that, we may not see any direct results when we work with children with additional needs. However, we are establishing a positive early experience for them of education environments, adult and peers within those environments. This can be very challenging for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

We need to approach children with Autism Spectrum Disorder not as a set of problems to 'deal with', but as unique people who need us to be flexible and adaptable in order to assist them to meet their potential. This is not to suggest that there are not challenges, indeed there are; but what we need, is a planned and purposefully inclusive approach.

Let's consider an overview of the steps needed to create great intervention plans. Before we begin, it is important to remember that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder often think about things differently to other people. They often have quite rigid ways of thinking and this is often referred to as 'black and white thinking' or 'train-track thinking'. In addition, they may

have poor consequential thinking and poor impulse control. These two factors often lead to unpredictable behaviours.

Once we recognise this process of understanding, we can begin to observe the child and their behaviour. We should consider elements such as when is the behaviour occurring, why do you think it is happening. Also, consider when you can predict that the children will escalate. What is going on in the environment for this to occur? Is it noisy; are there too many people for the child to cope? What are the child's strengths? What do I need to change and what can easily wait?

Most importantly, consider what is most likely to be quickly successful for the child. If we start with what will be successful, we are 'leading from the front' in that the child is likely to experience early success in changing behaviour, which reinforces future learning.

***Our first step is to come to terms with the idea that some children need different rules and boundaries.***

It is important to reflect on the idea that not all children can comply with all the rules. Simply expecting a child to follow a rule they do not understand, not only makes no sense, it is also negative for the child and can increase anxiety. This means that some children will have different versions of rules, or may not need to follow a particular rule at all, if they do not have any capacity to do so.

However, there is a big question 'what will we tell the other children?' Children understand and accept diversity much better than we often give them credit for. A good response to children who rightly ask, why does this rule not have to apply to the other child but it does apply to me is, 'I am teaching this child something that you already know how to do. Perhaps we can all help him to learn this thing together'.

Another important factor here is that we are providing all children with a learning environment that can include people with different needs. What children will learn is that people are not all the same, and that we all sometimes need to be flexible and adapt to meet the needs of others, so that we can assist them to cope in spaces they might find challenging. This takes us to a place where all children are

actively engaged in showing each other how to cope. This is residence building at its best.

Our second step is to work out what we need to do for this child and how to do it. This requires observation and planning. You need to have a plan to work toward. This should focus on one behaviour with which to assist the child. We might decide that we are working on, sitting in a group, lining up, or sitting still at rest time. Out of the behaviours you want to work on, decide which one will be most successful.

Once you know what to work on, start planning. Plan small steps that will be successful quickly. Remember, Autism Spectrum Disorder is all about motivation. A great motivator is success and getting the outcome the child wants.

Our third step is to extend planning. You need a quick checklist of what to do. Before you start anything, think about the following:

- What *can* this child do?
- What are their *strengths*?
- How do I *extend* these I to the new behaviour?
- What *rewards* might be needed? How do you begin to '*thin*' the rewards and when?
- Work on *one thing at a time*
- *Plan* what you will do
- *Review* what you have done.

***Remember, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder have some different ways of seeing the world. We want to ease them in, not frighten them.***

People have often heard me say that *everyone learns when everyone is included*. Children with different needs, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, are a gift to our environments. This is not just a fluffy comment, it is actually true; these children do not come along very often and they teach us that we need to be flexible, that everyone is not the same, and that we need to be open to change in order to make sure that everyone is included.

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