



Natural Learning Concepts

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Twelve Tips for Setting Up An Autism Classroom

Standing before your students' expectant faces, you're determined to create a successful classroom. You will! These twelve tips are here to guide you. To be truly effective, never lose sight of the secret ingredient. Your students must know you accept them for who they are. They must feel your belief in them. By believing they can do it, you will expect a lot from them and you will get it. In the process and quite unexpectedly, you will receive a surprise bonus. Your students will adore you and look forward to learning in your class every day.

1. Keep it structured

Children with autism thrive in a structured environment. Establish a routine and keep it as consistent as possible. In a world that's ever changing, routine and structure provide great comfort to a child on the autism spectrum. Define routines clearly. For example, every morning:

- Enter the classroom
- Greet the teacher
- Greet the friend next to you
- Unpack your school bag
- Put notes in the red tray
- Put lunch bags in the blue tray
- Sit at your desk

Activities are successful when they're broken into small steps. If children are creating a craft such as a paper airplane, define when it's time to cut, draw and paste. Make sure children know what to do if they finish ahead of time. Typically, children with autism do not use free time productively; therefore strive to have as little downtime between activities as possible.

2. Use visuals

A picture speaks a thousand words! Use them whenever you can. Children with autism learn faster and with greater ease when you use visuals. In fact, we all respond better to visuals. Look at any page of advertisements and see which ones catch your eye. When verbal instructions require too much concentration, children will tune you out. Visual supports maintain a child's focus and interest. So what can you use visuals with? Just about anything. Are you teaching hygiene? Show pictures of children brushing their teeth or combing their hair. Are you teaching greeting skills? Show pictures of children greeting their friends, bus driver, parents and teachers. Are you explaining an outing like a field trip? Show visuals of what to expect on the trip such as getting on the bus, arriving at the destination, planned activities, eating a snack and returning to school. Remember to keep explanations simple and short about each picture or concentration will wane. Give written instructions instead of verbal whenever you can. Highlight or underline any text for emphasis.



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3. Schedules

People with autism like order and detail. They feel in control and secure when they know what to expect. Schedules help students know what's ahead. Picture schedules are even more powerful because they help a student visualize the actions. Schedules can be broad or detailed. You can use them with any sequence of events. These examples will give you an indication of how they can be used.

Classroom on Tuesday is an example of a broad schedule since it takes a whole day to complete

Picture of "Unpacking school bag"

Picture of "Writing in a journal"

Picture of "Floor time"

Picture of "Snack"

Picture of "Music class"

Picture of "Math"

Picture of "Lunch"

Picture of "Playing at recess"

Picture of "Science experiment"

Picture of "Reading a book"

Picture of "Geography"

Picture of "Packing school bag"

Picture of "Saying goodbye"

Make sure you have this schedule in a very visible place in your classroom and direct the students' attention to it frequently, particularly a few minutes before you begin the next activity.

The end of a school day is a more detailed schedule as it explains a short activity

Picture of "A clock depicting the end of day"

Picture of "Retrieving a school bag from its location"

Picture of "Placing a homework book in the backpack"

Picture of "Placing a folder in the backpack"

Picture of "Putting on a coat"

Picture of "Saying good-bye to friends"

Picture of "Saying good-bye to the teacher"

Picture of "Getting on the school bus"

Make sure this schedule is available and draw attention to it before the activity begins. Another option is to create schedule strips and place it on each student's desk.

Written schedules are very effective for good readers. These can also be typed up and placed on a student's desk. The child can "check off" each item as it's completed, which is often very motivating for a student.

4. Reduce distractions

Many people with autism find it difficult to filter out background noise and visual information. Children with autism pay attention to detail. Wall charts and posters can be very distracting. While you or I would stop "seeing the posters" after a while, children on the spectrum will not. Each time they look at it will be like the very first time and it will be impossible for them to ignore it. Try and seat children away from windows and doors. Use storage bins and closets for packing away toys and books. Remember the old adage - out of sight, out of mind. Noise and smells can be very disturbing to people with autism. Keep the door closed if possible. If your classroom is in a high traffic area - time to speak to the Principal!



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5. Use concrete language

Always keep your language simple and concrete. Get your point across in as few words as possible. Typically, it's far more effective to say "Pens down, close your journal and line up to go outside" than "It looks so nice outside. Let's do our science lesson now. As soon as you've finished your writing, close your books and line up at the door. We're going to study plants outdoors today". If you ask a question or give an instruction and are greeted with a blank stare, reword your sentence. Asking a student what you just said helps clarify that you've been understood. Avoid using sarcasm. If a student accidentally knocks all your papers on the floor and you say "Great!" you will be taken literally and this action might be repeated on a regular basis. Avoid using idioms. "Put your thinking caps on", "Open your ears" and "Zipper your lips" will leave a student completely mystified and wondering how to do that. Give very clear choices and try not to leave choices open ended. You're bound to get a better result by asking "Do you want to read or draw?" than by asking "What do you want to do now?"

6. It's not personal

Children with autism are not rude. They simply don't understand social rules or how they're supposed to behave. It can feel insulting when you excitedly give a gift or eagerly try and share information and you get little to no response. Turn these incidents into learning experiences. As an example, if you enthusiastically greet a child with autism and you get the cold shoulder, create a "Greeting Lesson". Take two index cards. Draw a stick figure saying "Hi" on the first card. On the second card draw a stick figure smiling and waving. Show each card to the child as you say. "When somebody says Hi, you can either say "Hi" or you can smile and wave. Which one do you want to do?" When the child picks a card, say "Great, let's practice. "Hi Jordan". Show the card to prompt the child to respond according to the card he picked. Praise the child highly after a response and have your cards ready for the next morning greeting! Keep it consistent by asking the parents to follow through with this activity at home. If you get frustrated (and we all have our days) always remember the golden rule. **NEVER**, ever, speak about a child on the autism spectrum as if they weren't present. While it might look like the student isn't listening or doesn't understand, this is probably not the case. People with autism often have acute hearing. They can be absorbed in a book on the other side of the room and despite the noise level in the class, they will easily be able to tune into what you are saying. Despite the lack of reaction they sometimes present, hearing you speak about them in a negative way will crush their self esteem.

7. Transitions

Children on the autism spectrum feel secure when things are constant. Changing an activity provides a fear of the unknown. This elevates stress which produces anxiety. While a typical child easily moves from sitting in a circle on the floor to their desk, it can be a very big deal to a child on the spectrum. Reduce the stress of transitions by giving ample warning. Some ways you can do this is by verbal instruction example "In 5 minutes, it's time to return to our desks" and then again "Three minutes until we return to our desks" and then again "One more minute till we return to our desks". Another option is to use a timer. Explain that when the timer goes off, it's time to start a new activity. Periodically, let students know approximately how much time is left. When you ask a child to transition from a preferred activity, they might be very resistant if they have no idea when they will be allowed to resume. If a student loves reading, you could say "In 5 minutes it's time to do science. Then it's math and then you can read again". This way, the child knows that it's OK to stop because the activity can be resumed again soon. If a child is particularly struggling with a transition, it often helps to allow them to hold onto a "transitional object" such as a preferred small toy or an object of their choice. This helps a child feel in control and gives them something to look forward to. As an example you can say "In 3 minutes we're going to pick a toy and then we're going down the hall to music class". Using schedules helps with transitions too as students have time to "psyche themselves up" for the changes ahead.



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8. Establish independence

Teaching students with autism how to be independent is vital to their well being. While it's tempting to help someone that's struggling to close a zipper, it's a much greater service to calmly teach that person how to do it themselves. People can be slow when they are learning a new skill until they become proficient. Time is usually something we don't have to spare, particularly in western societies. However in order to help a person progress we must make time to show them the ropes. While it's wonderful that your students take direction from you, it's equally important they learn to respond to peers. If a student asks for a scissor, tell him to ask his peer. Encourage your students to ask each other for help and information. By doing so, students learn there are many people they can seek out for help and companionship. Making decisions is equally important and this begins by teaching students to make a choice. Offer two choices. Once students can easily decide between two options introduce a third choice. This method will help children think of various options and make decisions. People with autism may take extra time to process verbal instructions. When giving a directive or asking a question, make sure you allow for extra processing time before offering guidance. Self help skills are essential to learn. Some of these include navigating the school halls, putting on outerwear, asking for assistance and accounting for personal belongings. Fade all prompts as soon as you can. Remember that written prompts are usually easier to fade than verbal prompts. Fading prompts can be done in a phased approach. If you are prompting a child to greet someone by showing them an index card with the word "Hello", try fading it to a blank index card as a reminder before you completely remove the prompt. Never underestimate the power of consistency. Nothing works in a day whether it's a diet, an exercise plan or learning to behave in class. Often we implement solutions and if there are no results within a few days we throw our hands up in the air and say "This doesn't work. Let me try something else". Avoid this temptation and make sure you allow ample time before you abandon an idea. Remember that consistency is a key component of success. If you're teaching a student to control aggression, the same plan should be implemented in all settings, at school and at home.

9. Positive reinforcement

We all love being rewarded and people with autism are no different. Rewards and positive reinforcement are a wonderful way to increase desired behavior. Help students clearly understand which behaviors and actions lead to rewards. If possible, let your students pick their own reward so they can anticipate receiving it. There are many reward systems which include negative responses and typically, these do not work as well. An example of this type of reward system is where a student will begin with a blank sheet of paper. For each good behavior the student will receive a smiley face. However if the student performs poorly, he will receive a sad face or have a smiley face taken away. It's far better to just stop providing rewards than it is to take them away. Focusing on negative aspects can often lead to poor results and a de-motivated student. When used correctly, rewards are very powerful and irresistible. Think of all the actions you do to receive rewards such as your salary, a good body and close relationships. There are many wonderful ideas for reward systems. Ten tokens might equal a big prize. Collecting pennies until you have enough to "buy" the reward of your choice. Choice objects to play with after a student does a great job. Rewards don't have to be big. They do have to be something a student desires and show students they have done a great job. Every reward should be showered in praise. Even though people on the spectrum might not respond typically when praised, they enjoy it just as much as you!



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10. Teach with lists

Teaching with lists can be used in two ways. One is by setting expectations and the other is by ordering information. Let's discuss the first method. Teaching with lists sets clear expectations. It defines a beginning, middle and an end. If I ask you to pay attention because we're going to do Calculus, you probably wouldn't jump for joy and might even protest. However, you're likely to be a more willing participant if I explain that there are only 5 calculus sums. I demonstrate this by writing 1 through 5 on the blackboard. As we complete each sum, I check it off on the board, visually and verbally letting you know how many are left till completion. The second method of teaching with lists is by ordering information. People on the autism spectrum respond well to order and lists are no exception. Almost anything can be taught in a list format. If a student is struggling with reading comprehension, recreate the passage in list format. This presentation is much easier for a student to process. Answering questions about the passage in this format will be easier. Similarly, if you're teaching categories, define clear columns and list the items in each category. While typical people often think in very abstract format, people on the spectrum have a very organized way of thought. Finding ways to work within these parameters can escalate the learning curve.

11. Creative teaching

It helps to be creative when you're teaching students with autism. People on the spectrum think out of the box and if you do too, you will get great results. Throw all your old tactics out of the window and get a new perspective. Often, people with autism have very specific interests. Use these interests as motivators. If you're teaching reading comprehension and students are bored with a story about Miss Mavis, make up your own story about dinosaurs, baseball statistics or any other topic your students enjoy. Act things out as often as you can. If you're teaching good behavior, flick your pencil on the floor as you ask your students "Is it OK to do this?" Raise your hand as if to ask a question while you ask "Is it OK to do this?" Another great strategy to use is called "Teaching with questions". This method keeps students involved, focused and ensures understanding. As an example you might say:

Teacher: Plants need sun. What do they need?

Class: Sun

Teacher: That's right. They also need air and water. What do plants need?

Class: Air and water.

Teacher: That's right and what else?

Class: Sun

Teacher: Correct. Plants have stems and leaves. What do they have?

Class: Stems and leaves.

Teacher: And what do they need?

Class: Air and water

Teacher: And what else?

Class: Sun

Teacher: That's right...

Another great way of teaching is by adding humor to your lessons. We all respond to humor. If you're at a conference, think about how a lecturer holds your attention when he makes jokes. It's OK to be silly in class. You will have your students' attention and they will love learning with you. The saying goes that people on the autism spectrum march to the beat of their own drum. Therefore, they often respond to unconventional methods of teaching. While it might take some imagination and prep time, watching them succeed is definitely well worth the effort.



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12. Don't sweat the small stuff

The final goal is for children to be happy and to function as independently as possible. Always keep this in mind and pick your battles wisely. Don't demand eye contact if a student has trouble processing visual and auditory information simultaneously. People with autism often have poor attending skills but excellent attendance. Does it really matter if a student does one page of homework instead of two? What about if a student is more comfortable sitting on his knees than flat on the floor? It's just as important to teach appropriate behavior as it is self esteem. By correcting every action a person does, you're sending a message that they're not good enough the way they are. When making a decision about what to correct, always ask yourself first, "Will correcting this action help this person lead a productive and happy life?"

By Jenē Aviram

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