



Leading the way through knowledge,
understanding & acceptance

Information Sheet 18

Supporting students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder

The presentation of Autism Spectrum Disorders is unique to each individual and there is a wide variation across the spectrum. The level of intellectual functioning also varies across the spectrum and affects the way the core impairments present in the individual. Intellectual functioning also affects the individual's ability to learn to cope, adapt to and overcome these core impairments. Personality also affects the way the individual copes with the disorder. Some individuals are more resilient and more able to work to lessen the impact of the difficulties associated with the disorder.

It is imperative that school staff understands Autism Spectrum Disorders, how the core impairments present and how the individual they are dealing with is uniquely affected. With this knowledge of the individual and Autism Spectrum Disorders, teaching strategies and management can accommodate the particular cognitive and learning characteristics, logic and way of interpreting the world that is unique to the individual with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. It is more likely that successful outcomes will be achieved if staff have this knowledge base of both.

The Impact of an Autism Spectrum Disorder on Student Learning

As a result of the variations in intellectual functioning of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, students in South Australia are to be found in a number of educational settings, e.g. special schools, special classes within mainstream schools, mainstream classes in mainstream schools.

Whatever the educational setting and regardless of the level of intellectual functioning, an uneven IQ profile is characteristic of Autism Spectrum Disorders.

The psychological profile of individuals with autism and those with Asperger Syndrome vary considerably.

It is important school staff familiarise themselves with the student's individual profile to know what can be realistically expected of the individual. The presence of overtly autistic behaviour may lead to an under-estimation of abilities and skills in some areas and in others may lead to over-estimations of a student's ability. Staff may be confused that some tasks are easy for the student and some are hard. Staff may incorrectly label the student as a lazy, uncooperative, tactless or rude individual who refuses to listen or pay attention and do what they are required to do. In fact these behaviours are symptoms of their cognitive/behavioural profile and specific intervention and modifications are necessary in an ongoing, structured and consistent way to ensure successful learning outcomes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

The Failure Cycle

It is important to be aware of the fact that many children with a disability often think they can't learn. They have had years of not "getting it", sitting at their desk wondering what on earth they have to do and how to start doing it. They say "It's too hard", "I can't do it", "It's boring", and this negative self-talk can become deeply embedded in their thinking, having a catastrophic effect on their learning.

With students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, this may translate into behaviour which is oppositional or violent, a manifestation of their level of anxiety. They will do anything to get out of the situation they are in, such as hit someone, throw something, make loud noises, tear up books etc. because they know that eventually they'll be sent out of the room, which is just what they want to happen. They can escape the experience of failure, just for a little while at least.

The failure cycle may also manifest as a negative response to a teacher, another student or the school e.g. "I hate that teacher/student/school"
"I'm always unhappy/confused/in trouble/can't do what the teacher asks."

It is possible that the student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may not be able to identify his/her feelings or needs verbally, but the anxiety level is raised, the feeling of failure is real and the behaviour is the result. They won't even begin because they don't know how, or what to do next, and they don't want to fail.

To break the failure cycle we need to:

1. Assess the student and gather relevant information from various sources eg parents, school file, previous reports.
2. Begin from what they know.
3. Build in structure, routine, opportunities for practice and success and how to cope with failure into the program. It's OK to make mistakes, it's a part of learning.
4. Introduce positive self-talk or rote learned self-help strategies, mnemonics (a formula phrase that aids memory).
5. Use visual and verbal prompts simultaneously where possible.
6. Find opportunities for the student to apply what they learn in different areas of learning to assist generalisation of skills.
7. Understand Autism Spectrum Disorders, both in a general way and how it specifically affects the individual.

The learning of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders is affected by the way they take in (process), store and use (retrieve) information. Information becomes confused and segregated in the brain. It is a problem of seeing the world from unusual perspectives. They require supports to help them classify and access the information and then to apply it appropriately.

Abstract Thinking

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders have trouble with abstract thinking. A student may, for example, be quite competent at concrete maths operations - addition, subtraction etc - but cannot estimate which of two objects is the heavier. Be aware that the creative learning method may not be an enjoyable or effective way for the student with autism to grasp maths concepts. He/she may feel more secure with rote learning and concrete materials.

Similarly, a student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may become upset when encouraged to experiment with spelling. Many do not understand phonics, but learn to spell competently through the whole word / visual approach.

In written language, the student may be able to relate events or experiences, but cannot write an imaginative story. To encourage this, have the student read and discuss a similar story from a book. Ask him/her to find the 'nonsense' aspects and give these a label e.g. 'pretend'. Then demonstrate a very simple pretend situation e.g. pretend to be the student instead of the teacher. Encourage the student to try pretending he/she is someone else, then ask him/her to write a sentence about it.

Be aware of the impact of poor motivation, lack of organisational skills, difficulties in visual/motor integration, impulsively and perseveration during written tasks.

Many students benefit from access to a computer or word processor such as a “Star Writer” for written tasks.

Wherever possible, provide additional cues or experiences relating to the concept. Use visual and tactile aids to promote abstract thinking. Picture cards can help establish the concept of opposites, prepositions, sequences etc. Remember that most students with Autism Spectrum Disorder have difficulties generalising learning.

Reinforcement

Reinforcement is very important as it helps the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder to define what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The type of reinforcement/reward depends on the student's ability and how easily rewards can be administered.

Natural rewards (praise, access to activities etc) are preferable to food rewards, but the latter may be necessary in the early stages of a program, or with less able or very young children.

Frequency of rewards should be gradually reduced from every time the student performs appropriately, to occasionally.

Group Work

Avoid excessive 1:1 instruction. It is possible to condition students with autism to learn only in these situations, when the aim should be that they learn to function within the group or class setting. Excessive 1:1 also reinforces the idea that the student with autism is different, both in his/her thinking and in that of the peer group.

It is important that the student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder perceives him/herself as part of the group, subject to the same rules and expectations as others.

Imagination and Play

Children with autism have great difficulty imagining and so do not develop socio-dramatic play skills. Because of the limitations in their own self-awareness and body image, and in conjunction with the self-isolating nature of autism, they do not progress to the stage of displaying curiosity about significant people in their environment. In addition, they typically have poor imitation skills. All these factors are vital in the development of socio-dramatic play (role-taking). Another obstacle is their inability to identify moods and emotions within themselves. It follows, therefore, that they have great difficulty assuming how other people act, and imitate this in play.

If the student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder behaves in a manner markedly different from his peers, it may become necessary to explain this to the other students.

Self Management Skills

Explicitly teach self-management skills, coping skills, problem solving and negotiation skills. Provide and teach the use of visual aids such as cue cards. For example, in stressful situations the student's ability to retrieve and use language may become impaired so he/she may not be able to alert other people verbally that they need help or a break. He/she may alert others by inappropriate behaviour. Cue cards such as “break”, “I need help” may enable the child to communicate in a more appropriate way. Remember students will need to be taught how and when to use such visual supports.

Structured Learning

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders need to learn in a structured way, many of the tasks and behaviours that other students acquire incidentally. This includes social skills, cognitive skills, socio-dramatic play, functional language, appropriate behaviour and concept development. Break tasks down into step by step procedures, using written or picture cues. Keep verbal cues simple and clear.

Students with autism have irregular skill levels e.g. they may be very capable in maths and science, but struggle with spelling. Some students with autism can display splinter skills, particularly in visual/spatial activities. In almost all instances, students with autism function poorly in the area of social skills and require specific strategies to help them cope.

Labels

The value of labelling specific strategies and activities cannot be over-emphasised. Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders have a strong desire for structure, and the provision of a label or name helps integrate an activity into their routines. "Quiet time", for example, can cover a range of sessions when a talkative student must be silent. By writing this on a card and slipping it into his/her pocket, the student is provided with another cue to help him/her remember. Inform the student's parents of the labels being used so that they can be adopted at home, too.

Other suggestions for labels are work time, play time, listening time and even instruction time. If the student is especially rigid about routines, it is helpful to clearly define when the session has ended.

Transition

The significance of routines for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder has already been discussed, but it is especially important to consider this issue at times of transition. Critical transition times are:-

- Child Parent Centre or kindergarten to junior primary.
- Junior primary to primary.
- Primary to middle school.
- Year 7 to high school.
- Year 10 to Year 11.
- Change of school
- Vocational training

Thorough preparation can alleviate the stress of transition. This includes early and consistent discussion with the student and teachers and, if appropriate, frequent visits beforehand. It may be necessary to initiate specific programs prior to the transition period e.g. negotiation skills for a student entering high school. Discuss with the new school or teacher, training and development requirements for the school community. Autism SA is available to assist with training and development.

Consistency

It is important that all school staff are aware of the needs of the student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder and that management procedures and expectations are consistent. Responsibility for the student should not fall solely onto the class teacher. Through training and development, staff can acquire strategies which will help the student with autism generalise the skills he/she has learned in the classroom.