

Classroom Practice and Children on the Autism Spectrum

1. **Impairments in social interaction:** children on the Autism Spectrum have significant difficulty recognising what others know and think; they do not readily grasp that others have viewpoints. Teachers need to understand that a child on the Autism Spectrum will not learn social skills casually and it will be necessary to include specific strategies in the teaching lessons and to provide opportunities for the child to use skills in different situations.
2. **Impairments in language and communication:** it is essential that the teacher supports the child in understanding the purpose and value of communication. Teachers need to be aware of the problems which they may inadvertently cause by talking at length when giving instructions and by not ensuring that the child understands the purpose of the conversation. Teaching instructions should, in general terms, focus on paying attention, imitating, understanding and using language in play and social settings. Using visual material and prompts will also promote success.
3. **Impairments in imagination with a restricted range of behaviours, activities and interests:** the child will have developed few coping skills to deal with situations or factors which cause them stress. They may employ a number of unusual behaviours which will interfere with their ability to learn. Some behaviour may be extreme and challenging. Teachers need to observe the child over time to ensure that they understand the conditions which give rise to the child's stress and behaviour. Strategies should include alerting the child to transitions and changes, use of visual supports and timers, and supporting the child and the family to cope with changes.
4. **Additional difficulties:** these must be understood by the class teacher and any support so that adjustments can be made within the classroom and the school. An awareness of possible environmental problems can allow reasonable changes that will ease the anxieties and reduce the behaviour.

Top Teaching Tips

- Get to know the child as an individual. Understand the autism and assess how it interrupts learning. Use strengths to teach new skills.
- Give the child an opportunity to explain a situation from his point of view. A good idea is to share viewpoints using visual information such as 'comic strip conversations'.
- Cut down on the amount of language you use when giving instructions. Keep the instructions clear, simple and direct. Avoid idioms. Tell the child what should be done rather than what should not be done.
- Emphasis routine and structure. Teaching strategies which incorporate visual structure and clarity will be of great help.
- Set targets that are realistic, attainable and short term.
- Teach social skills as they do not come naturally.
- Keep all staff informed of the strategies you are using. Encourage consistency in the implementation of strategies.
- Establish regular communication between home and school: this is of paramount importance.
- Do not be afraid to make mistakes, this is a learning process.
- A calm disposition and a sense of humour are extremely helpful.

Classroom Assistants and support

- ✓ The TA should be fully informed of the classroom planning. It is helpful if the TA is involved in the planning.
- ✓ The TA should work with the teacher to create visual strategies to develop independence; child on the Autism Spectrum learn visually in the main and verbal instruction may not be enough to ensure learning.
- ✓ A TA should avoid being 'velcroed' to the child; create opportunities for independence and social interaction.
- ✓ It will help the child's self-esteem if the TA is seen working with other children as well.
- ✓ Cut down on the amount of language you use, especially when giving instructions.
- ✓ Think about your use of language and how the child will interpret it. The child may think literally and in concrete terms.
- ✓ Give the child enough time to process information rather than expecting an immediate response.

- ✓ Usual strategies for calming a child may not work. The child may need time alone rather than being comforted by another child or person. If the child has had a bad day it is not your fault; tomorrow is another day!

We are aiming for:

A Friendly Social Skills Classroom

A Communication-Friendly Classroom

An Autism-Friendly Classroom promoting Good Behaviour

Peter was in his second year in Nursery. At the finish of an outside play session, the teacher would blow a whistle and the children were told to freeze and then walk to the line. Peter would freeze and walk carefully to the line. The other children would run or walk quickly to the line getting there before Peter. Peter would then throw himself down on the ground screaming and kicking because he was last.

The teacher found that she had to be flexible in changing her ideas and rules: after all, she can be flexible, the child on the Autism Spectrum cannot!

John looked forward to going swimming with his class every week. At the end of the session, the class was given some free time to play but were not allowed to jump in the pool. John got out of the pool and was running to jump in when the teacher stopped him and told him off for jumping in. As a consequence, the teacher told John that he would not be allowed to go swimming the following week. John stomped off, refused to get dressed and delayed the school bus for an hour. When he calmed down he was able to say, "But I didn't jump in."

From John's perspective he was being punished for something that he hadn't actually done. The child can be so literal in his interpretation. He may also not realise or understand that you can foresee what the child's actions are going to be and pre-empt the action.

Brendan is aged twelve and in a mainstream school with TA support. On leaving class one morning he made a loud comment about a supply teacher being "an old bat". The teacher heard the comment and reported it. Brendan was suspended for two days. When asked about the incident Brendan explained that he was trying to make the other boys laugh.

Brendan did not judge the situation or the timing. He also was not able to consider the end results of his actions. There was no intent to offend the teacher but a real need to ingratiate himself with the peer group. He lacked social judgement.

Another pupil watched his peers play roughly during the lunch break. They were getting more and more boisterous. Without thinking John suddenly pushed his TA over to the ground. This was his way of joining in.

From the school's perspective this is regarded as abuse of staff and serious breach of discipline.