

Strategies for Working With Children With **Autism Spectrum Disorder**

1. **Children with ASD need structure and routine.** Structure and routine to a child with ASD is like glasses for a child who has a visual impairment or a hearing aid for a child with a hearing impairment. It's that important. The more organized and structured the environment and consistent the teaching style, the better.
2. **Structure "time" for the child with ASD.** A daily schedule is one tool for structuring "time" for the child with ASD. You may have your daily schedule posted on the board, but typically this is just not enough for the child with ASD. Most children will require a personal interactive daily schedule which is often more detailed. Mini-schedules for specific time periods are often needed.
3. **Structure "space" for the child with ASD.** Children with ASD benefit from clearly defined boundaries for specific areas of the classroom. Use of furniture to define areas or tape on the floor is often helpful. The student's work area should also be organized. Having a folder for work "to do" and "done" can be useful.
4. **Prepare the child with ASD for changes in the routine.** Despite the most routine-based classroom, there will always be changes in the schedule. Think of the all the events that may occur that impact the routine of your classroom. Assemblies and fire alarms are typical events that impact the routine of the classroom and often cause distress for the student with autism. The use of the daily schedule or a tool such as a social story may be helpful.
5. **Children with ASD have significant difficulty processing oral language.** Language deficits are the hallmark of autism. Children with ASD have difficulty processing long strings of verbal input. Provide one to two directions at a time and keep it simple. Directions such as, "get your math book out of your desk, turn to page 59, complete the first 10 problems, be sure to put your name on your paper and then put it in the basket", would be very difficult for the child with ASD. Of course, the amount of information that can be processed is different from child to child, but be aware that processing oral language is always an area of deficit.
6. **Children with ASD are visual processors.** Although the language areas of the brain are affected, the visual areas are often normal or, in many cases, well developed. Children with ASD process information visually significantly better than oral language. When at all possible, content information should be accompanied by visual representations. Pictures! Pictures! Pictures!
7. **Children with ASD have a difficult time understanding non-verbal communication.** You know your disapproving "teacher look" when the class is too loud? Well, your student with ASD will likely not understand that your look means that you want your class to quiet down. While the rest of your students quickly realize to they are to stop talking, the child with ASD will continue to chat and then be perplexed as to why he's now in trouble. You will need to be direct in your language and tell the child exactly what you want him to do ("Joey, stop talking").

8. **Children with ASD have difficulty reading social cues.** Children with ASD have significant difficulty understanding social cues. They have a difficult time taking on the perspective of another person. They may not understand how their comments or actions affects another person's feelings. Social skills such as using social greetings, turn taking, and sharing are all skills that likely need to be taught directly.
9. **Children with ASD are often rule followers.** High functioning students with ASD are often known as the classroom policeman. Once a rule is established, it is established forever and breaking of a rule by a classmate often causes stress for the child with ASD. They are black and white thinkers with no shades of gray. This often causes conflicts with peers as the child with ASD is viewed as a tattler.
10. **Many children with ASD have sensory related issues.** Many children with ASD have sensitivity to touch, sight, sound or a combination of some or all. They may be oversensitive to the buzzing of the lights in the classroom or the echoes in the school cafeteria or gym. Sensory related issues may be so severe that escaping these situations may be the cause of significant behavioral issues. Your school's Occupational Therapist may be helpful in determining sensory-related triggers for the students. The child's parents can also provide valuable information as to how their child likely perceives certain environments.
11. **Children with ASD focus on details rather than on the whole.** Children with ASD tend to focus on specific details rather than the big picture. For example, coming up with the main idea of a story will likely be difficult for the child. They may focus instead on irrelevant details of the story. It is important to keep your instructional materials simple. When teaching letters or words just have the letter or word on a flashcard rather than a fancy chevron border, for example. The child is just as likely to be paying attention to the stripes than to the letter or word itself.
12. **Children with ASD have significant difficulty generalizing information.** Learning skills in one setting are not likely to easily transfer into another setting. There will need to be a concerted effort to teach skills (social, language, academic) in a variety of settings and with various people.
13. **Children with ASD are literal thinkers.** Figurative language such as "raining cat and dogs" is lost on the person with ASD. In the course of the day, we use a tremendous amount of figurative language that would be confusing for a child with ASD. Children need to be taught the literal meanings of common phrases used by classmates and teachers.
14. **Children with ASD are often the victims of bullying.** Children with ASD are easy targets for bullies. Because their triggers are so obvious and often their reactions severe, some children tend to enjoy setting them off. All adults in the child's environment need to be especially aware of this issue. Educating classmates about autism and explaining the "why" behind the behaviors is often helpful.
15. **Children with ASD are children first!** Children with ASD are unique and wonderful individuals. They are first and foremost children. They are only children who think and perceive the world differently than most individuals.