

Programming suggestions for Students with Autism

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I. COMMUNICATION – People with autism have difficulties in sending and receiving messages. Some typical situations are mentioned with possible interventions.

A. People with autism interpret words literally. They may have a hard time with jokes and teasing. They often do not understand slang.

INTERVENTIONS

1. When a breakdown occurs, rephrase the statement using concrete language
2. Teach the student multiple meaning of words
3. Provide instruction on jokes and slang. Include why people laugh and how to tell a joke
4. Use videotapes to demonstrate how people take turns when telling jokes, what their faces look like, and to review why the joke was funny.

B. People with autism tend to be visual learners. Highly verbal interactions can be very confusing. In addition, usually the student will not tell you that he is confused. He may not even realize that a breakdown has occurred.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Keep your directions simple. Use short familiar words.
2. Present your messages using a multisensory approach. Use pictures, charts, gestures, the actual object of demonstration to clarify your message.
3. Teach students how to recognize when a communication breakdown has occurred how to signal the need for more information, and how to rephrase a message using different words.

C. Individuals who have autism may not be able to use the language skills they have in stressful situations. Situations that may cause problems include: large noisy rooms, rooms with fluorescent lights, large crowds, or misunderstood social situations.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Teach the student the words that convey feelings such as nervous, angry, sensitive, unhappy, uncomfortable. Demonstrate how to use those words in appropriate situations.
2. Teach the student to ask for a break as a way to escape from uncomfortable situations. Provide the opportunity to take frequent breaks if the student appears to become overloaded by the situation.
3. Provide an alternate way to convey the need to take a break, a way that does not require speech. A card, hall pass, a signal to the teacher that is followed by an escape plan can be very helpful.
4. Many of the behavior problems associated with autism are a direct result of poor communication skills. Continual experimentation with alternate forms of communication is essential. Interpreting behavior as a

communicative message provides many clues into the possible motivation for the behavior.

II. SOCIAL ISSUES – People who have autism often have difficulty understanding social situations, even when they have well-developed language skills. This leads to social blunders or unusual behavior difficult for peers to understand.

A. Many social cues are non-verbal such as rolling one's eyes to communicate disbelief, yawning to convey boredom or smirking while talking to signal teasing. Students with autism often miss these subtle signs and unintentionally create uncomfortable social interactions.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Teach the student to watch for body language. Teach the meaning of body language through videotape or role-playing.
2. Use exaggerated body language when working with the student to heighten his awareness.
3. Pair body language with other visual or verbal messages, taking advantage of a preferred or more effective learning mode.

B. People with autism may have difficulty establishing and maintaining friendships. They do not participate in social chit-chat comfortably. They are often unaware of another person's point of view.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Frequent opportunity to interact with non-handicapped communication partners is very helpful to establish turn-taking in conversations and to practice common social patterns such as greetings, talk about the weather and phone conversations.
2. Activities that capitalize on gaining an awareness of another person's point of view such as predicting what will happen next, describing hidden items to a partner, or guessing about feelings based on facial expressions are all helpful.
3. Informing students without autism in the environment about the unique features of autism often promotes friendships. Students will make exceptions for unusual social behavior if they realize it is caused by the handicap rather than an unfriendly attitude.

C. People with autism may have poor timing in conversation. They may interrupt the flow of conversation. They may have a delayed response.

INTERVENTIONS

1. It is helpful to give students with autism an overview of the structure of typical conversations. For instance, people usually make three or four comments on a given topic before moving on. this can become a type of script for the student, or the general rule they can rely on in social situations.

2. Raised awareness of the timing problems can often help the situation. videotapes of the individual talking to another person, role-playing of conversation skills and self-monitoring techniques have all worked for some students.
3. Printed steps of an actual conversation, with planned comments, can sometimes be a way to improving timing and turn-taking.

D. Individuals who have autism may not always orient to the listener. They may appear to be ignoring something when they are actually listening intently, absorbing much of the situation.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Teaching students to always look up when the teacher talks can be very helpful
2. Role-playing how good listening looks including the distance to stand from the speaker, and how to maintain eye contact can be useful.

III. DIFFICULTIES IN TIME AND SPACE – Students with autism frequently have problems with other forms of orientation, in addition to their communicational differences.

People with autism may have trouble understanding the daily schedule, despite frequent repetition and verbal reminders. They may not understand the changing requirements for different parts of the day. This may be one reason why structure and routine are so important to these students.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Picture or written schedules may help the student stay organized. It is important to use a system that is flexible, allowing changes in the schedule to be inserted as needed.
2. It's useful to have a signal or word that that indicates "change of plans" to the student. A question mark, a puzzled face, the words themselves need to be taught so that unexpected change can be more comfortable to the student.
3. When activities require making choices, a visual display of the options can act as a memory aid.
4. Watches that beep at pre-planned times, timers or other auditory signals may help cue the student to check the schedule or move to the next activity. Frequently these signals become automatic for the student and less upsetting than to constantly rely on another adult for an explanation of what comes next.
5. Transition times can be particularly troubling. A written story about how to transition, including the expectations of transition can be useful. In addition, a warning 5 minutes before the actual transition can help the student get ready to make a change.
6. People with autism often have trouble waiting. This may be because of the uncertainty of the expectations of waiting or the difficulty with anticipating how long the wait will be. Providing a plan of how to wait, including clues for the predicted length of the wait and opportunity to practice has helped several students.

B. People with autism frequently have difficulty organizing their materials. They may lose important papers in a messy desk, or leave essential belongings unattended due to this problem.

INTERVENTIONS

1. A system for organizing the notebooks, the homework, and other important papers is needed. Labeling sections for each class, with folders for work that is finished, work that is unfinished, and other flyers works well.
2. A monthly, one page calendar, where long range assignments and upcoming events can be noted helps students manage this aspect of organization. This system may stop some of the repetitive questions about future plans and improve completion of homework.
3. Money management skills need to be taught including: recording amount of money spent, use of the wallet, predicting need for money, and the importance of money.

IV. SENSORY DIFFERENCES – People with autism have many differences in their sensory systems that can range from a severe under-responsiveness to major over-reaction. Students who can tell us have reported that these problems can be so severe that certain sounds actually hurt their ears, certain touches feel like burning coals and certain lights make them blind. The extreme nature of these comments suggest that a consideration of a sensory overload or difference should always be a possible explanation for unusual behavior.

A. Light differences including difficulty with certain colors, fluorescent lighting and bright sunlight have been reported.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Some students with autism have used different colored glasses to improve these problems.
2. Allowing frequent breaks from fluorescent lights might be useful.
3. Providing opportunity to get in the shade might help problems with the sun. Other ideas might be wearing a hat, sunglasses, or a visor.
4. Providing an assortment of visually stimulating materials such as lighted toys, flashlights or flickering lights can provide needed input.

B. Auditory differences range from an inability to hear certain sounds to an inability to block out background noises.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Provide opportunities to escape auditorially confusing situations.
2. Making headphones available has helped several students. These headphones might be playing soothing music and simply available to block all sound.

3. Auditory Integration Therapy has been successful for several students who have autism.
4. Informing others of the difficulty can help other's monitor the possibility of overload.

C. Tactile differences range from extreme over-reaction to touch to an apparent under-reaction to pain.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Provide regular opportunity to have tactile input, including use of desired materials or alternative materials intended to provide parallel or similar stimulation.
2. Wash new clothes several times before asking the student to wear them.
3. Provide direct instruction of typical things that cause pain, to build awareness of potentially injurious situations.