



Autism Spectrum Disorder: Classroom Strategies

Children whose needs are not at the severe end of the spectrum have been and can be successfully included within mainstream schools. This has been most successful where schools have been given opportunities to understand the implications of Autism Spectrum Disorder for the child and have had the opportunity to explore strategies and interventions. There will need to be flexibility and recognition that the child may need some approaches different to those used for the other children. Close working with parents is also essential, to ensure consistency and mutual support.

Classroom practice for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in mainstream school will need to take into account the following issues:

- the child's lack of generalization of learning (every situation appears different to the child)
- the lack of incidental learning (everything needs to be directly taught)
- the literalness of understanding
- difficulties in becoming involved in group activities including play and games
- possible reactions to over-stimulation and the fact that this can easily occur in situations that other children cope well with
- observed behaviors which might be seen as simple naughtiness or non-compliance may in fact have a range of other meanings for the child with autism or Asperger's syndrome (i.e. the observed 'naughty' or 'non-compliant' behavior may in fact be the child's only way ... of indicating the need for help or attention, or the need to escape from stressful situations, ... of obtaining desired objects, ... of demonstrating his/her lack of understanding, ... of protesting against unwanted events, ... of gaining stimulation).

The program for an individual pupil will need to be based on the assessments of the pupil's individual needs and developed by close collaboration of all those involved with the pupil. However, Basic strategies would include:

- Providing a very clear structure and a set daily routine (including for play). Ensuring the pupil knows the day's program at the start of each day and can make frequent reference to this throughout the day, e.g. providing a 'picture board' with the day's activities 'laid out'. The child can move the activity 'picture' to the 'finished' section on the board before moving on to the next activity. Placing this board in a neutral ' area (i.e. area not linked with specific activities), creating a 'transition' area to enhance the understanding of finish and moving on to the next activity.
- Teaching what "finished" means and helping the pupil to identify when something has finished and something different has started.
- Providing warning of any impending change of routine, or switch of activity.
- Using clear and unambiguous language. Avoiding humor/irony, or phrases like "my feet are killing me or it's raining cats and dogs", which will cause bewilderment,
- Addressing the pupil individually at all times (for example, the pupil may not realize that an instruction given to the whole class also includes him/her. Calling the pupil's name and saying "I need you to listen to this as this is something for you to do" can sometimes work; other times the pupil will need to be addressed individually).
- Repeating instructions and checking understanding. Using short sentences to ensure clarity of instructions.
- Using various means of presentation - visual, physical guidance, peer modeling, etc.
- Ensuring consistency of expectation among all staff... and avoiding any 'backing-down' once a reasonable and manageable target has been set.
- Recognizing that some change in manner or behavior may reflect anxiety (which may be triggered by a [minor] change to routine).
- Not taking apparently rude or aggressive behavior personally; and recognizing that the target for the pupil's anger may be unrelated to the source of that anger.
- Specific teaching of social rules/skills, such as turn-taking and social distance.



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- Minimizing/removal of distractors, or providing access to an individual work area or booth, when a task involving concentration is set. Colorful wall displays can be distracting for some pupils, others may find noise very difficult to cope with.
- Seeking to link work to the pupil's particular interests.
- Exploring word-processing, and computer-based learning for literacy.
- Protecting the pupil from teasing at free time, and providing peers with some awareness of his/her particular needs.
- Allowing the pupil to avoid certain activities (such as sports and games) which s/he may not understand or like; and supporting the pupil in open-ended and group tasks.
- Allowing some access to obsessive behavior as a reward for positive efforts.

It is probable that these children will not take any advantage from counseling or from activities such as Circle Time. Instead, adults will need to constantly monitor the context to identify possible sources of uncertainty, peer-interaction problems, or other sources which could lead to stress for the pupil and consequent difficult behavior. Once such possible sources are identified adults may be able to create changes in the context that diverts the potential difficulties (such as establishing an enhanced tolerance of the observed behaviors and style), or act as a 'mediator' to help resolve any problems.

Close liaison with parents and with other professionals (Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Clinical Psychologist, Speech Therapist, Occupational Therapist) will need to be maintained. This will enable close monitoring of the pupil's progress in social and communication skills, and scholastic performance. It will also be important for sharing the process of interpreting behaviors and identifying triggers for negative or anxious episodes.



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