

## *10 Essential tips for Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder*

1. ASD students don't have to look at you all the time.
  - Reason: They find looking and listening at the same time hard to do.
2. Give them time to answer any of your questions.
  - Reason: They have slower processing time. Sometimes it can take them up to a minute to formulate the answer in the correct sequence.
3. If they feel pressured they will answer with stock standard answers.
  - Reason: They know it will get them out of trouble quickly. This may include: "I don't know", "yes", "maybe" and often this isn't their true answer!!
4. They often don't "generalise" information between people and places.
  - Reason: Homework for teacher 'x' is in the yellow basket but for teacher 'y' it's to be placed in the green basket.
5. They find organisation of their school equipment very difficult.
  - Reason: They are best with one folder with everything inside. Limit the number of pencils, pens etc.
6. Limit their choices and be very specific with choices.
  - Reason: They find choices overwhelming and are often concerned with making wrong choice due to their difficulty with problem solving.
7. Be as clear, concise and concrete as possible.
  - Reason: People with ASD have difficulty with abstract thinking.
8. Avoid verbal overload.
  - Reason: They are visual learners and verbal information takes them longer to process and retain.
9. Avoid verbal arguments by redirecting them to what they should be doing. Eg "Start your work".
  - Reason: They often enjoy verbal arguments.
10. Asperger people need positive feedback to know they are on the right track.
  - Reason: Because of their fear of failure and they want to be Mr Perfect.

## *10 Essential Strategies for Positive Behaviour Support*

### ***Avoid:***

- Telling the student what **NOT** to do.
  - Instructions and rules should always be phrased in the positive.
- Assuming the student has understood what you have said just because he can recite verbatim what you said.
- Verbal overload
  - No matter how verbal a student appears
- Nicknames, idioms and double meanings
  - Mean what you say
- Getting angry.
  - Most behaviours are a form of communication
  - These are usually frustration and/or confusion
  - Gather information about what happens before and after the behaviour that you want to change
- Never assume the student has behaved in a particular way to upset you.
  - He cannot take your perspective.
  - He only knows what he is feeling
- Thinking that student is rude
  - He simply doesn't understand or interpret body language or facial expressions
- Telling the student what to do in abstract terms such as:
  - Don't be rude
  - Go and play
- Underestimating links between communication and behaviour.
  - Improved communication skills are likely to improve behaviour.
- Avoid being misled by the student's strengths in one area and assuming that the student is as easily capable in others.

### ***Don't Forget that:***

- Social activities involve proximity and this may cause sensory overload.
- ASD students don't derive the same pleasure from social activities and events as we do. You may have to accept on partial participation.

# *Tests and Exams*

## *Successful Strategies*

A wide range of assessment strategies may need to be employed for the ASD student such as:

- Teacher observations.
- Puzzles and games.
- Interviews.
- Daily work schedules.
- Orals instead of written work (That blank piece of paper is very daunting!).
- If it's a written test, explain to the student that:
  - He must read the information sheet.
  - Then write his answers in the blank spaces or the sheet provided.
- Break the test down into smaller chunks so that it is not so overwhelming.
- Remember too that the same word in a different font can lead to the student not understanding the exam question.
- If they need specific items.
  - Give them a list of what to bring a few days before.
  - Give them a visual reminder of what to bring the day before i.e. a written note.
- Environment:
  - Smaller room.
  - Closer to examiner
  - Near a window.
  - Let them go in first or last.
- Time. Apply for a longer time allocation.
- Consider the noise from:
  - Fans

- Air conditioning
  - Sports classes outside
  - Passing traffic
  - Lights flickering
- Think about the aim of the test.
    - Is it to find out how much information they know?
      - If so maybe ask questions orally or
      - Allow dictation into a tape recorder etc
      - Allow for part of the test to be done one day and follow with the rest on a second day.

## *Curriculum Engagement*

If a student is caught behind in his work look at what is stopping them from achieving at their level. It could be a problem with their learning style.

- Perhaps they are finding it hard to know how to start
- They may not be aware of how much information they need and therefore have not completed the work.
- Most ASD students do not have problem solving skills. We need to build in problem solving strategies by supplying the right information and the correct amount of information without overloading the student. Refer to assignments, mind mapping, pro forma etc in this book for ideas.
- Aim to start to create small **successful** segments for the student.

## *Keeping On Task and Completing Work*

### *8 Essential Tips*

These are some tips for keeping the student on task and ready to complete work.

1. Subtle refocussing by pointing to their place on the page
2. Break task into more manageable pieces
3. Only give the student part of the task sheet with fewer words.
4. Give clear expectations, guidelines and parameters of the task to be completed.

For example

- a. "Write ten words"
5. Tell the student how long to spend on each task.
6. Have strategies in place for mistakes
7. Reward each small accomplishment with time on his special interest.
8. Reward with an early mark.

# *Anxiety*

Anxiety will be expressed in several ways by ASD students. The most common way is behaviour. A normally quiet student will show subtle signs of confusion or agitation or a quiet student may become very talkative. Other signals could be a lack of organisational skills.

Anxiety is:

- Very individual.
- Will vary and fluctuate from day to day depending on sensory overload.
- A range of strategies can be used however whether these will work will depend on how anxious the student is.
- Strategies need to be varied often.

## *Successful Strategies*

- Give him *de – frag* time (Computer term) i.e. quiet time to collect themselves and their thoughts.
- Use non threatening removal.
  - Send them for a drink.
  - Send them on an errand.
    - Get a red pen from the school secretary. (The school secretary already knows what your note is about and so will not argue with the student! She will not ask questions and confuse him further).
    - This gives the teacher time to calm and settle the class on task so she can talk to the student when he returns.
- Allow them to talk about their favourite subject. (This is not rewarding their anxiety it is lessening it. It is giving them time out in a structured way where the teacher is still in control of the situation.).
- Allow them to flick through favourite magazines.
- Allow them to do a favourite activity for a specified time.
- May need increased use of visual aids.
- May be able to wear a cap to keep out too much sensory light or distractions.

- Communication between home and school to check triggers and changes that may be occurring.
- Use written information and instruction. Limit verbal interaction.

### *More Successful Strategies*

Use a two stage process and allow the student to work through occasions when he is feeling overwhelmed. Follow these steps and encourage the student to ask himself these questions:

- What is causing me these feelings? Is it anything in particular or everything in general?
- Can I do anything about it **now**?
  - **YES** Think about it and come up with ideas on possible solutions for now.
  - **NO** Set a time in the future when I can think about it and perhaps deal with it **AND** in the meantime, get on with whatever else it is I should be doing.

### *Support in the School Environment*

- Identify a 'safe person' or persons (in case one is away for the day).
- Make clear the role of this 'safe person'.
  - Mentor.
  - Social skills interpretation.
  - Active listening.
  - Calming the student.
  - Sensory support.
  - Help with organisation.

## ***Social Understanding*** (but I don't have time!!)

Many teachers exclaim at this point that they don't have time to do social skills. There are however, many ways to do social understanding.

Teachers model it every day without really knowing they are doing it. The only difference for ASD students is to tell them what you mean when you are doing it?

- When I stand with my hand on my hip it means: "I'm starting to be upset with you".
- The words "Excuse me" with THAT intonation means: "it's time you stopped talking in this class".
- Look at the position of my body: It is saying...
- Look at my face. When it looks like this I am:
  - Annoyed with...
  - Frustrated by...

### ***Essential Teaching Tips:***

- They don't have to look at you all the time, as they find looking and listening at the same time hard to do.
- Give them time to answer any of your questions. Sometimes it can take them up to a minute to formulate the answer in the correct sequence.
- If they feel pressured they will answer with stock standard answers, as they know it will get them out of trouble quickly.
- They will learn social understanding best in the context that it will be used. For example classroom behaviour in the classroom, playground behaviour in the playground with the peers **that they want to be with**. There is no point teaching them the right behaviours unless you are teaching them to be with the group that they want to be in.



## *Sarcasm*

ASD students initially find sarcasm difficult to understand or use appropriately. As a teenager, it needs to be used at the correct time with your peers.

### *Successful strategies*

- Use an English lesson to define sarcasm, its uses and abuses.
- Allow the lesson to revolve around why people can be sarcastic.
- Give students some safety phrases to use such as:
  - Are you joking?
- Are you being sarcastic?

## ***Homework***

Keep in mind the very real stress and mental exhaustion that many of these students have at the end of the school day. The social aspect of school leaves them with an absence of breaks during the school day and for these students, school is for learning and home is for relaxation and time out. The ASD student needs downtime and that can usually happen at home where there is less pressure to constantly conform.

Tony Attwood has written an excellent article on homework and it can be downloaded from his website [www.tonyattwood.com](http://www.tonyattwood.com). In this article he describes ideas on whether homework is relevant for the ASD student or not. He also describes the stress on student, family and teacher where homework is involved. He suggests other ways of dealing with homework and/or doing away with it altogether.

### ***Successful Strategies***

- Choose which subjects require homework responsibilities.
- Have parents create a learning environment area with no distractions. (No fan noises, no TV, no posters on walls etc.)
- Keep homework short with a specific time allocation. Always give start and finish times.
- Do homework at the same time every night. There is no point sitting in front of a blank piece of paper for three hours.
- Provide parents an outline of the work to be done.

### ***Teacher preparation of homework***

- Use a coloured pen and highlight aspects of what needs to be completed.
- Help the student to formulate a plan.
- Provide a motivation such as controlled access to a specialist interest.
- Break the work down into smaller more manageable segments. (Only two questions instead of five).

### *Alternatives to homework*

- Do homework in school time.
- Have a specific period each week where he can go to the library or SEU (Special Education Unit) to do homework and/or assignments.
- Have a homework tutor (not a parent or sibling).
- Provide exemption from homework without peers knowing of this arrangement.

# *Assignments*

## **Remember:**

**Sometimes the process is more important than the quality of the final product.**

Many ASD students find the idea of doing assignments very difficult. They cannot visualise what is being asked of them and cannot see a way through the maze of information that needs to be collected and collated.

## *Successful Strategies*

As they are visual learners, hand out samples and models of previous assignments. Show the students examples of “A” grade and “C” grade work.

This will provide:

- A visual guideline of what is being asked of the student.
- A definite parameter of how much work is needed to be included in producing this assignment.

Make some academic modifications such as:

- Shorten the length of the assignment.
- Reduce the number of assignments.
- Break assignments into smaller more manageable segments.
  - Introduction to be handed in 1<sup>st</sup> week of assignment.
  - Body handed in 2<sup>nd</sup> week of assignment,
  - Conclusion handed in 3<sup>rd</sup> week of assignment.
- Give a list of specific questions you want answered in the introduction, body, and conclusion.
- Give a list of specific criteria for successful completion.
- Make sure students have access to information that they understand such as simplified handouts.
- Outline in simple sentences what steps should be followed.
- Present the assignment in a simpler format with fewer words than for other students.
- Discuss the assignment with support personnel.

- Allow the student to demonstrate mastery of concepts through alternate means, such as orals or allow the student to dictate essays.
- Evaluate the work done in the light of one or more of their IEP goals.  
(Individual Education Plan etc)

To allow for success consider the following for some students:

- Producing a poster.
- Copy and Displaying of information.
- Cut and Pasting information from a website.

When presenting assignments keep in mind what the **outcome** needs to be. For example if the assignment is on sea life:

- If it's primarily for research skills, allow the student his favourite topic.
- If it's primarily to know more about sea life, he can watch a video or read a book and then present his findings.

## ***School Camps***

Many ASD students are not allowed to go on school camps because of their challenging behaviours. When they are prepared in advance for what is going to happen and what to expect on camp their behaviours can be moderated. This gives them the ability to predict an outcome which can lead them to problem solve.

### ***Successful Strategies***

- Give the student at least two weeks warning of the up coming camp.
- Parents can visit the camp site one week in advance to orientate the student.
- Student can arrive at camp just prior to others arriving (before the noise and confusion)

### **Provide:**

- A map of the camp.
- Mark important items on it such as:
  - Sleeping areas
  - Eating halls
  - Out of bounds areas
  - Play areas

### **Travel:**

If they are to travel on the bus with the other students talk to them:

- About expectations on the bus.
- How they are going to feel on the bus.
- How the other students will be on the bus. (Excited and talkative and probably louder than normal).
- Sit them at the front of the bus.
  - Sit them near the front three rows and near the adults.
- Sit them under an air conditioning vent or have the window open.

### **Talk about:**

- The planned day activities and their outcomes. (Why do we have to do this?).

- The night activities and what they can do instead of joining in. (He will need some 'down time' at night).
- What they can do if they can't sleep.
- Which group are they going to be in?
- Which teacher will be in charge of that group?
- What will they do if they get lost?

**Discuss:**

- The emotions they are going to feel, remembering that they will pick up on the other students' excitement and they will not know what to do about this feeling.
- How they are going to feel it? Give it a physical description.
- "What will you do if.....happens?"
- Give them the signs of how it will feel when the outing becomes overwhelming.
- Give them written instructions on what to do if the outing becomes overwhelming.