



Supporting Learning in the Student with Autism

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Supporting Communication

Communication encompasses a broad range of challenges for individuals with autism, from intake and processing of information, verbal or representational output, to reading and writing skills. Picking up on non-verbal cues, body language and subtle intent, intonation, and interpretation are also difficult for individuals with autism.

Since all students with autism, by definition of their diagnosis, have communication and social deficits, the services of a trained speech pathologist will be an integral part of their program and planning team. For children without language, the speech pathologist should assist in formulating plans and supports for alternate modes of communication, such as sign language, PECs or augmentative devices. For students with emerging language, building on receptive and expressive language skills will be ongoing, and for those with high verbal skills working on the more subtle aspects of pragmatics and conversational reciprocity will be the focus. Speech pathologists can be instrumental in helping to drive the social, as well as language components of interaction, since these are often so intertwined. However, the development of communication skills in a student with autism cannot be the sole responsibility of the speech pathologist. Communication regarding wants and needs, as well as social interactions, occurs throughout the day and across settings, and the entire school team will be involved.

While some students are predominantly auditory learners, many tend to be visual learners, meaning they understand or retain what they see more effectively than what they hear. Visual supports are often helpful since they provide extra processing time.

Supporting Receptive Language Skills

Receptive Language is the ability to understand what is said or written.

- Make sure you have the student's attention before you deliver an instruction or ask a question.
- Consider the student's processing challenges and timing (for example, begin an instruction with the student's name - this increases the likelihood that he may be attending by the time you deliver the direction)
- Avoid complex verbal directions, information and discussion. Keep instructions short or give information in chunks.
- Give positive directions to allow for incomplete language processing.
- Minimize the use of 'don't' and 'stop.' (For example, 'Please stay on the sidewalk' can be much more effective than 'Don't walk on the grass' for a student who might not hear the 'don't'—or for one who isn't sure where the acceptable place to walk might be.) This lets the student know exactly what you want him to do.
- Allow 'wait time' (be prepared to wait for a response, whether it is an action or answer). Avoid immediately repeating an instruction or inquiry. Sometimes it is helpful to think of a student with auditory processing challenges like a computer - when it is processing, hitting the command again does not make it go any faster, but rather sends it back to the beginning to start the process all over again!





- Model and shape correct responses to build understanding (for example, for a younger child, to teach the meaning of 'stop': run on the playground holding hands with the student, say 'stop'; stop yourself and the student; repeat until you can fade the handholding and then fade the modeling)
- Supplement verbal information with pictures, visual schedules, gestures, visual examples, written directions. For example:



- Do not reprimand a student for “not listening or responding” as it only serves to highlight his challenges.

Supporting Expressive Language

Expressive Language is spoken language as well as any communicative output such as picture exchange, written language, etc.

- Take responsibility for finding a way to access the student's need for communication. Many people with autism have word retrieval issues - even if they know an answer, they may not be able to come up with the words. Offer visual supports, cue cards, multiple choice options, etc.





A Success Story:

A teacher once told me, “I have reviewed the information on the states many times and Peter still does not know what the capitals are, and I have reduced the amount of states he needs to know.” I asked, “Well, how do you ask him?” She said, “I say, what is the capital of X? and he either does not know or gives the same answer, Washington, DC.”

So I printed out a large map of the states, wrote down the capitals on stickers, and gave Peter three at a time. He was able to put every capital in the right state with the exception of mixing up Springfield and Madison.

The teacher was dumfounded and Peter was thrilled and smiled!

- Use visual supports to prompt language or give choices. (for example, if you are teaching a child to ask for help, have a cue card available at all times, and prompt its use whenever it is time for him to request help. This can be used by the student instead of spoken language, or as a support for developing language and teaching when it might be appropriate to use this phrase.

“I Need Help”

- Teach and use scripts - words, pictures, etc. for communication needs or exchanges (for example, ‘I like... What do you like?’ ‘I like.....’) Use cue cards and fade over time as the student develops an understanding of how to use the phrase or the pattern of the exchange.
- Teach the student to communicate or say ‘I don’t know’ to reduce the anxiety associated with not being able to answer a question. Later teach the student how to ask for additional information (Who? What? Where? When?, etc.)
- Add visual supports to the environment as needed (for example, label ‘IN’ and ‘OUT’ boxes).
- Teach students to look for and use visual supports that already exist in the environment: calendars, signs, door numbers, name placards, drawer labels, the display on a cash register and body language.
- Use a communication board, PECs, pictures or sign language to support or provide communication options for students with low verbal output.





A Success Story:

A teacher asked for a behavior intervention for non-compliance at snack.

She explained that Miles always requested the same snack, but when it was given he got upset and threw it. When I asked what the choices were the teacher stated,

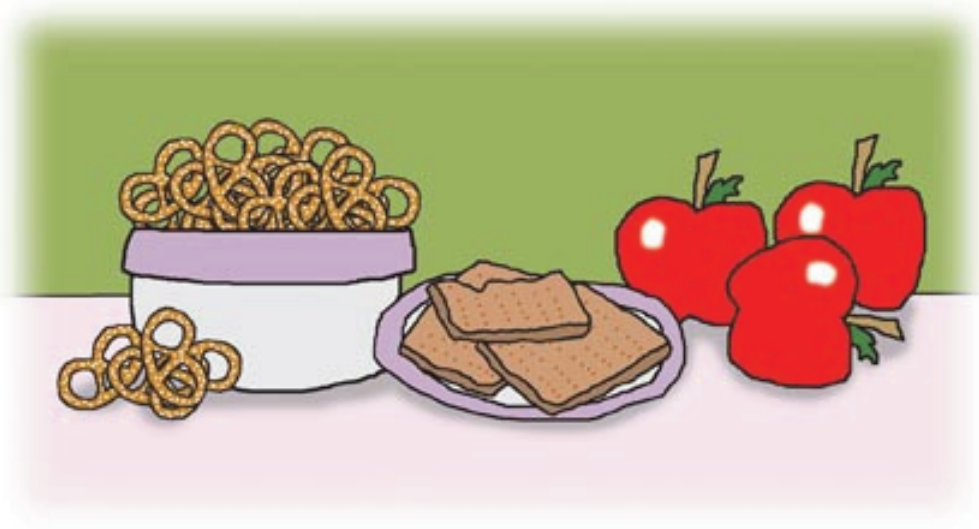
“They are always the same: pretzels, apples or graham crackers.” I asked if she always says them in that order and she said yes. I exclaimed,

“Well he always chooses graham crackers, right?” She said, “Yes how did you know?”

Due to short term memory issues, that is the only label Miles could remember.

I printed three pictures from Google images, cut them out, put them in front of Miles, and asked what he wanted for snack. He chose the picture of pretzels, repeated it verbally, and then happily ate what was given to him.

No need for a behavior intervention — just access to communication!



- If your student has been provided with an augmentative or alternative communication device, learn how to use it too. These devices can range considerably in terms of sophistication, with some offering either written or speech output. Ask the student's special education staff or tech support for programming specific to his needs and help guide them to communication options that will be helpful.
- Sing! Musical processing occurs separately from language processing, and singing can be used to promote both receptive and expressive skills (for example, for younger children, 'The fork goes on the left, the fork goes on the left, hi ho the dairy- o, the fork goes on the left!') as well as motivation.





- Provide verbal prompts or models with care, knowing that these can sometimes cause pronoun confusion and challenges due to perspective taking (for example, from the child's perspective, when a teacher says "I want a cookie" does that mean that the teacher wants a cookie or is prompting him to say 'I want a cookie'?)
- Be aware of echolalia, in which a student repeats phrases he has heard before. Sometimes this is seemingly self-stimulatory behavior, but many individuals with autism also use functional echolalia to comment, inform or request (see below).
- Always look for a student's communicative intent (for example, if a child often reverses pronouns or employs functional echolalia, then "Does your head hurt?" might be his way of telling you that his head hurts).
- For a student who is inclined to use echolalia, try to model language (and visual supports and social narratives) using language forms that would be appropriate when the student uses it so that pronoun reversals do not occur (for example, when creating a visual for a child with frequent headaches, one might use a picture of a person holding his head and the words "My head hurts.")
- Address the language of emotions - the communication of thoughts, feelings and emotional states for all individuals with autism. The challenges they face may cause ongoing anxiety and stress. Provide an outlet for their emotions. Otherwise they may communicate their feelings through behavior or shutting down. Helping the student put a label on an emotion can sometimes help modulate the intensity of it. He may be calmed by seeing that you recognize what he is trying to convey. (for example, "I can see that you are angry.") Use cartoons and visual supports to build emotional fluency.



- Whenever possible, teach self advocacy and negotiation skills
- Many students with autism have a favorite topic or special area of interest that may interfere with schoolwork or social interaction. To shape the student's expectations and to minimize the impact of this obsession:
 1. Provide scheduled opportunities to discuss this topic.
 2. If appropriate, use a visual schedule.
 3. Establish boundaries (when it is, or is not, appropriate to discuss this topic).
 4. Set a timer to establish duration.
 5. Support strategies for expanding to other topics
 6. Reinforce the student for talking about other subjects or the absence of the topic.





Improving Social Interaction & Development

Supporting social interaction is an important piece of the student's educational plan. Student's with autism often have the desire to interact with others, but do not have the skills to engage appropriately or may be overwhelmed by the process. Some students are painfully aware of their social deficits and will avoid interactions even though they desperately want to connect with others. Others will engage in attention seeking behavior to connect with others until they build the skills they need to interact.

Social development represents a range of skills, including timing and attention, sensory integration and communication, that can be built and layered to improve social competence. Building competence will result in further interest and interaction.

Sometimes, the mere unpredictability and noise of the presence of others can be disconcerting. Working through the sensory issues is the first place to begin, such as with a young child still learning to develop parallel play. A student's social ability builds on skills of imitation and reciprocity. Even a child with significant receptive and expressive language challenges can work on social referencing and paying attention to the behaviors of those around him. Without understanding the words of the teacher's directive, he can learn that when the class stands to salute the flag, he stands and salutes too!

Social challenges in autism are bidirectional. This means that they may manifest as deficits (a lack of social initiation) or excesses (a one-sided conversation in a highly verbal student with Asperger's Syndrome). In both instances, the need for support and teaching is real. Appropriate social behavior requires social understanding. Some people with autism appear highly social, initiating social interaction but lacking reciprocity, being one-sided and overbearing. People with high functioning autism and Asperger's Syndrome often suffer the pain of rejection and loneliness because they lack the necessary skills to reciprocate.

Considerations in Addressing Social Skills

- Extend a feeling of welcome to your classroom, lunchroom, or gym and model for the other students that the student with autism is a valued part of the group.
- Get to know the student and meet him where he currently is in terms of both social skills and interests, and be ready to work from there. Reciprocity, the give and take of an interaction, is a critical social skill necessary for developing a relationship. Typical individuals build strong relationships on reciprocity and socially demand it. Relationships are not based only on one-sided giving. You come to expect a friend to call you back, return a favor, etc. To create true reciprocity, it is important to engage a student on his terms and interests, not just expect him to engage on yours.
- Appropriate social behavior requires social understanding; be aware of the need to build foundations and scaffold skills in appropriate developmental sequence, expecting growth through supports, practice and direct teaching.





- Be aware that free play, recess and other unstructured times are the most difficult times for children with autism; think about how to impose structure on activities; this also applies to older students, though with needs for age appropriate supports and structure.
- Focus on social development in areas where the student shows interest and competence - not where language, fine motor or other challenges will create an overwhelming experience.
- A student with autism is likely to have anxiety surrounding social situations, which can result in avoidance or inappropriate behaviors. Building competence may reduce this anxiety.
- Students with autism often have a difficult time maintaining eye contact. Insisting on eye contact can cause additional stress. It is often best to begin with requiring the student to direct his body toward the talking partner. After significant practice in social situations and increased comfort level, eye contact may develop naturally or can be targeted more directly.
- Social challenges, while very real in each instance, will be very different for individuals along the autism spectrum. A student with limited verbal ability or word retrieval issues might have trouble contributing to a conversation. An extremely verbal and single-minded student might have trouble allowing a conversational partner to get a word in. It is generally not effective to pair students with disparate needs in social skills classes or speech groups, as it becomes even more challenging for the needs of either of them to be met and progress is impeded.
- Students with autism, especially more verbal students who perform well academically and do not have consistent adult supports, can be the target of teasing and bullying. They often do not “pick up” on non-verbal cues such as tone of voice or the hidden intention of a request or comment. They often go along with the teasing and/or bullying because they do not identify that it has a negative intent. The desire to make friends, and their difficulty doing so, means they often encounter peers with dishonest intentions. Be on the lookout for this and respond quickly if teasing and bullying become an issue.
- Many people with autism are very logical and will play according to the rules always. If the rule is that basketballs are not allowed on the playground during recess, a student may become agitated when a special activity for PE includes basketballs on the playground. Similarly, he may not understand special circumstances in game play such as penalty shots, and his insistence on following the rules as he has learned them may become problematic.
- Generalization and flexible thinking are often challenging for students with autism. So, for example, playing dodge ball is usually not a wise idea: you are asking the child to understand that the ball can be thrown at other children, but not adults, and only during this game -confusing!

Strategies for Supporting Social Skill Development

- Reinforce what the student does well socially - use behavior-specific praise (and concrete reinforcement if needed) to shape pro-social behavior.
- Model social interaction, turn taking and reciprocity.
- Teach imitation, motor as well as verbal.





- Teach context clues and referencing those around you (for example, ‘if everyone else is standing, you should be too!’).
- Break social skills into small component parts, and teach these skills through supported interactions. Use visuals as appropriate.
- Celebrate strengths and use these to your advantage. Many students with autism have a good sense of humor, a love of or affinity for music, strong rote memorization skills, or a heightened sense of color or visual perspective. Use these to motivate interest in social interactions or give a student a chance to shine and be viewed as competent and interesting.

A Success Story:

A student with a great interest in numbers but not sports was kept occupied at the basketball net with a peer by shooting from sequential numbers chalked on the floor. After several sessions of this activity, he got off the school bus one day and asked to “shoot hoops with Jason!”

- Identify peers who model strong social skills and pair the student with them. Provide peers with strategies for eliciting communication or other targeted objectives, but be careful not to turn the peer into a teacher - strive to keep peer interactions as natural as possible.
- Create small lunch groups, perhaps with structured activities or topic boxes. (The group pulls a topic out of a box and discusses things related to this topic, such as ‘The most recent movie I saw was...’ This can be helpful for students who tend to talk about the same things all the time since it provides supports and motivation and the benefit of a visual reminder of what the topic is.)
- Focus on social learning during activities that are not otherwise challenging for the child (for example, conversational turn-taking may not occur if a child with poor fine motor skills is being asked to converse while cutting.)
- Support peers and student with structured social situations. Define expectations of behavior in advance. (For example, first teach the necessary skill, such as how to play Uno, in isolation, and then introduce it in a social setting with peers.)
- Provide structured activities during recess. If there is a group of students playing YuGiOh each lunchtime, consider teaching YuGiOh to the student with autism who likes to play cards.
- During group activities define the student’s role and responsibilities within the group. Assign a role or help him mediate with peers as to what he should do (for example, ‘Sallie is the note taker today.’) Rotate roles to build flexibility and broaden skills.
- If you leave it up to the class to pick groups/ partners, students with special needs are sometimes chosen last, causing unnecessary humiliation.
- Educate peers, establish learning teams or circles of friends to build a supportive community.





A Success Story:

What a circle of friends can do:

Andrew has Asperger Syndrome, and the kids on his school bus have been teaching him to call other kids vulgar names.

Andrew has no idea what the words mean,

but likes the attention he is getting from his peers.

Hannah, a girl from his Circle told the teasers to stop it, but they wouldn't. She made Andrew's Circle facilitator aware of the situation. Adults at the school then dealt with the kids who were teasing. Also, both Andrew's parents and his resource teacher were made aware of the situation so they could teach him how to identify when he was being made fun of and strategies to use to deal with the problem.

(from "With Open Arm"s, p 85)

- Use video modeling to teach appropriate social behavior - see [Model Me Kids](#)
- Teach empathy and reciprocity. To engage in a social interaction, a person needs to be able to take another's perspective and adjust the interaction accordingly. While their challenges may distort their expressions of empathy, people with autism often do have capacity for empathy. This can be taught by making a student aware - and providing appropriate vocabulary - through commentary and awareness of feelings, emotional states, recognition of others' facial expressions and non verbal cues.
- Use social narratives and social cartooning as tools in describing and defining social rules and expectations.
- Develop listening and attending skills and teach ways to show others that he is listening.
- Teach a highly verbal student to recognize how, when and how much to talk about himself or his interests. Directly teach the skills relating to what topics to talk about with others, being aware of a conversational partner's likes and dislikes and reading from their body language and facial expressions.
- Teach social boundaries—things you should not talk about (or whom you might talk to about sensitive subjects) and maintaining personal space (an arm's length is often used as a measurable distance for conversation.)
- A social narrative example from the social narrative bank at Kansas Autism Spectrum Disorder:





BODY SPACE

SOMETIMES I STAND TOO CLOSE TO PEOPLE.



I AM ALMOST TOUCHING THEM.



THIS BOTHERS PEOPLE.



I CAN STAND NEAR PEOPLE.
I LEAVE A LITTLE SPACE BETWEEN US.



I WILL TRY NOT TO STAND TOO CLOSE TO PEOPLE.



- Teach Relationship Circles to assist in understanding social rules and boundaries, and how these vary based on how well you know someone. Source: With Open Arms, p 67-70, by James Stanfield.
- For older students, it is important to learn about the changes that take place in their bodies and appropriate hygiene as they grow, and communication supports and visuals should be used to help explain and teach. They will need to be taught when and with whom it is appropriate to discuss these changes.





Ideas for Preventing Behavior

- Recognize behavior as communication. Try to understand the communicative intent of the behavior and teach the student appropriate ways to communicate, and give them positive reinforcement when they are successful.
- Establish a classroom behavior plan for all students to promote expected behaviors.
- Develop an individualized Positive Behavior Support Plan for each student with autism.
- Provide behavior specific feedback and ample praise and reinforcement.
- Catch your students being good and reward! (For example, 'It was wonderful how nicely you walked in the hall and stayed in line. Give me a high five!')
- Provide organization and support transitions.
- Communicate expectations, use daily and short term schedules, warn of changes to routines or personnel, prepare the student for unexpected events such as fire drills, field trips or field day, substitutes, etc.
- Offer choices and provide the student some control - within reason (for example, 'Which one should we work on first, math or reading?' or 'Do you want to do 10 math problems, or 15 math problems?') Even if the student does not have a true choice, he can feel that he has some input and is not directed throughout every step of his day.
- Consider sensory needs and interventions.
- Respect the student's personal space - and teach him to recognize and respect the personal space of others.
- Provide a home base or safe place where the student feels safe and can regroup, calm down, or escape overwhelming situations or sensory overload such as a separate room, a tent or corner within a classroom, or a particular teacher's or administrator's classroom or office. Proactively teach the student how and when to use this strategy, using visual supports or cue cards as needed.
- Practice flexibility and self-monitoring - start this when the student IS calm and help to provide a framework for what 'calm and ready to participate' actually is.
- Utilize breaks as a way to return to a calm state or as a reward for 'good working', but be watchful of how and when breaks are given. Providing a break in the middle of an outburst during a less-preferred activity may help to build that negative behavior, since it becomes a strategy for the student (for example, 'If I scream, I get to avoid math and sit on the bean bag!'). Teach the student to request a break before he acts out, using an appropriate visual cue, whether that is raising his hand and asking or using a visual aide like the one below.



- Provide communication options and seek to give the student an opportunity to express emotions, confusion or his perspective.





- Teach contingencies and waiting strategies.

Out and About offers a variety of simple strategies such as:

1. Countdown (5, 4, 3, 2, 1)
2. First, Then
3. A “WAIT” cue card that can be implemented in a variety of settings

- Teach and provide the student with a list of strategies for calming when anxious, stressed or angry

When I am Stressed, I can:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ■ <i>Take deep Breaths</i> | ■ <i>Ask for help</i> |
| ■ <i>Count to 10</i> | ■ <i>Ask to take a break</i> |
| ■ <i>Repeat a positive message</i> | ■ <i>Ask permission to go to room 10</i> |
| ■ <i>Squeeze a ball</i> | |

- Use a system that reinforces the student for exhibiting desired behaviors, especially rewarding those behaviors that replace disruptive behaviors.
- Be aware of, and work to avoid, known triggers and antecedents that may result in frustration, overload, anxiety or maladaptive behaviors. Make a list and share it, so the student’s entire team is aware of these possible triggers.
- While they are occurring, ignore ‘attention seeking behaviors’ (use ‘extinction’) as much as possible, since remarking on or otherwise addressing the behavior often delivers the desired attention, even if the response is negative. Use redirection strategies instead. Teach alternative behaviors (for example, how to get someone’s attention with a gentle tap on the shoulder) at another time.
- Know the student’s learning style and ensure modifications/ accommodations are sufficient and appropriate so as to increase competence and motivation and minimize frustration.
- Use video modeling to show desired behaviors, or to compare or evaluate with the student his behavior in a targeted situation (i.e. ‘this is the way your classmates walk in the hall. This is how you walk in the hall. What might you be able to do differently? How can we support you in attaining this goal?’)
- Evaluate behaviors that need to be changed, considering the factors in place before the behavior occurred, the details of the behavior itself, and the events that followed—talk to others to gain their perspective, and develop an understanding of the function of the behavior (what purpose did it serve?) so that a replacement behavior or strategy might be developed. Enlist the support of behavior specialists in analyzing behaviors that need addressing.

Often the most obvious piece of behavior management is the positive behavior support plan, where many of these suggested strategies are identified in specific for the student; the analysis of behavior is described, and the steps to preventing undesirable behavior and promoting positive behavior and development of the individual are outlined. For a student with behaviors that impede learning (his or that of those around him), IDEA requires a positive behavior support plan developed by the team as part of an IEP. A trained behavior analyst should be involved in evaluating the student’s behavior as well as developing the support plan. Training those who are responsible for implementation and the ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of the plan are two areas that sometimes fall by the wayside in a busy school environment, but these are essential to the plan’s success. Recognizing that needs and circumstances change, it is important that the plan be reevaluated and revised as needed.





Positive Behavior Support

According to the Association of [Positive Behavior Support](#), Positive Behavior Support (PBS) is a set of research-based strategies used to increase quality of life and decrease problem behavior by teaching new skills and making changes in a person's environment. Positive behavior support combines:

- **Valued outcomes** that are considered effective when interventions result in increases in an individual's success and personal satisfaction, and the enhancement of positive social interactions across work, academic, recreational, and community settings.
- **Behavioral and biomedical science:** Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) research demonstrates the importance of analyzing the interaction between behavior and environment, and recognizing that behavior is purposeful and can be influenced by environmental factors that can be changed. Biomedical science shows that information relating to an individual's psychiatric state and knowledge of other biological factors might help professionals understand the interaction between physiological and environmental factors that influence behavior.
- **Validated procedures** that use best practices and ongoing evaluation, using data collected to evaluate outcomes (program evaluation measures, qualitative research, surveys, rating scales, interviews, correlational analyses, direct observation, and self-report information).
- **Systems change to enhance quality of life and reduce problem behaviors**, recognizing that effective implementation of a plan will require that issues of resource allocation, staff development, team building and collaboration, and the appropriateness to the implementation team be considered and addressed in the development of the plan.

According to [Northern Arizona University, Institute for Human Development](#) Positive Behavior Support is an approach to helping people improve their difficult behavior that is based on four things:

- An **understanding** that people (even caregivers) do not control others, but seek to support others in their own behavior change process;
- A **belief** that there is a reason behind most difficult behavior, that people with difficult behavior should be treated with compassion and respect, and that they are entitled to lives of quality as well as effective services;
- The **application** of a large and growing body of knowledge about how to better understand people and make humane changes in their lives that can reduce the occurrence of difficult behavior; and
- A **conviction** to continually move away from coercion - the use of unpleasant events to manage behavior.

For more information consult:

[Northern Arizona University's](#) description of the mindset and framework for developing supports that are effective and positive (also in Spanish).

[Association of Positive Behavior Support](#): which offers fact sheets on PBS Practices, PBS examples and case studies, and suggested readings.





Supporting Organizational Skills

Between the executive function deficits (short term memory, attention, sequencing, etc.) and the language and social challenges of autism, keeping pace with the world around becomes extremely challenging. If a student is having a hard time processing sensory information, he may be distracted from organizing his thoughts and work.

Strict routines provide some order to the chaos a student with autism experiences. Predictability will reduce his anxiety. Unexpected changes to routines can cause significant distress and behaviors.

Organizers and schedules can help reduce anxiety and increase. Just as a busy teacher or business person might use a planner or smart phone to organize important dates and times, and a To DO list to stay on track, a visual schedule helps establish routines and keep the student focused, productive and informed of what is coming next.

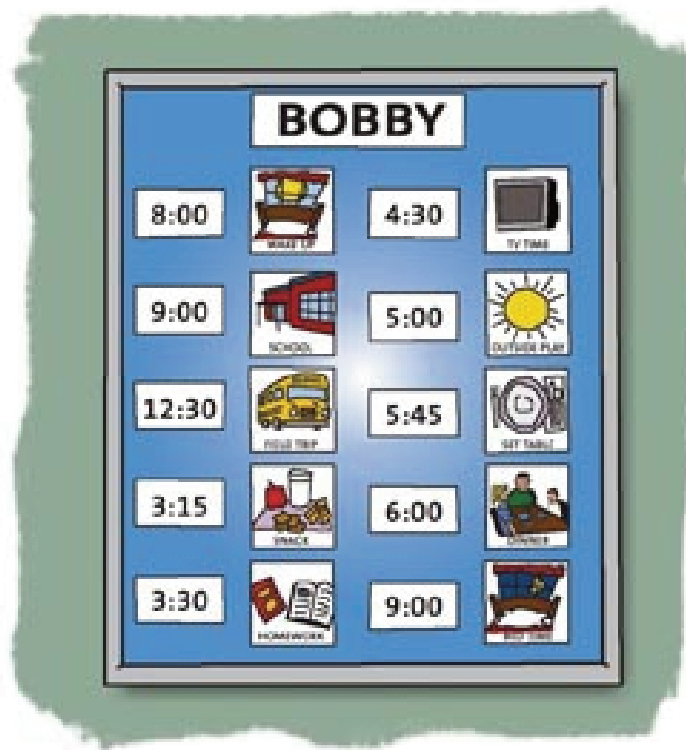
- Provide a schedule of daily activities. Depending on the needs of the student, this can be photos, symbols or written information. Provide information on what is happening, in what order, and any changes to the regular routine (for example, a substitute teacher, assembly, field trip, or fire drill).

Sample Daily Schedule (Middle School Student)				
Starting Bell	Subject	Where	Materials I Need	Ending Bell
8:10	Homeroom	Room 117		8:15
8:15	SRA Reading	Room 117	Purple SRA Books	8:59
9:04	English	Room 117	Spelling Book yellow folder	9:48
9:53	Science	Room 117		10:37
10:37	Nutrition	Outside	Snack	10:52
10:57	Social Science	Room 117	11:41	
11:46	Math	Room 117	Purple Folder	12:30
12:30	Lunch	Outside	Lunch OR Wallet	1:05
1:10	Reading	Library	Book	1:25
1:25	PE	Locker Room/Outside		2:10
2:15	Elective			3:00





A sample visual schedule for a kindergarten student using Velcro pictures:



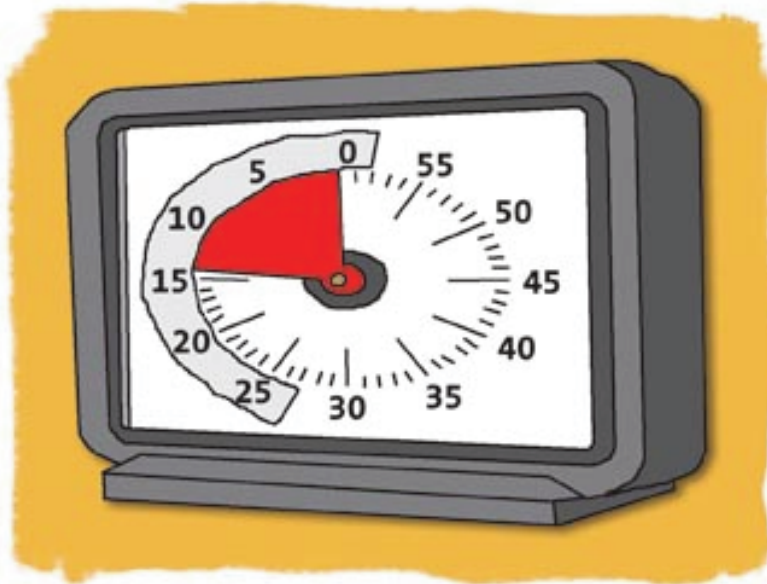
- Some students need more detail, such as the sequences of activities within a period.
For example:
Period 2 Reading:
 1. reading group, pages 22-25
 2. comprehension questions
 3. silent reading at my desk
- The simplest visual schedule format—readily available in any situation with paper and writing instrument:
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
- Create 'to do' lists and checklists for completing tasks or assignments.
- Streamline and teach to mastery, creating supports that can be generalized across activities
(for example, Get worksheet. Take out a pencil. Write name on paper. Write date. Read directions)
- A student will need to be taught to reference his schedule, checking off activities as they are completed, and eventually using it to build independence for managing time and activities.





Organizing materials, time and activities

- Use binder organizers, color-coded folders by subject or teacher, etc.
- Use labeled desk organizers (divide the desk into areas, work to complete, text books, pencils/pens etc.) and classroom supports (for example, label the 'homework in' bin).
- Manage time and deadlines using tools like time organizers, visual calendars, tablets (such as iPads), smart phones, computers, countdown timers (www.Timetimer.com) or watches with alarms. Break long assignments into chunks and assign time frames for completing each chunk.



The TimeTimer™ shows how much time remains in an activity

- Schedule a regular (weekly?) time to clean and organize the workspace and update planners.
- Create organization for group activities and provide help or strategies for identifying the student's role within the group and his responsibilities.
- Create visual schedules for specific tasks and routines.
- Use schedules to prepare for transitions and teach flexibility and problem solving.
- Warn the student of changes in routine or upcoming transitions (e.g. 'in five minutes we need to clean up the paints and go to reading groups').
- Use social narratives to prepare for novel events - field trips, fire drills, assemblies etc.
- Organize problem solving, teaching step-by-step strategies to organize thoughts for problem solving, sequencing, etc.
- Work on flexibility and handling changes in very small steps, using visual supports and rewards, so that the student learns to control his anxiety because of these previous successes.





Supporting Sensory Needs

Sensory integration provides a foundation for more complex learning and behavior. For most of us, effective sensory integration occurs automatically. For many people with autism, the process demands effort and attention with no guarantee of accuracy.

Sensory challenges can affect the student's ability to take in information, respond to requests, participate in social situations, write, participate in sports, and maintain a calm and ready to work state. Research is still exploring the impact and factors associated with sensory challenges in autism. Some research, anecdotal observations and personal accounts from people with autism have provided important insights.

Either through internal imbalances, or in response to environmental sensations, the sensory and emotional regulation of a person with autism can become overwhelmed and result in anxiety and distress. Working to maintain a 'modulated state' is an effective strategy for maximizing his ability to learn, maintain focus and reduce reactive behavior.

A trained occupational or physical therapist can provide help with sensory modulation (appropriate responses in relation to incoming sensations) and treatment for sensory dysfunction using evidence-based practices. If a student is suspected of having sensory integration issues, trained personnel should evaluate his needs.

The student's school team can be trained to use fun, play-based activities that support the student's needs and can be integrated throughout his program.

- Be aware of possible sensory issues and alter the environment where possible (for example, minimizing exposure to loud noises, using low odor dry erase markers, selective seating arrangements) to reduce their impact on a child's function.
- A sound sensitive student might find a gym teacher's whistle assaulting and the echoes of a busy locker room disturbing - pairing the student with a teacher not inclined to use a whistle, and allowing him to dress when the locker room is empty, might greatly improve the student's tolerance of, and interest in, Physical Education class.
- Some students find standing close to others difficult, so this would need to be addressed when deciding where to place a student in line when moving around the school or sitting in the cafeteria or classroom
- Students with autism may have difficulty looking at you and listening simultaneously (taking in information from auditory and visual modalities at the same time). From a social modeling aspect it is important to gain eye contact before speaking, but expect that a student might avert his eyes but still be listening.
- Highly decorated classrooms can be visually over-stimulating and distracting for some students.
- Some students may need to transition earlier than other students or may require a few minutes to unwind after walking in a noisy hallway.





- Typical classroom occasions such as singing the happy birthday song or participating in less structured, noisy activities such as lunch, assemblies and indoor PE classes can put a child with sensory issues into distress mode. It might be helpful to allow the student an “out” in these instances, such as being the person responsible for getting napkins during a birthday celebration (allowing the child to walk to the cafeteria while the rest of the class sings) or being a behind the scenes ‘production manager’ for a assemblies.



- Use the sensory integration techniques recommended by the student’s therapist, recognizing that certain sensory input is stimulating, while other input can be calming. Be sure to understand which activities should be used at what times.
- The trained therapist should help to create a program to teach the student to recognize his emotional and sensory arousal levels and needs, and over time build self-monitoring and self-delivery of the appropriate sensory input or strategies for modulation.
- Use visual supports in teaching the student how to recognize his arousal state as well as his emotions. Provide options about what he might do to return to a ‘ready to work’ state.

There is much that can be done to help alter the environment and provide supports that will make the world a less overwhelming place for a student with autism.

