

17 Tips For Teaching High Functioning Students

with Autism

1. **People with autism have trouble with organizational skills, regardless of their intelligence and/or age.** Always praise the student when he remembers something he has previously forgotten. Never denigrate or “harp” at him when he fails. A lecture on the subject will not only NOT help, it will often make the problem worse. He may begin to believe he can’t remember to do or bring these things. These students seem to have either the neatest or the messiest desks or lockers in the school. Attempt to train him in organizational skills using small, specific steps.
2. **People with autism have problems with abstract and conceptual thinking. Avoid asking vague questions** such as, “Why did you do that?” Instead, say, “I did not like it when you slammed your book down when I said it was time for gym. Next time, put the book down gently and tell me you are angry. Were you showing me you did not want to go to the gym, or that you did not want to stop reading?” Be as concrete as possible in all your interactions with these students.
3. **An increase in unusual or difficult behaviors probably indicates an increase in stress.** Sometimes stress is caused by feeling a loss of control. Many times the stress will only be alleviated when the student physically removes himself from the stressful event or situation. If this occurs, a program should be set up to assist the student in re-entering and/or staying in the stressful situation. When this occurs, a “safe-place” or “safe-person” may come in handy.
4. **Do not take misbehavior personally.** The high-functioning person with autism is not a manipulative, scheming person who is trying to make life difficult. **They are seldom, if ever, capable of being manipulative.** Usually misbehavior is the result of efforts to survive experiences which may be confusing, disorienting or frightening. People with autism are, by virtue of their disability, egocentric. Most have extreme difficulty reading the reactions of others.

5. **Use and interpret speech literally.** Until you know the capabilities of the individual, you should avoid:

*Idioms * Double meanings * Sarcasm * Nicknames * “cute” names (Pal, Buddy)

6. **Remember that facial expressions and other social cues may not work.** Most individuals with autism have difficulty reading facial expressions and interpreting “body language”.

7. **If the student doesn’t seem to be learning a task,** break it down into smaller steps, or present the task in several ways (eg., visually, verbally, physically).

8. **Avoid verbal overload.** Be clear. Use shorter sentences. He may have difficulty understanding your main point and identifying important information.

9. **Prepare the student for all environmental and/or changes in routine.** Use a visual or written schedule to prepare him for change.

10. **Behavior management works,** but if incorrectly used it can encourage robot-like behavior, provide only short term behavior change, or result in some form of aggression. **Use positive and chronologically age-appropriate behavior procedures.**

11. **Consistent treatment and expectations from everyone is vital.**

12. Normal levels of **auditory and visual input can be perceived by the student as too much or too little.** For example, the hum of florescent lighting is extremely distracting for some people with autism. Consider environmental changes such as **removing “visual clutter”** from the room or seating changes if the student seems distracted or upset by his classroom environment.

13. If your high-functioning student with autism uses **repetitive verbal arguments and/or repetitive verbal questions** you need to interrupt

what can become a continuing, repetitive litany. **Continually responding in a logical manner or arguing back seldom stops this behavior.** The subject of the argument or question is not always the subject which has upset him. More often the individual is communicating the feeling of loss of control or uncertainty about someone or something in the environment.

Try requesting that he write down the question or argumentative statement. This usually begins to calm him down and stops the repetitive activity. Then write down your reply.

14. Since these individuals experience various communication difficulties, **do not rely on students with autism to relay important messages** to their parents about school events, assignments, school rules, etc., unless you try it on an experimental basis with follow-up or unless you are already **certain** that the student has mastered this skill. Even sending home a note for his parents may not work. The student may not remember to deliver the note or may lose it before reaching home. Phone calls to parents work best until the skill can be developed. **Frequent and accurate communication between the teacher and parent (or primary care-giver) is very important.**
15. If your class involves **pairing off or choosing partners**, either draw numbers or use some other arbitrary means of pairing. **These students could benefit most from having a partner.**
16. **Assume nothing when assessing skills.** For example, the individual with autism may be a “math whiz” in Algebra, but not able to make simple change at a cash register. Or, he may have an incredible memory about books he has read, speeches he has heard or sports statistics, but still may not be able to remember to bring a pencil to class. **Uneven skills development is a hallmark of autism.**
17. **Be positive, Be creative, Be flexible!** 😊