Creating a Model Classroom

For students with autism and other developmental disabilities

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a group of developmental disabilities—including classic autism, pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and High Functioning Autism— that affect a person’s ability to understand what they see, hear, and otherwise sense. It is a brain disorder that impacts communication, social interaction, behavior, and cognitive intelligence. Individuals with ASD typically have difficulty understanding verbal and nonverbal communication and learning appropriate ways of relating to other people, objects, and events. No two people with ASD are the same. As its name implies, ASD is a spectrum disorder that affects individuals differently and with varying degrees of severity. Additionally, ASD is often found in combination with other disabilities.
Organization of Environments

**Goal:** to create an environment that is structured, predictable and visually stable.

- Furniture placement
- Traffic Flow
- Visual Clutter Management
- Purposeful Spaces
- Teaching Boards
- Clear Boundaries
Furniture placement & Traffic Flow

Reduce the ability for the student to turn the classroom into a race track. Also, most students on the spectrum are visual learners so the layout of the classroom is important.
Some Model Classrooms
Furniture placement & Traffic Flow

A visual sense of order will decrease stress that comes from a lack of order.
Visual Clutter Management

Keep it simple and clear.
Teaching Boards/
Clear Boundaries
Teaching Boards/
Clear Boundaries

Dividing off each student’s work area creates a boundary for a defined area of space.
Students with Autism Need:

- Expectations made clear
- Visual Schedules and other visual teaching strategies
- Timers
- Sensory Needs Addressed
- Social Stories
- Positive Behavior Support
Students with Autism Need: Expectations made clear

- Visual Schedules and other visual teaching strategies

- The ASD student’s strength is that most are **visual learners**. Individuals with ASD think in pictures.
Individual Schedules help students know what is next, and when it is finished.
Visual Schedules

When students go to different classes, some type of visual schedule would be a great help. For example, placing a check mark or removing a picture, helps the student understand the task is complete, and the next visual tells them what they need to do next. (TASK ANALYSIS) Also, ASD students have not learned the skills necessary to know how to occupy themselves during free time. The visual schedule is one aid that will help the student learn this skill.
Other Teaching Strategies:
- Differentiate by allowing some students to match shapes, while others are labeling the shape.
- Lap Books help attach meaning.
Independent Work Stations:

In these areas, students will work on structured work tasks by themselves (eventually) from start to finish.
Independent Work Stations:

Tips for Implementing Independent Work Stations:

• These particular work tasks will be hands on activities designed to have the student learn to be productive and independent. These tasks will reinforce known concepts.

• Select an area of the room where students can be monitored easily during the activity. Possibly place desks against the wall and have students face the wall for less distractions.

• Collect various containers or ask parents to send in containers of various sizes with lids.

• Velcro works well for keeping materials grounded.

• Large storage bins can help to hold each child’s work tasks.

• Photo or icons of the tasks may help to show each student which work task they are to complete.

• Use an icon to show “finished” or “reinforcer” when done.

• Start with having the students complete one small task, then provide them with a reinforcer item or toy. Gradually work up to adding more tasks.

• Provide only physical prompts, no verbal comments for completing the work tasks, since the goal is to get them to complete the task without the verbal prompting from the adult. Gradually decrease the physical prompts as time goes on.
Visual timers are a great way for a student to see when something begins and ends.
Structure and the Environment

You can separate the classroom into 3 areas/groups and display the shape/color to create a visual for the student to see the **boundaries** of that area. Rotate the groups out by using a prompt or timer to signal the change. You might want to hang that shape 18” below the ceiling of the specific area for greater **visibility**, providing it’s approved.

It might help to group by ability.
Small Group Areas.

**Tips for Implementation:**

- All team members should be in the room when conducting small groups.
- Create a schedule to identify which students will be at which station/center. After 15-20 minutes, the students can rotate to the next center/station. It often helps to have the students rotate in the same direction each time, so they are not confused.
- The adults in the class will need to know which center they will be responsible for teaching. They will need a schedule too. You can decide if each adult will keep the same center/station for a week or for the year.
- If you have any group with three students, you will need three seats in every center.
- Extra reinforcer boxes come in handy during this activity for those students who may need to wait. Have a box or zippered baggie full at each center, if needed.
Students with Autism Need Predictability:

- ASD Students respond positively to knowing what will happen next, or knowing their daily schedule. The *First, Then* format will help the student know what is next.

- The *First, Next, Then* format may help organize their thoughts for a writing assignment.
Students with Autism Sometimes Struggle with Writing:

- Students with ASD sometimes have difficulty with writing. It could be the function of writing, or putting their thoughts on paper.

Some type of graphic organizer, or possibly a word processor, would be beneficial.
Following Directions:

Using a checklist

___ Put book bag on chair.

___ Sit at desk.

___ Write down homework.

___ Raise hand to ask questions, and wait to be called on.

___ Sit quietly.
Older students would benefit from a schedule/checklist to help them stay organized.

Homeroom

1st period – L.A. - blue folder pencil, paper, homework

2nd period - Math - red folder Book, paper, pencil

3rd period – P.E. Dress out in gym clothes

4th period – lunch

5th period – Science - green folder

6th period – History - yellow folder

Dismissal
Structure and the Environment

The Waiting Bears are a good idea for transitioning. The student will sit on the waiting bear and wait to be told where to go next.

Weekly planned lessons help decrease down time.
Soft lighting temporarily helps create a calm environment.
Students with Autism may need a Sensory Motor area/space:

- Create an area where the ASD student can go for calming or a sensory break.
• Students with Autism Need:
• Social Stories

- What are Social Stories and how are they used?
  - Developed by Carol Gray and colleagues, this strategy uses stories written in the first person to increase youngsters’ awareness of problematic situations.
  - Beginning with the child’s understanding of a situation, a story is developed describing what is happening, why and how people feel and think in the situation, ex: What is happening in the situation, and What to do in the situation.
  - Social Stories are read repeatedly to children until they have over-learned them, then read again just prior to the problematic situation.
What are ways to support a student when he/she is getting stressed?

- Help them identify where they are on the Stress Level Thermometer by noticing their body signal.
- Show them the calming strategy for that location on the thermometer.
Using the Stress Level Thermometer

On this thermometer if the body signal is stomping feet, the calming technique is going to the ‘safe spot’ in the classroom.
Using a Behavior Reminder Chart

- Use a visual to show what “good choices/behavior” looks like.
- Also, remind the students there are no positive reinforcers when they display red behavior.
Students with Autism Need:
- Behavior Support

**A few Intervention Ideas**

If the Function is Escape/Avoidance, try one of these options:

- Put in place Positive Behavior Supports
- Provide a scheduled “escape” before the student engages in the behavior
- Decrease the difficulty of the activity, then gradually increase the difficulty
- Teach the student to request a break appropriately
- Do not stop the activity because of the behavior
• Students with Autism Need:
• Behavior Support

A few Intervention Ideas

If the Function is Attention from Others, try one of these options:

- Put in place Positive Behavior Supports
- Do not provide attention for inappropriate behavior (no eye contact, no verbal comments, neutral body language)
- Assist the student into a safe situation without verbal comments
- Provide an over abundance of attention on a scheduled basis for appropriate behavior and reward for appropriate behavior
• Students with Autism Need:
  • Behavior Support

**A few Intervention Ideas**

If the Function is Gain Access to a Tangible Item, try one of these options:

- Put in place Positive Behavior Supports
- Teach an appropriate way to ask for the item or activity
- Teach the student to “wait” using a wait card, timer, or first-then board
- Use visual supports to show the student when he or she will get the item or activity or to show the item is no longer available.
A few intervention ideas

If the Function is Sensory Input Gained from Behavior, try one of these options:

- Put in place Positive Behavior Supports
- Talk with an O.T.
- Provide appropriate sensory input before the student needs it or provide it on a regular basis
- Provide an alternate behavior that may give the student the same type of sensory input
Positive Reinforcers:

To change behavior there needs to be a good motivator/reinforcer:

- Find out what the student likes
- Tell the student he/she can work for it
- Make it clear what the student has to do specifically to earn the positive reinforcer.

Students with Autism Need:

- Positive Behavior Support
In Summary

- Autism is another way of thinking and being.

- Many children with autism like things to be perfect, but we know everything can’t always be perfect. We can help them learn everyone makes mistakes, and that’s okay.

- Students with autism need predictability, and priming if there will be a change.

- Let’s set them up for success by creating a structured environment with positive reinforcement.