AUT-OH! Tips for handling behaviors for students on the Autism Spectrum

Lisa Kay Knight,
Student Support Facilitator for Henry County Schools
MOM TESTED, TEACHER APPROVED

• I am a parent to an exceptionally bright, stunningly good looking, amazingly interesting son with Autism

• I’ve taught students served through Autism in elementary and middle school

• As a student support facilitator, I am a resource of support for teachers and students for both elementary and middle school
MOM TESTED, TEACHER APPROVED

- I am a parent to an exceptionally bright, stunningly good looking, amazingly interesting son with Autism

James during a Civil War reenactment
Autism Spectrum Disorder

- DSM now includes PDD, Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome
- Impaired social and or communication skills, repetitive behaviors, and a restricted range of interest
- Sometimes has physical indicators such as a toe walk gait, ‘flapping’, or avoiding eye contact
- Sometimes has emotional indicators such as rigidity to routine, detachment, a narrow set of interests and perseveration
Let’s start with some facts from the CDC:

• According to the CDC, 1 in 68 children is identified as having Autism Spectrum Disorder
• This has increased from 1 in 150 in the year 2000
• Autism is five times more common among boys than girls
• Autism is now seen across all racial and ethnic groups
• The most common age for diagnosis is eight years old
• Autism can be diagnosed as early as two years old
So Autism... AND...

• Significant co-morbidity with other psychiatric diagnosis; statistics vary

• ADHD, mood disorder are commonly comorbid

• National Alliance on Mental Illness explains that with continuing understanding of Autism and its changing parameters, it is often hard to determine when a second diagnosis is appropriate

• Sudden changes of temperament are often indicators of a comorbid condition. This often happens in adolescence.
Autsy kids in the classroom...

Have you ever seen these behaviors?

Meltdowns?
Miscommunication that leads to fighting or crying?
Perseveration on a preferred idea?
Task avoidance?
Disrespect to adults?
Arguing?
Aggression to self or others?
First things first: Sensory needs!

- Avoiding ‘too much’ avoids meltdowns
- ‘Too much’ can be chatter of classmates, the smell of wet paint, or an activity such as classroom exercise
- Share a time when you saw a student reach the ‘too much’ stage

Check out Asperger’s Experts online for more insight
First things first: Sensory needs!

When he was 9, James cried every afternoon. His third grade teacher was puzzled and annoyed at the change in his behavior from morning until afternoon. If he could behave and complete work in the morning, why couldn’t he in the afternoon?

What do you think?
First things first: Sensory needs!

When he was 3, Matthew screamed, cried and kicked whenever his Mom tried to take him to the bathroom. It seemed worse in public bathrooms. What do you think?
First things first: Sensory needs!

Imagine that you are Christmas shopping a week before the holiday. You have a mission to get three more gifts. You have to get from one end of the mall to the other, pushing through the jostling crowds. You are carrying a shopping bag that is getting heavier by the minute. A baby starts to cry. Someone farted. Chick-fil-a is cooking fries. That lady is arguing with her husband. Are they going to fight? You have to get to JCPenney. You dropped your cell phone. Where is it? Where is your cell phone?

Now, I’m handing you a worksheet. Do it please. RIGHT NOW while you are Christmas shopping at the Mall.
First things first: Sensory needs!

- Observe behavior
- Backwards planning

- What is the antecedent?
- How can it be changed?
First things first: Sensory needs!

Task avoidance issue number one is sensory needs. Kids on the spectrum are often over-stimulated and can’t do what you are asking them to accomplish because it is just ‘too much.’ The more you push, the more they are overwhelmed and noncompliant.
First things first: Sensory needs!
What if you weren’t able to avoid the antecedent, or it is a new trigger, and a meltdown happens?

1. Don’t try to reason with student. Bad timing!
2. Logic isn’t applicable. See number 1. It is a bad idea to say ‘You are overreacting.’
3. Remove the student from the trigger-time to cool off.
4. Give the student space and time to deescalate.
5. Make an affirmative statement like “I know you’ll work through this” and go do something else nearby.
First things first: Sensory needs!

What if you weren’t able to avoid the antecedent, or it is a new trigger, and a meltdown happens?

The only time you restrain a student is if he is an imminent danger to self or others. Hands off!
First things first: Sensory needs!

Adding sensory items can also make students feel more ‘grounded’. Students with Autism as well as other neurological conditions often struggle with proprioception. A weighted blanket, small lap bean bag or compression therapy can help students feel less overwhelmed; their brain understands more about where the body is.
Second Concern- Emotional regulation

Students on the spectrum are sometimes described as having a ‘short fuse’ or ‘going from zero to 90 in 2 seconds flat.’

Self regulation is overriding one’s immediate feeling or behavior consciously, with a more desired or socially appropriate feeling or behavior.

Students on the Spectrum lack a sense of self awareness and self competency, which creates difficulty with self regulation. They are unaware of the unwritten rules of society and often unaware that their response is atypical or undesired.
Second Concern: Emotional regulation

Students need direct instruction in self regulatory strategies. This often starts with recognizing emotions in themselves and others.

For James, we talked specifically about recognizing facial features. He knew when Mama got ‘Angry eyebrows’ he’d done something wrong.
Second Concern- Emotional regulation

Sometimes, students with Autism are served with a Speech Language Pathologist. She can help students with pragmatics and non-verbal communication. Small group direct instruction in social skills with other students served through Autism is also a time these skills can be taught.
Second Concern - Emotional regulation

If something is bothering me I can...
- go to a safe place
- take deep breaths
- earn rewards
Second Concern - Emotional regulation

On a scale of 1-10, I’d rank today a....

This was my high today:

This was my low today....
Second Concern - Emotional regulation

Don’t ride an emotional roller coaster with your student!
Second Concern - Emotional regulation

14 year old James-
“Everybody hates me. I wish I could die.”

Mom- “Everybody?”
James- “Yes, everybody!”
Mom- “I’m sorry you are feeling alone.”
James- “I’m not feeling ALONE! I am pissed!”
Mom- “We’ll talk through it when you are calmer.”
Second Concern - Emotional regulation

Don’t give up. Don’t be afraid to take a break when you need to.

Me on a bad Aut day
Third concern- Socialization?

Ducks like to be with other Ducks.
Third concern- Socialization?

Direct instruction in the unwritten rules help with perceived disrespect and socialization. For our family, we talked about the totem pole. A LOT.
Third concern - Socialization?

Do- Plan activities that build on strengths. Lego Club, anyone? Minecraft party?

Do- Have duck time and chicken time.

Do- Look for teachable moments during social interaction. The best instruction comes for social skills is embedded.
Third concern - Socialization?

Don’t- Forget to ask questions. It is easy for students on the Spectrum to be bullied or manipulated.

Don’t- Force it. Sometimes we all like to be alone. Allow for both.

Don’t- Get angry when students make social errors. They have a neurological disorder that impairs communication and socialization. It’s not about you. Don’t take it personally.
Third concern - Socialization?

Make factual positive statements affirming appropriate socialization.

“I saw that you sat with John and talked about Minecraft. That’s a good way to make friends.”
Task compliance—Now LASTLY, let’s talk about academic work.

Rosie King explains that the inside world is so much more engaging than the annoying outside world.

https://www.ted.com/talks/rosie_king_how_autism_freed_me_to_be_myself
Academic Work

Students on the spectrum are sometimes non-compliant with non-preferred tasks. Here are some possible reasons:

• I can’t think about that because I am already thinking about...
• I don’t think I can do it and that frustrates me.
• It is too much and I feel overwhelmed.
• I think it is a stupid assignment. I already know this stuff.
• My executive functioning skills are weak and I can’t analyze this task.
Task avoidance?
Strategies to try:
- If, then (KISS)
- Visual Schedule
- Sticky note for perseveration of idea
- Tie-in interests
- Be consistent and matter of fact
- Make expectations clear
Last bit of advice? Keep a sense of humor.

Ask me about the time James made potpourri.
Or when he took Advil at school.
Or when he kicked his third grade teacher.
Or when he ran away from school...eloping was a thing for awhile....
Or when he discovered how to circumvent the firewalls at school...