


# *General Strategies for Intervention*

## *Why a Team Approach?*

---

 In supporting a student with autism, it is virtually always beneficial to employ a team approach to understanding and programming. Each member of the team brings a unique perspective and set of observations and skills, all of which are helpful in assisting a student with complex and variable needs. In addition, it is important to **employ the knowledge and perspective of the family**, since they offer another valuable and longitudinal view. Just as the symptoms of autism vary across children, so will the knowledge bases and coping skills of the parents and siblings. Parents can contribute information and a history of successful (and unsuccessful) strategies, and may also benefit from information on strategies and successes at school that can help to extend learning into the home setting. A positive and collaborative relationship with the family is beneficial to everyone.

In a similar fashion, supports that work in a specific classroom can be shared with other teachers or support staff, to promote the behavioral, communication and social growth being targeted. Community based personnel, such as a private psychologist, vocational-rehabilitation counselor or wraparound service coordinator, can offer information, resource options and perspective to support the team's efforts on behalf of the student. **Communication among team members is critical. Share what works and problem-solve what does not.** Repetition and reinforcement across settings help to generalize skills and build competence faster, resulting in success for the staff as well as the student. Reassess the effectiveness of interventions, collecting and analyzing data. See [Data Collection](#).

Remembering to **think of each student as an individual** is critical to success in providing appropriate support and growth. An understanding of the characteristics of autism and strategies that have proven successful is critical to providing an appropriate mindset and framework, but application across the widely varying students and settings will require an individualized approach. For example, while a young child with autism may be supported by compassionate peers who want to help develop his speaking ability, a high-functioning, verbally proficient adolescent may not be provided the same compassionate allowances by peers or educators who are not familiar with his specific challenges with timing and organization. In an effort to assist with some of the differences across the population this tool kit provide supportive information specific to Asperger's Syndrome (which often applies to high functioning autism as well), but the caveat to treat each student's need individually remains. Similarly, what represents perfect support for a first grader is likely to be grossly out of place for a high school student, so it is important to support the development of age appropriate interests and raise expectations towards independence and peer-level behavior as much as possible.



**Establish appropriate expectations for growth and competence.** Support the student in his learning and help him to build skills and independence. It is often the well meaning tendency for support staff to take on the everyday tasks of a student with autism--to speak for the student, tie his shoes, walk him to class, turn in his paper. While this might keep the student on pace with the activities of the surrounding class or community and seem supportive at the time, in the long run it represents a disservice since the student has not learned to perform the activities of daily life for himself. This requires patience, setting priorities and establishing small goals that must be supported and built to reach the desired outcome, but with this mindset at the root of teaching, as opposed to care giving, expect to be surprised, impressed and rewarded by all that a student *can* do.

**Meet the student where he is.** For each of the skill areas that needs to be addressed with a student with autism, it is critical to develop an understanding of the individual's current ability, and build from that level. This approach applies to social and communication issues as well as academics. Understand where a student is and problem solve what is impeding progress from that point, then develop the teachable, scaffolding steps that will move learning forward.

**Motivation is critical to attention and learning.** Know what motivates a student, being aware that this may be very different from what motivates a typical child. Use his interests to garner attention to a less interesting or non-preferred activity (e.g. for a student who is averse to word problems but loves dinosaurs, create word problems that add triceratops or multiply the food requirements of a brachiosaurus) and embed preferred activities as naturally as possible. Also recognize that familiarity and increasing competence increase confidence and interest, so appropriately supporting and building new skills opens up more opportunities for engagement and motivation.

As a student with autism works to change behaviors or learn difficult skills, it is essential that the reward for this effort be substantial enough for him to extend this effort. In many instances, even if there is something inherently motivating about a task or activity, it is necessary to shape behavior by making small changes at a time and **utilizing reinforcement strategies**—social reinforcement such as praise or a high five, as well as concrete reinforcement such as a favorite activity, toy or food item. The reward for learning a new skill or decreasing a maladaptive behavior needs to have more strength than the reinforcement for *not* developing the replacement behavior. Token economy systems can be extremely effective and reinforcement can be faded over time to decreasing frequency or more naturalistic social rewards. See [Positive Behavior Support](#) and [Reinforcement Strategies](#).



**Respect the individual.** Please do not talk about the student in his presence—even those who *seem* to not know what is being said may actually understand every word. Recognize that the student has desires and preferences, and give him choices whenever appropriate.

For excellent perspectives and advice on interacting with and planning for individuals with autism, see—and pass along to others--the articles in the **Appendix** by [Stillman](#), [Notbohm](#), and [Kluth](#).



# *How Can Communication Be Supported?*

---

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. Supporting communication challenges is essential to assisting a student with autism to understand, as well as to express his needs, wants, opinions, knowledge and feelings.

Since all students with autism, by definition of their diagnosis, have communication and social deficits, the services of a trained speech pathologist should be an integral part of their program and planning team. For children without language, the speech pathologist should assist in the formulation of plans and supports for alternate modes of communication, such as sign language, PECs or augmentative devices. For students with emerging language, building receptive and expressive language is critical and ongoing, and for those with high verbal skills working on the more subtle conversational aspects of pragmatics and reciprocity will be the focus. In addition, many 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, it is essential to note that 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, occur throughout the day and across settings, and a team approach to communicative development is absolutely essential for all learners on the autism spectrum.

While some are predominantly auditory learners, many students with autism (and often other students with behavior or communication challenges) tend to be visual learners, meaning they understand or retain what they see more effectively than what they hear. Given the challenges with language and shifting attention, visual supports are often helpful since they provide extra processing time afforded by a static presentation rather than the fleeting nature of spoken communication.

## *Receptive Language — the ability to understand what is said or written*

- Make sure you have the student's attention before delivering an instruction or asking a question
- Consider the student's processing challenges and timing (e.g. begin an instruction with the student's name to call his attention—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 use of 'don't' and 'stop.' e.g. 'Please stay on the sidewalk' can be



much more effect 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.

- 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 processing all over again!
- Model and shape correct responses to build understanding (e.g. 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

### *Volume*

Quiet



Loud



- If you are giving lengthy bits of information, provide visual supports, outlines, or bullet point important information for the student
- Do not reprimand a student for “not listening or responding” as it only serves to highlight his challenges

*Expressive Language -- 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 individuals with autism have word retrieval issues—even if they know an answer, they cannot come up with the words. Address this by offering 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. 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.
- Teach and use scripts—words, pictures, etc. for communication needs or exchanges (e.g. ‘I like.... What do you like?’ ‘I like..... ‘) Use cue cards and fade over time as the student’s understanding of the use of the phrase or pattern of the exchange develops.

*“I Need Help”*

Teach the student to communicate or say ‘I don’t know’ so as 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 (e.g. 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, 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?” Of course, 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, 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 in the context of your relationship. 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 in interacting with you 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 (e.g., ‘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 (e.g., 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 (e.g., 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 (i.e. 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. Knowing that their challenges result in ongoing anxiety and stress, it is important to provide an outlet for emotional content, as it is otherwise likely to be communicated through behavior or shutting down. For a student who cannot express this verbally, often putting a label to an emotion can sometimes help in modulating intensity, since he is calmed by seeing that you recognize what he is trying to convey. (e.g. "I can see that you are angry.") Use cartoons and visual supports to build emotional fluency.



- Teach self advocacy and negotiation skills
- Many students with autism have a favorite topic or special area of interest that may interfere with school work or social interaction. Strategies that can be helpful in shaping the student's expectations so as to minimize the impact of this obsession: provide scheduled opportunities to discuss this topic, present scheduled opportunities on a visual schedule, establish boundaries (when it is, or is not, appropriate to discuss this topic), set a timer to establish duration, support strategies for expanding to other topics, and/or reinforce the student for talking about other subjects or the absence of the topic.
- See [Appendix](#) for an introductory booklet *What are Visual Strategies?* by Linda Hodgdon and [Resources](#) section for suggested reading such as *Out and About*



# *What Can Help Improve Social Interaction and Development?*

---

Supporting social interaction is an important piece of the student's educational plan, as increasing social interaction and competency are vital to overall progress. The desire to interact with others is often in place in individuals with autism, but the processes that allow social interaction to occur can be so overwhelming that they do not know where to begin. **Take care not to interpret social deficits as a lack of desire or avoidance of social interaction.** Keep in mind the issues of timing and attention, sensory integration and communication, and recognize that to build social skills all of these issues will need to be addressed. Social development encompasses a range of skills that can be built and layered to improve social competence (and competence breeds further interest) and interaction.

Sometimes, the mere unpredictability and noise of the presence of others can be disconcerting and working through the sensory issues is the first place to begin, such as with a young child still learning to develop parallel play. Social ability builds on skills of imitation and reciprocity. While communication issues are critical to eventual social competence at a typical level, even a child with significant receptive and expressive language challenges can work on social referencing and attending 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!

It is critical to recognize that social challenges in autism are bidirectional—they may manifest as deficits (such as a lack of social initiation) or excesses (such as one-sided conversation in a highly verbal student with Asperger's Syndrome). In both instances, the need for support and teaching is real, as appropriate social behavior requires social understanding. Some individuals on the spectrum *appear* highly social, initiating social interaction but lacking reciprocity by being one-sided and overbearing; since they are then aware of their inability to conform and be accepted by others, individuals with high functioning autism and Asperger's Syndrome often suffer the pain of rejection and loneliness.



## *What are Some Things to Consider When Addressing Social Skills?*

---

- Extend a feeling of welcome to your classroom, lunch room, 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, and 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. (See [Gernsbacher](#) article)
- 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 of interest and competence for the student—not where language, fine motor or other challenges will create an overwhelming experience.
- Recognize that a student with autism is likely to have anxiety before, during and after social situations, which can result in avoidance or inappropriate behaviors. Building competence is essential to reducing this anxiety.
- Use care in expectations of appropriate eye contact, shaping this over time. Often students with autism have a difficult time maintaining eye contact and insisting on eye contact can cause discomfort and additional stress. It is often best to begin with requiring the student to direct his body toward the talking partner, then after significant practice in social situations and increased comfort level as a result of supports, eye contact develops or can be targeted more directly.
- Note that the social challenges, while very real in each instance, will be decidedly different for individuals along the autism spectrum. Whereas 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 edgewise. As such, it is generally not effective to pair students with these 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.



- It is important to note that students with autism, especially more verbal students who perform well academically and are therefore less inclined to have consistent adult supports, can be the target of teasing and bullying. As a result of their social challenges they often do not “pick up” on non-verbal cues such as tone of voice or the hidden intention of a request or comment. Students with autism 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, coupled with the difficulty in doing so, means they often encounter peers with dishonest intentions. It is important to be on the lookout for this and to respond quickly if teasing and bullying become an issue. See [Strategies for Bullying](#) for highlights of useful strategies from *Perfect Targets*, as well as suggested reading in [Resources](#).
- Many individuals 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!

## *Are there Specific 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, reciprocity
- Teach imitation, motor as well as verbal
- Teach context clues and referencing those around you—e.g., 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. See example for [face washing](#) from the Kansas Autism Spectrum Disorders website
- Celebrate strengths and use these to your advantage. Many individuals 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 to 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 with strong social skills and pair the student with them so he has good models for social interaction. 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. (Teach the group to pull a topic out of a box and have the students discuss 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 (e.g. conversational turn-taking is not likely to occur if a child with poor fine motor skills is being asked to converse while cutting, especially if it is in a room with overwhelming sensory distractions.)
- Support peers and student with structured social situations with defined expectations of behavior (e.g. 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 supports or 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 it is beneficial to help the student define his role and responsibilities within the group. Assign a role or help him mediate with peers as to what he should do (e.g. Sallie is the note taker today.) Be sure to rotate roles to build flexibility and broaden skills.
- Remember that 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 – See *Resources: With Open Arms*



### *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. The kids who were teasing were then dealt with by the adults at the school. 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—see [Model Me Kids](#)
- Teach empathy and reciprocity. In order 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 often display or distort their expressions of empathy, individuals with autism often do have capacity for empathy. This can be taught by making a student aware — and providing the associated 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. Developed by autism consultant Carol Gray, she describes: a '*Social Story™ describes a situation, skill, or concept in terms of relevant social cues, perspectives, and common responses in a specifically defined style and format. The goal of a Social Story™ is to share accurate social information in a patient and reassuring manner that is easily understood by its audience. Half of all Social Stories™ developed should affirm something that an individual does well. Although the goal of a Story™ should never be to change the individual's behavior, that individual's improved understanding of events and expectations may lead to more effective responses.*' Source: [The Gray Center](#).
- 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 the likes, dislikes and reading from the body language and facial expressions of conversational partners.
- 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



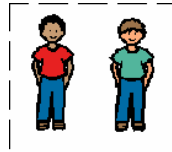
Sometimes I stand too close to people.

I am almost



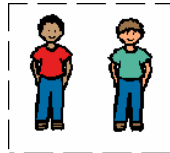
touching them.

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 [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 employed to help explain and teach. See [Resources](#).



# *What Strategies Can Be Employed to Promote Socially - Appropriate Behavior?*

Each individual on the autism spectrum has oddities in his behavior. These may vary from repetitive physical movements with a likely sensory basis (arm or hand flapping and other self-stimulatory actions) to aggression and destructive behaviors that are often the result of frustration or even pain. Obsessions, inflexibility, adherence to seemingly non-functional routines, adherence to rules, literal thought patterns, and resistance to change are all examples of common behavioral manifestations of the neurological differences, as well as associated anxiety, frustration and disorganization that are often present in an individual with autism's life.

## *Examples of Common Behaviors in Autism*

- Little or no eye contact
- Seems deaf
- Uneven development of skills
- Resistance to changes in routine
- Marked hyperactivity and/or extreme passivity—which may alternate
- Less demonstration of typical signs of affections
- Odd body movements or postures (flapping, spinning, etc.)
- Little or no apparent fear of real dangers, but often significant fear of seemingly benign situations or things
- Inappropriate laughter or crying
- Inappropriate attachment to objects
- Eating, sleeping, toileting oddities
- Aggressive or self-injurious actions
- Pica—eating non-food items

While many of these behaviors can be disruptive to learning or interaction, it is critical to seek to understand the cause, or the function, of each behavior. Key to supporting an individual with these atypical behaviors is recognizing them not as conscious choices but as neurological symptoms of the disorder. Instead of only thinking of the elimination and remediation of a behavior it is often helpful to consider the support strategies to help a student cope with, manage or replace these behaviors—or the sensations that drive them. It is also important to remember that some 'behaviors' in autism can actually make for a model student—many individuals are strict rule followers or excellent rote learners, who can have a positive influence on the classmates around them.



In evaluating the function of a behavior, it may be helpful to differentiate between those that are a result of neurology, such as the repetitive behaviors like flapping or difficulty with maintaining eye contact, and those that are responses to frustration or communication difficulties. Absolutely essential to any behavior support is the understanding that behavior usually represents a form of communication. In the case of most 'problem' behaviors, a look for the underlying cause often reveals anxiety, confusion, frustration, or injury, since acting out is often the only way the individual can communicate. Attention-seeking behavior can even have an overtly social function, in that a child who cannot say 'come play with me' might dump all his toys so his caregiver joins him in his space.

In a world that is swirling all around, routines and predictability can be calming; therefore, supporting the student with information and organization from every aspect (physical environment, daily routine, academic modifications, etc) can result in increased learning and autonomy as well as improved behavior. Supporting behavior also includes working on flexibility, communication and self-advocacy, and the teaching of appropriate responses and replacement behaviors. Responses to behavior can include ignoring the behavior (called extinction in ABA terminology--and often essential to reshaping attention-seeking-behavior), redirecting, or delivering previously established consequences. Recognizing the effort that changing behavior represents to the individual, it is absolutely essential to provide consistent and positive reinforcement to reward the student for developing the desired, socially appropriate behaviors.

The topic of behavior is generally one of the most challenging areas for staff working with students with autism to comprehend. It is difficult to break out of the mode that maladaptive behavior is willful and defiant in its intent, but for the most part this is not the case in students with autism. **While it may be impossible to *always* identify the underlying cause or communicative intent of a behavior, it is helpful to *always* consider this.** In addition, it is much more helpful to the student to err on the side of caution and assume behavior is the result of anxiety, stress, frustration, avoidance or anger due to the challenges associated with autism, and to strive to provide the supports that will help to avoid the recognized behavior in the future.

It is vital that behavior is supported across all settings according to an established plan, with staff consistent in the development of appropriate behavior and the ignoring/extinction/consequences of disruptive or socially-inappropriate behaviors. Being calm, patient, positive and reassuring are vital if the student is to accept support and feel comfortable and successful in school. Providing a safe and supportive atmosphere where sensory needs are addressed and the student feels organized, valued and supported provides a framework for a successful learning environment and opportunity for teachers and peers to see the unique strengths and personality of a student with autism.



## *What Are Some Ideas for Supporting the Student and Preventing Behavior?*

---

- Recognize behavior as communication. Always seek to understand the *communicative intent* of behavior and build alternate modes of communication for the student.
- Think preventively and proactively.
- Establish a classroom behavior plan for all students to promote expected behaviors.
- Develop an individualized Positive Behavior Support Plan for each student with autism—See below and additional information in [Resources](#) and [Appendix](#)
- Provide behavior specific feedback and ample praise and reinforcement. Catch your students being good and reward! (e.g., ‘It was wonderful how nicely you walked in the hall and stayed in line. Give me a high five!’)
- Provide organization and support transitions—See section [Classroom Checklist](#)
- 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 (e.g., ‘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 is made to feel that he has some input and is not directed throughout every step of his day.
- Consider sensory needs and interventions—See Sensory section, [Resources](#) and sample supports in [Appendix](#).
- 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 (e.g., ‘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 a visual cue.



## *“I Need a Break”*



- Provide communication options and seek to give the student an opportunity to express emotions, confusion or his perspective.
- Teach contingencies and waiting strategies. See [Resources](#) for suggested reading. **Out and About** offers a variety of simple strategies such as Countdown (5, 4, 3, 2, 1); first, then; 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:*

- *Take deep Breaths*
  - *Count to 10*
- *Repeat a positive message*
  - *Squeeze a ball*
  - *Ask for help*
- *Ask to Take a break*
- *Ask permission to go to room 10*

- Use a system that reinforces the student for exhibiting desired behaviors, especially rewarding those behaviors that replace disruptive behaviors. See [Reinforcement Strategies](#)
- 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 behaviors (use ‘extinction’) that are intended to gain attention, since remarking on or otherwise addressing the behavior often delivers the desired attention, even if the response has negative intent. Employ redirection strategies instead. Teach alternative behaviors (e.g. 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 to 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.

## *What is 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 research demonstrates the importance of analyzing the interaction between behavior and the environment, and recognizing that behavior is considered purposeful and is under the control of environmental factors that can be changed. Biomedical science shows that information related



- to an individual's psychiatric state and the knowledge of other biological factors can assist professionals in understanding the interaction between the physiological and environmental factors that influence behavior.
- *validated procedures* that employ 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



## *What are Some Ways to Support Organization?*

---

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. Anxiety and stress are ever-present in most students with autism. If a student is having a hard time modulating the intake of sensory information, he might find it impossible to organize his thoughts and work since he is concentrating on keeping his body in control. Strict routines are often a way of providing some order to the chaos that individuals with autism otherwise experience. Knowledge of what is coming next is helpful in reducing anxiety, as unexpected changes to routines can result in significant distress and resultant behaviors. The use of organizers and schedules can be helpful in reducing anxiety and increasing focus on the actual tasks at hand. Just as a busy teacher or business person might use a day timer or PDA to organize important dates and times, and a To DO list to stay on track, a visual schedule is essential to keeping an individual with autism focused, productive and informed of what is coming next.

- Utilize visual schedules and supports in establishing and perpetuating routines, ensuring compliance (such as putting the homework in the appropriate folder) and managing behavior
  - Provide a schedule of daily activities. Depending on the needs of the student, this can be photos, symbols or written information. The schedule needs to provide information on what is happening, in what order, and whether there are any changes to the regular routine (e.g. substitute teachers, assistants, assemblies, field trips, fire drills etc.)

Even once a child has learned an established routine the daily schedule is a critical tool for communicating expectations and changes. A personalized schedule provides a strategy an individual with autism is likely to need to use for life--organizing school, college or a job.



*Sample Daily  
Schedule (Middle  
School Student)*

<u>Starting Bell</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Where</u>	<u>Materials I Need</u>	<u>Ending Bell</u>
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 visual schedule for a kindergarten student using Velcro picture activities — preparing for the day can involve the child in building the schedule to build sequencing, vocabulary and set expectations.



- Some students require even greater level of detail such as the sequences of activities within a period (e.g. 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 by creating supports that can be generalized across activities (e.g. Get worksheet. Take out a pencil. Write name on paper. Write date. Read directions) and supplement with those that are task-specific
- 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
- Organize 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 (e.g. label the 'homework in' bin)
  - Give written directions- step by step directions for projects, group activities, multi-step in-class directions, due dates, assignments and tests, using icons and pictures as needed.
  - Teach use of homework planners, day timers and palm pilots to older students. For some students information may need to be input for them in order to utilize the planner, day timer, or palm pilot
  - Manage time and deadlines using tools like time organizers, visual calendars, computers, countdown timers ([www.Timetimer.com](http://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 work space 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 routine.
- 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.

## *What Strategies Can Help With a Student's Sensory Needs?*

---

Sensory integration provides a crucial foundation for more complex learning and behavior. For most of us, effective sensory integration occurs automatically, unconsciously, without effort. For many individuals with autism, the process is inefficient, demanding effort and attention with no guarantee of accuracy. Being aware of possible sensory issues and altering the environment where possible (e.g. minimizing exposure to loud noises, using low odor dry erase markers, selective seating arrangements) can help to reduce their impact on a child's function.

Teaching sensory modulation (appropriately grading responses in relation to incoming sensations) and treatment for sensory dysfunction should be addressed by trained personnel, usually by an occupational or physical therapist trained in



sensory integration therapy. Staff should use evidence based practices; while there is still a lot to be learned about sensory processing disorder, some interventions have been shown to be more effective than others. If a student is suspected of having sensory integration issues that affect his ability to perform at school, trained personnel should evaluate the child's needs and, if present, should employ a plan that practices interventions through fun, play-based activities and share appropriate ongoing supportive strategies with the rest of the student's support team so they may be integrated throughout his program and day.

It is important to note that sensory challenges can affect the student's ability to learn, take in information, listen, process information, respond to requests, participate in social situations, write, participate in sports, and maintain a calm and ready to work state. Some research, anecdotal observations and personal accounts from people with autism have provided important insights into sensory dysfunction, but research is still exploring the impact and factors associated with sensory challenges in autism. Either through internal imbalances, or in response to environmental sensations, it has been reported that the sensory, as well as emotional, regulation of an individual with autism can become overwhelmed and result in anxiety and distress. Working to maintain a modulated state in the individual is an effective strategy for maximizing his ability to learn, maintaining focus and reducing reactive behavior.

- Accommodate sensory modalities known to be difficult or cause discomfort to an individual student. Examples:
  - 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
  - Since taking in simultaneous sensory information from two modalities (such as visual and auditory) can be very difficult for some individuals, it is important that you not impose social norms on those who take in and filter sensory information differently. It can be difficult for students with autism to look at you and listen simultaneously. 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.
  - Beware of a highly decorated classroom, which can be visually over-stimulating and distracting for some students.
  - Transitioning in a loud school hallway can be difficult, so 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 an assemblies.
- Employ the sensory integration techniques as recommended by the student’s occupational or physical therapist, recognizing that certain sensory input is stimulatory and arousing, while other input can be calming and aid in developing focus and attention. 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. See examples in the [Appendix](#).
- Consult with the OT about **sensory considerations and interventions** [www.autism-mi.org/about\\_autism/interventions\\_supports/sensory.html](http://www.autism-mi.org/about_autism/interventions_supports/sensory.html) or implementation of a program such as [The Alert Program](#), *How does your Engine Run?*

To learn more about sensory and arousal considerations, see [Resources](#).

- In summary, there is much that can be done to help alter the environment and provide learning opportunities and supports that will make the world a less overwhelming—and therefore more inviting—place for a student with autism. Consider using the [Classroom Checklist](#) for strategies that have been implemented across settings.

Note the irony in that, to appropriately support individuals on the autism spectrum, effective intervention requires us to be the opposite of autistic--overtly communicative, decidedly social and collaborative, and continually flexible and open-minded. Seek first to understand, next to support, and then relish the gifts and surprises that unfold in students with autism spectrum disorders.

