

# Tips for Teaching Young Children with Autism

*Developed by Laura Maddox & Annette Wragge, 2005*

*The following suggestions were compiled as a resource for teachers, therapists, or family members working with individuals with autism. While these tips may be very helpful we recognize that there is no one strategy that works for all students with ASD. It is important to assess your student or child's individual strengths and needs and work with team members to integrate effective practices that address those specific strengths and needs.*

*One resource we have found very helpful is a summary of a study that was completed by the National Research Council, Committee on Educational Interventions for Children with Autism. This study can be found online at [www.nap.edu](http://www.nap.edu) or in the book *Educating Children with Autism* published by the National Academy Press.*

*The tips are organized in the following categories: Structuring the Environment, Opportunities for Communication, Social Interaction, Systematic Instruction and Joint Attention. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list but an overview of some quick and easy things you can do to create a positive learning environment for a child with ASD.*

## 1. Structure the Environment

*Create a picture or object cue that helps the child predict the daily routine or an upcoming event. (You may use line drawings or photographs for pictures, depending on your child.)*

Set up your environment to “tell” the student and other staff members:

- what to do
- how much to do (amount, length, etc.)
- when to do
- when they are finished
- what comes next

**Example:** Prior to music time, assist a child in retrieving a maraca from an object schedule and have him take it to the music area. Over time, fade your assistance and have the maraca signify that the child should go to the music area.

**Example:** Upon arrival at daycare or preschool provide the child with a picture schedule indicating major daily activities. Assist the child to remove the first picture

and takes it to the designated area and match it to an identical picture at that location. (Fade your assistance so the child becomes independent.)

**Example:** On the weekends or days when the schedule is different, provide child with a simple written or picture *mini-schedule* of the day's activities. If you are going shopping write a list of the stops you are going to make in order. Try to have a mix of preferred and non-preferred stops ending with the most preferred when possible.

- 1.) Car Shop 
- 2.) Grocery store 
- 3.) Grandma's House 
- 4.) McDonalds 

*Provide structure within activities*

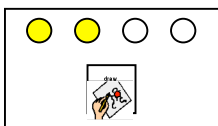
**Example:** When working on a task or activity provide the child with visual information that tells her how long the task will take. At the end of the activity when her time is up provide her with reinforcement for her efforts. (You can increase the number of balls, stickers or amount of time in the following examples as the student's time on task increases.)

Some examples of visual schedules of reinforcement include:

- 1.) Line balls of playdough on the table next to the child's work area. As the child works have her keep smashing balls until they are all flat.



- 2.) Provide a small card with places to velcro stickers and a picture of a reinforcer. When the card is full the child is done working and gets her reinforcer.



- 3.) Set up a timer that provides the child with visual information for when time will be up.





*Provide a warning that a transition is coming.*

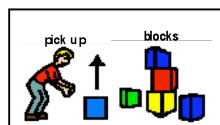
**Example:** Prior to the end of playtime, gain the child’s attention and let them know you are setting the timer for 2 minutes. This will help them be prepared for the end of playtime.

**Example:** Prior to ending bathtime, let the child know they can drive their boat around the bathtub 1 more time and then it will be time to get out.

*Provide structure during transitions.*

**Example:** At the beginning of an activity that requires sitting, sing (or say) with the child(ren) as they do the movements, “I wiggle my fingers, I wiggle my toes, I wiggle my shoulders, I wiggle my nose, Now there are no more wiggles in me, So I will sit as still as can be!”

**Example:** Give “job assignments” during clean up time. Pictures may help a child understand what they need to do.



(remember the good thing at the end!)

## **2. Provide Opportunities for Communication (and Reinforce Attempts)**

*Be sure the student wants and needs to communicate. (Often, using motivating topics, activities or objects may help increase communication.)*

**Example:** When looking at a familiar repetitive book with a child with autism such as *Brown Bear Brown Bear What Do You See*, provide opportunities for the child to fill in the blanks. You could say Brown Bear Brown bear what do you \_\_\_\_\_, and create an opportunity for the child to complete the sentence. \*Children with ASD enjoy hearing stories or phrases over and over and are more likely to verbally attempt a familiar word or phrase when provided a fill in the blank opportunity.

**Example:** For children who are non-verbal or reluctant to communicators, provide pictures of items the child enjoys in a communication book. The child can learn to exchange these pictures for desired objects. He can be systematically taught to make a request by exchanging a picture of the toy with an adult or peer.

**Example:** Provide wait time before asking the child what he/she wants. Give the child time to come up with the words before providing a prompt. Try to pretend you don't know what they want instead of anticipating what they want.

**Example:** Provide access to desired items and/or activities in small amounts so the child is motivated to ask for it again. If you give a large amount or overexposure to an item the child will become satiated and not want to request the item(s) anymore.

**Example:** Create language opportunities through surprise, sabotage and broken routines. Add an unusual element to a known routine or activity so the child has something new to communicate about. Sabotage familiar activities such as setting up the play dough center with empty containers of playdough. This provides a great opportunity for the child to communicate about the missing materials.

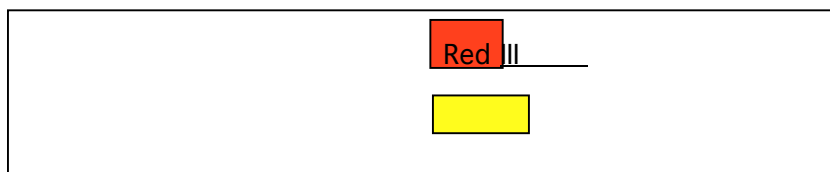
### **3. Create and Enhance Social Interactions**

*Provide repeated opportunities for children to interact with their peers, even for short periods of time.*

**Example:** On Show and Tell Day, help the student prepare a script to use when showing.

<p><u>Show and Tell</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. This is my <u>Teddy Bear</u>_____.</li><li>2. You can/can't touch it.</li><li>3. (Velcro comment picture like "Be careful!" "I like the pink part")</li></ol>
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**Example:** Before an art activity, let the children choose the color of paper they want to use. Have "Rosy" use a choice board to ask each student what color of paper they would like. While Rosy does not speak verbally, she can show the choices to her friends and they make a selection.



What color do you want?

Yellow

I \_\_\_\_\_

 Blue

II \_\_\_\_\_

**Example:** Structure activities to promote peer interaction. When playing with puzzles, give some of the puzzle pieces to a peer. Have the child with ASD request additional puzzle pieces as he needs them. Have the children switch roles and the child with ASD can provide the puzzle pieces as requested by his peers.

#### **4. Provide Systematic Instruction**

*Thoroughly plan how skills will be taught and allow many opportunities for practice.*

**Example:** Prior to doing a music activity such as *Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes*, practice each individual movement with your student ahead of time. With practice he is more likely to be able to be prepared and participate in the group activity. You may need to provide the student with many opportunities to practice before he can follow along during the group activity.

**Example:** When working with a student on an IFSP or IEP goal of sorting object consider breaking it down into steps. The skills needed for sorting objects may include sorting identical objects, and then sorting objects into different groups or categories.

#### **5. Joint Attention**

*Provide many opportunities for sharing experiences, role reversal and imitation.*

It is helpful to gather information about child's interests and use them to teach joint attention.

To find out what the child likes to play with, try the following:

- Conduct a reinforcer assessment
- Observe the child during free play time and see what he chooses to do
- Ask other caregivers what things the child enjoys playing with or doing

**Example:** Observe what a child is focusing on and bring that object to a joint point of regard. Use this opportunity to label and comment on the object, while allowing the child to continue enjoying it.

**Example:** Create opportunities to interact with the child that are better with you than without you. If the child likes bubbles use a bubble dispenser that she needs you to operate. After providing some bubbles pause for a few seconds and wait for the child to look in your direction and indicate they want you to make more bubbles.



**Example:** Play *What's in the Bag?* Put some motivating items in a brown paper sack. Teach the child to ask, "What's in the Bag?" and then label the item when you pull it out. Be sure to provide opportunities for the child to be the "Holder of the Bag" also. This provides opportunities for communication, imitation, role reversal, and you may also be able to work on specific IEP/IFSP goals as well!