

Facts and Tips for Interacting with People on the Autism Spectrum – Indiana Resource Center for Autism

No 107, January 2016

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According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) commonly co-occurs with other developmental, psychiatric, neurologic, chromosomal, and genetic diagnoses. The potential impact on our schools and other service delivery systems continues to be tremendous. The strain on families is very real and significant. Costs include health care, education, ASD-related therapy, family-coordinated services, and caregiver time. It is important to note that education services and an array of supports are needed for children and adults on the autism spectrum to live, learn, and work successfully in our communities.

GENERAL TIPS* TO HELP SUPPORT SOMEONE ON THE SPECTRUM

Carefully consider communication needs. If an individual has difficulty communicating wants and needs or requesting help, they may become frustrated or upset. Don't assume that because an individual is highly verbal that they have skills to cope and adequately communicate when stressed or in unfamiliar situations.

Think about **“showing”** rather than **“telling”** when you are trying to teach something new. Presenting the individual with an object, picture, or written information (if he or she reads) will be more effective than just verbally instructing.

Visual supports are beneficial even after the individual no longer seems to “need” them. Many of us need and use them as well. Consider

how to transition visual supports to life skills for scheduling, organization, and self-management. In times of stress, these visual supports may be a great support throughout their lifetime. Do not discontinue their use without a conversation with the individual's team.

Think of individuals on the spectrum as having a limited amount of energy available to them each day. Their energy “reserve” can vary from day to day. What seems like a simple task to us may be overwhelming and exhausting to them.

Individuals on the spectrum will read our emotional level about a situation. Use a calm tone of voice, even in the midst of a behavioral outburst. An over-excited reaction from you may yield heightened emotional responses in those you support. Practice your poker face.

Be consistent with praise and positive interactions. Minimize negative comments and punishment. Individuals with an ASD learn by being told what to do and what is expected in a positive fashion. Telling an individual what not to do does not teach them what to do and frequently makes matters worse. It is easy to resort to negative comments and punishment because you are frustrated and convinced the individual is not listening and/or is choosing to disobey because “they have been told many times and they should know better.” Realize the individual on the autism spectrum is likely frustrated also and cannot figure out “what to do,” especially when emotions are high.

Work with and build upon the individual's interests. Learn to enjoy his or her unique perspective. Using their interests may be the best way to teach important skills. Be creative. These interests and strengths, when used to help a person learn, can lead to exciting accomplishments.

When trying to extinguish unacceptable behavior, always identify an alternative skill or replacement behavior. And when you are targeting a behavior for change, be sure to choose your battles carefully. Sometimes focusing too much attention on a behavior may actually intensify that behavior.

Social Communication

Individuals on the spectrum often have difficulty with social skills. It is part of the diagnosis. However, simply teaching social skills is insufficient. The goal should be to facilitate relationships and establish connections. Many individuals on the spectrum want to date, develop friendships, and even have families. Their desires are often not so different from ours.

The manner in which an individual conveys a message may not indicate its significance or true meaning. Individuals may use a monotone voice with little facial expression to discuss an item of importance or even urgency. To detect the true meaning of a message, listen to the individual, interpret what he/she is saying literally, and probe.

When trying to foster friendships for teens or adults with ASD, connecting them with people who have similar interests (e.g., attending a Japanese Anime conference or enrolling in a chess club), is likely to be more effective than attempting to teach them to interact around interests that seem more typical for their age group, such as team sports.

Consider teaching the individual how to engage in "small talk" which is a quick way to connect with others about informal topics. One can have a short reciprocal conversation about the environment, a weekend experience, the weather, sports, television shows, or a movie they recently saw. This is a good way to help the individual to start to feel comfortable around various types of people and to learn how to start and end a conversation.

Sensory Processing and Anxiety

Sensory differences can manifest in sensory seeking, sensory avoiding, hyper-responses, and hypo-responses. Carefully consider an individual's sensory needs when developing strategies to help them adapt to their environment and to respond purposefully. The sensory strategies chosen should match the need, with the ultimate goal being for an individual to respond adaptively and to maintain an optimal arousal level. Consult with an OT (Occupational Therapist), when possible, for strategies.

Anxiety is a game changer for individuals on the autism spectrum. Remember that sensory issues can also manifest as anxiety. Provide opportunities to manage anxiety through providing embedded sensory strategies, such as movement breaks, calming input, and through self-monitoring with visual supports. One example of self-monitoring would be to create or use an anxiety scale (www.5pointscale.com).

Uncertainty creates anxiety that, in turn, reduces the person's ability to attend and learn. It also increases the risk of tantrums, rage, and meltdowns. Individuals on the autism spectrum need reassurance and information about upcoming events and changes.

Teach a person early in life the difference between private and public places. Private is only in your bedroom with the door closed. All other places are public (e.g., school bus, school restroom, classroom, living room, etc.). This information will be especially helpful as they continue through puberty.

Remember

The transition process begins at the moment of diagnosis. We are continually transitioning people across grade levels and settings and, ultimately, into adulthood. Be sure to plan for all transitions and begin with the end in mind. What are the ultimate and desired outcomes? Consider the skills and behaviors individuals will need as adults and begin teaching at an early age. Set priorities and make a plan. Identify the top few concerns and needs for your child and your family. Start addressing these concerns and needs, and let everything else wait. While focusing on top concerns, you need to remember to leave time to focus on fun and "typical" activities, whatever those are for your family.

Stay in close contact with family members and physicians about what is working and what is not, especially when individuals are on medications.

Acknowledge and celebrate accomplishments, yours (regardless of your role), family members (siblings, spouse/partner) or the individual's. For some on the autism spectrum, small steps are a major accomplishment. Be proud and remember that all accomplishments, whether small or large, are important.

* Tips: Remember that each person is different, and specific tips may not apply to all.

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