

7 Tips for Working with Autistic Children

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological condition that affects the way individuals think and behave. It is a spectrum disorder, meaning there are variations in how autism manifests itself in each individual. For example, communication skills can range from non-verbal to highly verbal, cognitive ability can range from severely impaired to gifted, and the actual autism symptoms can range from mildly impacting functioning to severely impacting functioning.

The following tips will help you work successfully with autistic children:

1) Have a positive attitude about autism.

Focus on each child's strengths and what they can do. Adopt the perception that different isn't wrong or broken, it's just different. When adults have a positive attitude about differences, all children will feel accepted and are less likely to be bullied.

Avoid comments about what children "should" be doing by certain ages. We all have things we are good at and things that will take longer to learn. Every child should feel loved and accepted regardless of differences.

2) Develop rapport with the child.

An autistic child may need extra time to become comfortable in a new environment. Respect their space and individual needs. Be kind, friendly, and use a calm tone of voice. Treat the child as an intelligent person. Social, processing, and sensory differences are not an intellectual difference.

3) Create an autism friendly environment.

Keep a consistent routine. Writing out a schedule of activities may reduce stress in an autistic child. It can help to see what activities will occur in what order. It can also help to see when the activity will be finished. A visual timere can also help provide this information.

If there are going to be changes in the routine, let the child know in advance. A visual schedule* can also help the child be aware of coming changes.

Certain types of events and activities may provide a lot of stress for autistic individuals.

You may need to avoid games where there are winners and losers. You will also need to avoid taking things away from them.

4) Be sensitive to sensory needs.

Many autistic children have sensory sensitivities. Their bodies may be over- or under- responsive to sensory input. This is neurological and not something they can control. Although each child is different, sensory input including sounds, smells, lights or other visual distractions, may be aversive and create stress. Allow a child to use hats, sunglasses, ear plugs, or other devices to deal with sensory sensitivities. Avoid using perfumes, soaps, or lotions with strong odors.

5) Do not expect neuro-typical behavior.

Eye contact may be uncomfortable for an autistic individuals. Other autistic children may not find eye contact relevant. It may be very difficult for a child to make eye contact and pay attention to auditory information at the same time. Do not demand eye contact.

Many autistic children will need to do something with their hands while they are listening. Allow the use of fidget toys or other objects to keep their hands busy.

6) Understand communication differences.

Autistic individuals understand language literally. When communicating with an autistic child, keep in mind that idioms, sarcasm, figurative, or imprecise language may be confusing. Non-verbal social cues may be completely missed. Provide logical and concrete explanations.

Due to social differences, autistic behavior and communication may come across as rude. Literal responses to your language is not meant as disrespect. Be understanding. Autistic children do not intend to be rude. They just do not instinctively pick up on social rules.

Some autistic children also have a processing delay. Allow extra time after asking a question before requesting a response.

7) Be observant and sensitive to needs.

An autistic child may not be able to communicate that they are having a hard time and a meltdown may follow. A meltdown occurs due to a stress overload.

If you are observant, you may see signs that something is wrong and be able to prevent a meltdown. Be kind and respectful and help the child meet their immediate needs. Do not take things away from them. Use a collaborative model* to ask about what is wrong and to come up with a solution that meets the child's needs.

If a meltdown happens, **stop talking**. Auditory information may exacerbate the situation. Provide a quiet area for the child to calm down. Parents know their children will be able to help them during and after a meltdown.

*Here is an example of a collaborative model in action:

Child is refusing to go into the classroom. Ask, "I noticed you don't seem to want to go in the classroom. Can you tell me why?" The child responds, "It is too loud." You reply, "So you don't want to go in because it is too loud." If the child replies affirmatively, you could ask them for ideas or suggest some solutions. For example, "Would you be okay going in after the classroom quiets down?" If they agree, you have your solution.

This hand-out was written by Dr. Redhair from learnwithemil.com. Please feel free to share this handout in the community where it will be beneficial.

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