

Managing Mild Autism in Early Childhood Classrooms

Mike A. Assel, Ph.D.
Libby Hall, M.Ed., CALP
December 9, 2015.



Why this topic?

- With the prevalence of ASDs, it is likely that most teachers have a child who has been diagnosed with an ASD, or who was at least expected to have an ASD.

Let's Look at the numbers.

In November of 2015, a new estimate of the prevalence of ASD was released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

This new data suggests that 1 in 45 children, ages 3 through 17, have been diagnosed with an ASD.

This is notably higher than the official government estimate of 1 in 68 American children with autism, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This number was released in March of 2014.

Also- notably higher than the 1 in 88 number that was released in 2012.

Overview of talk

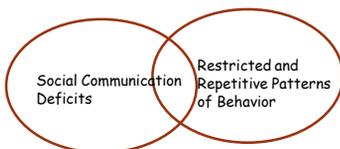
- Brief overview of ASDs
- Classroom Organization
- Encouraging Language
- Encouraging Social Skills
- Supporting Behavior

Differences in your presenters

- As you will notice Mike and Libby have very different presentation styles.
 - One of us uses text, some research, and clinical experience to guide the presentation.
 - The other uses images, personal experience, and years of experience as a teacher to impart knowledge.
 - When we were first planning this talk, we both wondered whether these conflicting styles would coalesce.
 - However, as I started working on the material, I began to notice that our styles complement each other rather well.
 - In addition, I started to think about teaching teams that I have known over the years. Oftentimes, successful co-teachers have complementary styles (e.g., structured vs creative, emotional vs cognitive) and I started to feel much better about our talk.

**Hold on
Tight..... Here
comes the
Quick Overview.**

Core Deficits (DSM-V)



Examples of Social Communication Deficits

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity
2. Deficits in nonverbal communication behaviors used for social interaction
3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships

Examples of Restricted and Repetitive Patterns of Behavior

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects or speech
2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of behavior.
3. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., indifference to pain, adverse reaction to certain sounds).

The DSM-5 sought clarity by.....

- The use of qualifiers.
 - ASD with or without accompanying intellectual impairment
 - With or without accompanying language impairment
 - Associated with a known medical or genetic condition or environmental factor
- Severity Specifiers
 - Requiring very substantial support (e.g., severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication, extreme difficulty coping with change).
 - Requiring substantial support (e.g., social impairments apparent even when supports are in place, repetitive behaviors apparent to casual observers).
 - Requiring Support (e.g., difficulty initiating social interactions, difficulty switching between activities).

Difficulty in Social Interactions

- Persistent deficits in social communication and social interactions across multiple contexts
- Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
- Deficits in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors (e.g., eye gaze, facial expression, body posture, and gestures to regulate social interaction).
- Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships (e.g., not being able to adjust to a social context, inability to engage in imaginative play or making friends, absence of interest in peers).

Qualitative Impairments in Communication

- Marked impairment in ability to initiate or sustain conversation.
- Stereotyped and repetitive language
 - Echolalia
 - Repeating scripts from television, movies, music, or videos
 - In older children vocal tone and content can be overtly odd/unusual
- Lack of varied spontaneous make believe play or social imitative play.

Restricted and Repetitive Patterns of Behavior

- Preoccupation or obsessive interest in one or more stereotyped behaviors (e.g., dinosaurs, vacuum cleaners, Titanic).
- Inflexibly adhering to specific nonfunctional routines or rituals (mac and cheese).
- Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms
 - Hand flapping, finger flapping, complex whole body movements.
- Persistent preoccupation with parts of objects.
- Insistence on sameness (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, need to eat same food or take same route every day).

The Importance of Classroom Arrangement and Organization.

Key Strategy Components

Setting Up Your Classroom

Linking Language and The Literal Child

Prepping Your Lessons

Supporting Behavior

Setting Up Your Classroom: Pinterest may not be in your best interest

- Too many darling ideas = too much clutter for the child with autism (1). Organization counts.
- Start with a visual schedule

Visual Schedules



Hang Pictures that show what is expected.



Delineate space and areas of ownership. Many kids (and adults alike) find comfort in knowing where their things belong.



But I like the hanging lanterns ...

- Current research out of Carnegie Mellon (2014) investigated classroom décor, child esteem and attention. Research indicates that cluttered classrooms, filled with scalloped borders, commercial posters, mobiles and other hanging items, deter attention.
- Children with autism are typically challenged at focusing and matching the group idea. When visual stimulation plays another barrier, the child's education is impacted.





Does Monochromatic Matter?



Colors of Learning: Color Matters

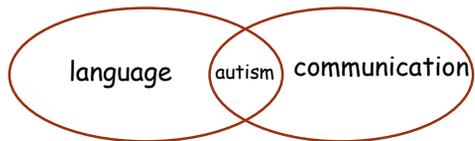
- Research at Texas Tech University studied the Impact of Color on Learning Behavior (Gaines, et. al. 2011).
- Studies indicate the following:
 - The human mind continuously strives to organize visual information. Too much color, motion or pattern functions as a distracter - making visual search more difficult. Further, excessive use of color results in a stressful learning environment.
 - Most children with autism need to learn the skill of focusing on the right object or person at the right time. Your classroom need not be an element of distraction.

Add light to make your room soothing.



Encouraging Language in the Classroom.

Strategies for Linking Language and the Literal Child



What does the literal child look like?

Many children with autism are literal thinkers. Basically, they take your words as written in stone.

For example, if you say, "We always have PE on Monday" and PE is cancelled, the child may become very upset.

Another example, for your ask, "Bring me all the papers." S/he may bring you all the papers in the room.

Tip: Avoid words of condition: always, all, never. Use "we plan on, we should, we usually"

More Language Tips

Use a calm
voice

Avoid
sarcasm

Slow, clear
speech

Check for
understanding

Why is language such an important indicator of developmental progress.....

- The ability to use language makes us human.
- We are inherently social beings and from the dawn of time humans have developed social systems that allow us to live better lives.
- Language is also tangible (i.e., something that is fairly easy for teacher and parents to track).
- Teachers who are not closely tracking the linguistic progress of their children with ASDs are doing them a disservice.

General strategies for improving language skills in children with ASD

- Teachers should remember to model appropriate and rich language.
- Use what the child gives you in terms of language and expand on the verbal behaviors that are used. Taking "Tarzan Speech" and making it into a complete sentence. Sentences should be complete but not overly wordy.
- Children with ASD will occasionally point (or drag you) to what they want instead of using language to make a request. Use these times to encourage language by giving a child choices.
 - Do you want to play in the pretend center or block center (wait for response)
 - Follow-up, Do you want to be a fireman or a doctor? dress as a fireman or a doctor?.

The suggested were adapted from an article written for parents.
<http://day2dayparenting.com/15-ways-encourage-expressive-speech-language-skills-child/>

General Language Strategies....Continued

- **Waiting/Giving language time to percolate:** Teachers often want to (and are encouraged) to use language to describe what is happening in the classroom and what children can expect. Children with ASDs (and other language disorders) need time to process verbal information. *TPS example of teachers waiting and encouraging a child to provide details during a story retell.*

General Language Strategies....Continued

- While many students with ASD do not understand sarcasm or jokes, making comments about unexpected events can foster language.
- For example, "It's time to drink our lunch", might be enough of an oddity that a child with a mild form of ASD will make a spontaneous comment about the absurdity of the statement. This is especially true if you make this types of playful comments part of your daily routine (e.g., it is time to comb our teeth).
- Fill in the blank games, Five little monkeys sitting on the ____.
- Forgetting--- Forget to give a child a snack at snack time to see if they will make a comment about it.
- These techniques were adapted from: <http://day2dayparenting.com/15-ways-encourage-expressive-speech-language-skills-child/>

Real objects = Real impact

"Teachers and parents need to help children with autism to take all the little details they have in their heads and put them into categories to form concepts and promote generalization." Temple Grandin (2011).

And you don't have to buy, hunt through your teacher closets and borrow items from home.

Lesson Procedures

- The following lesson procedure recommendations can be standardized as a "best practice" but are essential for children with autism. The following format presents in a matter of organization, targets generalization and provides a clear expectation and defines lesson closure.
 - State the lesson components – lay each part of lesson on floor or tape to board
 - Use real pictures or real objects when presenting material or to hook your learners.
 - Follow lesson format, maybe say "check" and tic ✓ the box after each part.
 - Always share what to do when you are finished. Maintain an "All Done Basket."



All done basket



Improving Social Skills in the Classroom.

General strategies for improving eye contact

- With children with more severe presentations of ASD, you might have to be extremely directive in terms of encouraging eye contact.
- Calling out the child's name.
- Placing an interesting object in the child's line of sight and moving it closer to your face (almost like a fishing lure).
- Getting down on the child's level and making a specific request to "find my face".
- Support the child as he practices making requests or interacting with peers (e.g., "remember we try to find our friend's faces when we ask them to play").

Why is eye contact important

- It provides evidence of attention and engagement
- While it is not necessary for learning (e.g., I can listen with my eyes closed), it often helps to keep us focused on the message.
- Provides context clues that can help us understand a person's intent

General strategies for improving social skills in children with ASD

- 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.

https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/documents/family-services/improve_social.pdf

Improving social skills...continued

- 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.

https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/documents/family-services/improve_social.pdf

General strategies for improving social skills in children with ASD

- Remember— In this talk we are focused on children with mild presentations of ASDs.
- Many children with mild presentations will respond reasonably well to typical behavioral approaches used in classrooms.
- However, as the severity level of the disorder increases, teachers should understand some simple behavioral strategies.

https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/documents/family-services/improve_social.pdf (for more severe behaviors)

Responding to Behavior in the Classroom.

General strategies for improving behavior in children with ASD

- 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.

Responding to Behavior (continued)

- Behavioral Charting:
 - Good behavioral charting includes teacher expectations (e.g., sitting quietly, completing work, maintaining awareness of personal space) and the reward.
 - Make it tangible for the child (touch and feel is important).
 - A behavior chart has to be tangible and easy to understand for a child with autism (e.g., child has to have an understanding of the expected behavior and how rewards will be earned).
 - Teachers need to remember how slot machines work (i.e., reward schedule should not be consistent).
 - Rewards should be easy to receive initially and taper over time.
 - Be prepared to adjust the chart (as soon as you see it is working, it is likely that you will need to change the system).

Responding to Behavior (continued)

- Prompting:** There are multiple types of prompt:
- Verbal-using a specific word (or phrase) to remind child what is expected.
 - Example---- Saying "find my face" when prompting for eye contact.
 - Gestural-pointing to behavior that is expected.
 - Example----- Pointing to an activity I would like the child to attempt.
 - Physical- might involve physically guiding the child through a behavior
 - Example----- hand over hand demonstration to teach proper handwashing technique.
 - Modeling- Demonstrating the desired task.
 - Example--- having a child watch me ask a peer if I can join into an activity.

Teachers need to gather information from other professionals.

- Work closely with speech therapists, occupational therapists, or behavioral consultants.
- Pay attention to the skills that the child is working on with specialized providers.
- Find out how you can support the goals of the therapists working with the child.
- Find out what strategies that the professional is using that appear to be successful and learn how to incorporate those techniques into your classroom (e.g., reinforcement strategies that work with the speech therapist, techniques to encourage social language).

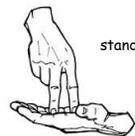
At the forefront:

- There are many tips and tricks to try and apply when working with children who have autism. Before beginning to look at strategies, it is vital to remember, day in and day out that the child's brain works differently; the brain *thinks* differently.

The Keys to Supporting Behavior

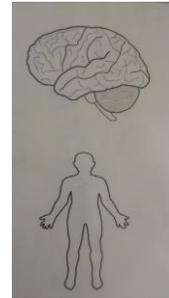
- In this final set of slides I want to share practical ideas for the classroom that can prevent behaviors before they begin. These are the keys to success in my personal classroom.
- Let soft music play during transition times: Vivaldi, Enya, Spanish guitar. Have child with autism sit at the end of a table instead of in the middle of a group.
- Have the child with autism sit in close proximity to the visual schedule.
- Have a fidget box of sensory objects available for when the child needs a mental break - goo timers, stress balls, magazines to cut, larger pieces of yoga strap to pull.
- Use sign language to limit verbal overload: wait, stop, sit, stand, walk. Too often we say the child's name over and over. It leads to a leery reputation.

A few signs:



A Few More Keys to Unlock Behavior

- 🔑 Keep a picture of a brain nearby. Brain??? The concept of other people having other / different ideas in their brains can be novel. I hold the picture and say, “My brain is thinking that it is time to sit with the group. I need you to match my idea.”
- 🔑 Speak specifically. “I need you to ____.” In lieu of, “Can you please give me your paper?” Remember, the literal brain may see your question as an option rather than a command.



Final Keys ...

- 🔑 Recognize behavior specially and attach the behavior to a character trait, i.e. “I notice that you turned in your paper, that shows me _____.”
- 🔑 Similarly, recognize unexpected behavior as communication. “I noticed that you bumped Sally, that tells me you want a place in line.” Then, what can you ask Sally?
- 🔑 A child does not learn manners by being sent to the back of the line. And “cutting” is confusing because that is what you do with scissors. Again, think ahead about the literal mind.



In conclusion, if you must copy a cute idea from a decorating Website, make yourself a picture frame.

In the picture slot, write: *Pick Your Goals, not your battles.*

If a child is not walking perfectly in line, but is with the group, then pick your *goal*. Is the goal to walk like a soldier, or for the child to stay with the group and get to music class on time?

Let some things go.



Remember, at the end of the day, the child with autism is communicating with their behavior. They are probably *not* trying to make your day miserable, they are trying to make their day manageable - author unknown

Contact Information

Mike A. Assel, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Pediatrics (NTC)

Children's Learning Institute at UTHealth
The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston
7000 Fannin | Suite 2300 | Houston, Texas 77030
713-500-3714 tel | 713-500-03705 fax
Michael.a.assel@uth.tmc.edu



THE PARISH SCHOOL

Libby Hall M.Ed., CALP
Elementary Teacher

o: 713.467.4696 x 172 | f: 713.467.8341
11001 Hammerly Blvd. | Houston, Texas | 77043
www.parishschool.org | *Advancing Language. Empowering Learners.*