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Provide Visual Structure for Students with ASD

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World renowned animal scientist and autism self-advocate Temple Grandin said, “People on the autism/Asperger spectrum have uneven skills. They are often good at one type of learning and bad at another. Educators need to work on building up the area of strength.” She explains that three cognitive areas of strength are those who are visual thinkers, pattern thinkers, and word thinkers. Visual thinkers are more inclined to think in pictures rather than words. They may excel in graphic design, industrial design, animation, geometry, or trigonometry. Pattern thinkers have abstract visual thoughts where they can see patterns and relationships between numbers. These students may be good at engineering, math, or computer programming. Word thinkers may seem to know every fact about their favorite topic and may be successful in journalism or technical writing (Grandin, 2009).

Strengths in visual processing are very common among students with autism. On one extreme, they may be able to solve complex puzzles in a short period of time, recreate a block pattern accurately and quickly, or distinguish subtle differences in two world maps. On the other hand, some students with autism may not have extraordinary visual skills, but rely on visual cues to help them process their social environments.

Teachers can help students with autism spectrum disorders be more effective in school by establishing visually-rich environments. Such environments help not only students with autism, but other students as well. Imagine going through a typical day without your calendar, daily schedule, to-do list, phone contact list, or shopping list. These are all examples of visual supports, which help us to have meaningful and productive days. Likewise, students benefit from similar visual supports. Examples include establishing social structure, physical structure, and academic structure.

Social Structure

Structuring the environment for social success helps students with ASD understand what others expect of them. Establish classroom rules—no more than five—and teach the students what it means to follow and not to follow the rules. Be sure to post the rules as a reminder. Also, teach students both positive and negative consequences associated with the rules.

Establish classroom routines and procedures that are predictable, and teach these to the students. While many students understand the “unwritten rules” such as when they are allowed to call out answers and when they must raise their hands, students with autism may not understand what they view as unpredictable expectations. Write down the routines and procedures for preparing for class, engaging during class, and for leaving class.

Help students with social situations by using Social Stories. These stories teach a lesson to the students about how they should behave in social situations. The student may write his own story and accompany the story with illustrations, or they can be made by school personnel such as the special educator, paraeducator, or school psychologist.

Physical Structure

Physically arrange the space in the classroom to enhance student success. For example, provide clear physical and visual boundaries to clearly indicate what should happen in each area of the room. Students with ASD do best when their space is predictable—when they know where to hang their jackets, which desk is theirs, where they can obtain needed materials.

Minimize visual and auditory distractions. Students with ASD may focus better if their work areas are clutter and congestion free. They may need special seating arrangements so they are not sitting beside distractions such as windows, doors, and certain students. Creating visual barriers such as a study carrel may help minimize distractions. Some students may need to wear earplugs in order to decrease auditory distractions.
Academic Structure

We use visual schedule systems on a daily basis when we use our personal planners, a “post-it note” for daily reminders, and a cell phone to keep track of time. They help us to predict upcoming events such as when something will start, change, end, or when we need to move locations. Students with ASD benefit from similar structures.

Daily Schedule – Having the daily schedule posted for all students or personal schedules for individual students help them predict what will happen during the school day. These schedules can be broken down to smaller increments of time, such as for each period of the day.

Work Schedule – Work schedules provide students with concrete information about what work needs to be completed in a period of time. For example, during “Reading” time, students may be required to do four work tasks: 1. Read pages 45-60, 2. Write their names on the worksheet, 3. Answer questions 1-5 on the worksheet, and 4. Place the completed worksheet in the teacher’s inbox. Work schedules should answer four specific questions:
1. What work do I need to do?
2. How much work do I need to do?
3. When am I finished working?
4. What do I do next?

Graphic Organizers – Graphic organizers help students visualize complex relationships, such as a sequence of events, a hierarchy, or a process. For example, a graphic organizer can be used to illustrate the three branches of the United States Government. Including illustrations helps students understand the concepts more fully.

When educators use visual structure in their classrooms, they utilize the strengths of students with ASD. This decreases the time necessary for providing auditory instruction and correction, increases students’ independence on their tasks, incorporates their need for routines, and emphasizes the concept of finished. Because visual structure is fixed, it will continue to be a support, whereas auditory input is soon lost or forgotten once it is spoken. Establishing and maintaining visual structure will help your students with ASD and will also provide support and organization to the other students you teach.

Editor’s Note: Tina Dyches is one of Utah’s autism experts, and her video contribution can be seen on the Utah Autism DVD.

References for this article are available in the online Essential Educator version, which can be accessed at: www.essentialeducator.org