

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH AUTISM OR ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

by Beverley H. Johns
bevjohns@juno.com

1. Provide frequent verbal positive reinforcement that is behavior specific.

Our ratio of positive statements to statements of criticism should be at least 4 to 1. One of the most important behavior management techniques is to: Never take good behavior for granted, positively reinforce it.

Since our students with autism need concrete and specific information, it is important that our verbal reinforcement be as specific as possible. Rather than saying: "Sally, you are such a good girl!" it is much better to say: "Sally, thank you for raising your hand" or "Sally, thank you for putting your papers in your desk." Making such statements provides the student with the specific behaviors that are positive. Teachers should work to monitor their own use of positive statements and can do so in a number of ways: audiotape a 30 minute period of time in the classroom and listen later and tally the number of positive statements vs. negative statements to each child; having a piece of paper handy with the name of each child in the class and each time you make a positive statement, put a mark by the child's name; putting pennies in one of your pockets and each time you praise a child, move a penny to the other pocket with the goal of moving all the pennies to the other pocket. If the teacher has an assistant, the teacher can monitor the number of positive praise statements of the assistant and the assistant can monitor the number of positive praise statements of the teacher. A visual reinforcement system can be achieved by taping a "thermometer" on each child's desk. Each time the teacher moves over by the child and observes a positive action, the teacher can praise the student and fill in a notch on the thermometer.

2. Address stereotypical behaviors utilizing positive techniques

The children I described in my first class exhibited a wide variety of stereotypical behaviors—hand flapping, jumping up and down, and rocking. These are prevalent behaviors in children with autism. (Nuzzolo-Gomez, Leonard, Ortiz, Rivera, and Greer, 2002). Many of the treatment responses to this behavior have been punitive ones. Nuzzolo-Gomez and colleagues (2002) point out that punishment procedures decrease the stereotypical behaviors but have limited maintenance of initial treatment effects.

Stereotypical behaviors are more likely to be seen when the student is not engaged in a meaningful activity. Therefore high levels of meaningful engagement can be utilized to

decrease such behaviors. If the student is attending to a task that is relevant to him or her, he or she is more likely to refrain from the hand-flapping.

The teacher may also determine that the stereotypical behaviors may be utilized to actually engage the student in a meaningful activity. Can you utilize the stereotypical behavior as a means to assist a student in attending to a task? As an example, Scott liked to rock. With a rocking chair within the classroom, Scott could rock in the chair while reading. This additional stimulation allowed him to concentrate more on the reading.

The teacher may also want to provide a more appropriate substitution for the behavior. It is important to provide multiple opportunities for appropriate repetitive movements so the child's sensory needs are met. (Johns and Crowley, 2003).

Nuzzolo-Gomez and colleagues (2002) in their research suggest that behavior analysts can use a student's known reinforcement to replace the non-preferred stereotypical behaviors with more appropriate activities such as playing with toys and looking at books. They speculated that "stereotypy occurs as a function of a paucity of preferred activities that is a result of a lack of reinforcement conditioning." (p. 85).

It is critical that the teacher positively reinforce the student for the opposite behavior. At times, school personnel will correct a student for rocking or hand flapping; instead it is more productive to positively reinforce the student for engagement in more appropriate behaviors.

4. Provide errorless learning through such strategies as fading, task analysis, chaining, and backward chaining

The best behavior management is academic success. Fading and backward chaining were two of my favorite and most successful teaching strategies. I was teaching the students to read using a visual approach. I utilized fading to teach both reading and printing. For each word that could be described pictorially for which I was teaching word recognition, I would find a picture of the word. I would then make a set of flash cards for each word. The first flash card would have a traced picture of the word and the word. I would ask the student to read the word. Because the child knew the picture and could say the word, I would verbally reinforce. I would practice that card with the student over a period of time—errorless learning for the child. The next flash card would have a traced partial picture and the word. The next flash card would have a more faded picture and the word. I would then make the flash card without the picture. By then the child was able to read the word without the picture.

To teach the color words, I wrote the color word in its color. I then wrote all but the last letter of the color word in color; then all but the last two letters of the word in color; and so forth.

Manuscript and cursive writing lend themselves well to a fading approach. The teacher can actually draw a model of the letter and have the student trace over it. Then the teacher can draw the letter in dotted lines. Then the teacher can reduce the number of dotted lines until the student is able to print or write the word on his/her own.

Backward chaining can be defined as a method that gradually constructs the chain in a reverse order from that in which the chain is performed. (Martin and Pear, 2003). The last step is established first, then the next to the last step is taught and linked with the last step, and so forth.

5. Behavior has a communicative intent and we must recognize that intent

Behavior is a means for students to communicate their needs. We must be very cognizant of that as we work with our students. When students misbehave during certain academic tasks or before those tasks, they may be communicating to the teacher that the task is not appropriate for them. (Johns and Crowley, 2003). Gibb and Wilder (2002) provide a good overview of the possible communicative intents about academic tasks:

The student does not want to do the task.

The student has not had enough help in order to do the task.

The student has not had to do the task that way before.

The task may be too difficult.

The student may be overwhelmed at the sight of the task—there may be too much of it, the worksheet may be too “busy” and over-stimulate the student.

6. Maintain routine as much as possible and prepare students for any change in routine

It is important that we acclimate students to changes in schedule and people.

Within schools we face tremendous pressure to include more students in high stakes assessment. I am reminded of a student with autism in the school in which I was the administrator. He was very capable of taking the high stakes assessment required at the

11th grade but one of the requirements of the test publisher was that he had to be tested in a separate room because of the specific accommodations he required. His teacher knew that this would be upsetting to the student so she prepared him by taking him to the room where he was to be tested several days ahead of time. The first few days she worked with him mostly on tasks that were enjoyable to him interspersing those with more difficult tasks. She then added more difficult tasks. By the time he was to take the assessment, he was used to the room and used to doing difficult tasks in the room. Of course, she was the individual who gave the test. If he would have been required to have a “stranger” give the test, she could have used the same strategy. She could have also introduced Jeremy to the new individual while she was present and then began to fade her presence out of the room a little at a time.

7. Use visual aids as much as possible.

Make sure rules are posted with a picture to illustrate them. For example, if there is a rule that the student is to raise his/her hand when he or she has a question, the rule should be depicted with the rule and a picture of a student raising his/her hand.

Make sure also that the schedule is posted with a visual prompt and pictures when possible. If the schedule is going to be changed in a day, the teacher should review the change in the schedule and the reason for the change. One of the strategies I liked to use was to make individual strip cards of the activities scheduled for the day and then at the beginning of the class, actually put the strip cards up on a board using Velcro to stick. I would put them up in the order they were going to occur. When the activity was over, I would take the card down. Some teachers use similar systems; some may put them up using a top to bottom sequence; others may prefer a left to right sequence to teach the students to utilize left to right.

When students are going to be given a timed task, it is helpful to utilize timers where students can actually see the time start, the time moving, and when the time is up.

A great teacher I know used to take old story books and rewrite them substituting the names of the students in her class for the characters in the book. The students loved this and were much more likely to pay attention and want to read the story. I like to make worksheets, particularly for math word problems, and insert the names of the students in those problems.

8. Keep directions short and to the point.

It is critical that teachers provide short one step directions for students and avoid the use of language that may not be familiar to the student. Whenever possible give a visual

cue with the direction. An option that the teacher may want to consider is to make picture cards of directions that he or she typically provides. As an example, the teacher might say: "Put your papers in your desk." The teacher could have a picture of a student putting papers in the desk and could also show that picture to the student.

It is critical that the teacher allow processing time when giving the student a direction. In today's rushed society, we are often in a hurry to get the student to comply with our request. The student may need time for the information to be received, processed, and acted on. I am reminded of another student, Dewayne, who was a high school student with mental retardation and behavioral issues. I would give a direction to Dewayne and he would just look at me. At first, I thought he was being defiant and just refusing to do what I wanted him to do. Ninety seconds later, Dewayne would comply with the request. It took that long for my simple direction to go into his brain and for him to process and then actually execute the direction. While many students may not have that degree of a delay, they will take longer to process information and the teacher must be cognizant of that need.

Educators should avoid jargon or figures of speech. It is critical to speak in precise and concrete terms. I am reminded of a well-meaning parent who said to his son who had multiple disabilities, including behavioral ones, "Don't give me any lip." His son did not have a clue what that meant.

10. Always remain calm.

It is critical to remember that if a student with autism is agitated and the adult becomes loud or upset, this will result in increased agitation of the student. The teacher must work to always remain calm and, in fact, lower his or her voice when the student is upset. This has a calming effect on the student. "A student's disruptive behavior can be looked upon as an opportunity for modeling socially acceptable behavior. Each time a teacher responds calmly to disruptive behavior, he or she is modeling a positive alternative to verbal or physical aggression." (Johns and Carr, 2002, pp. 36-37).

It is also critical that the teacher not stand too close to the student when the student is upset. This is particularly true with students with autism. The teacher should remain 1 and 1/2 feet-3 feet away from the student to give him or her some space.

The teacher must also recognize his/her own feelings in interactions with the student. Realistically there will be times when the teacher may become frustrated with the student or become angry. When those feelings occur, the teacher may need to move away from the student or the teacher may want to change the activity in which the teacher and student are engaged. The teacher, if he or she has a paraprofessional, may

want to let that individual work with the child so the child does not see the teacher's anger or frustration.

11. Avoid situations where there is a high level of stimulation.

For many children with autism, a room full of people talking can be sheer torture. We must continue to assess the environment to determine whether it is overwhelming to the student with autism. The arrangement of the physical space of the classroom is well documented as influencing the behavior of children. (Conroy and Davis, 2000). The number of children in a given area and the space per child can increase the likelihood of inappropriate behavior. Conroy and Davis (2000) caution educators to avoid placing students where they must cope with high traffic or face areas of distraction. These factors, along with assuring that the room temperature and lighting are appropriate, can contribute to positive behavior in children. The classroom environment should depict beauty but avoid over-stimulation.

Doyle and Iland (2004) remind us that students with autism may be unable to cope with sensory input and become overloaded or may ignore and therefore fail to respond to the input. Students with autism may also have difficulty coping with several things changing at the same time.

Educators must also be very aware of the texture and type of materials they use. I remember one day early in my teaching career when I decided I was going to do finger painting with my students. That was a big mistake—they didn't want to get their hands dirty; not to mention the fact that they didn't like the messiness—this was just too much for them.

12. Capitalize on the student's strengths and interests.

As we work with any student we learn through observations, and informal and formal assessments about their strengths and interests. We also learn about their strengths and interests through parent interviews. Parents know what their children spend their free time doing. Parents know what their children can do well and what skills with which they struggle. Parents also know what types of reinforcement are most effective with their child.

With children with autism, we know they may be preoccupied with certain TV shows or movies or books. They show a keen interest in certain topics. I remember working with Jeremy through his entire school career. He had a keen interest in the most current Disney movies that had been released on Video. One day in a conversation with him, I made a comment about a movie that I thought was a Disney production and he quickly

corrected me. We used his interest in Disney movies to promote conversation, to improve his reading comprehension, and to encourage higher-level thinking skills. His teacher also utilized the Premack principle—when he completed an assignment, he could spend 5 minutes reading a book about Disney films.

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