

# INTRODUCTION

Receiving a good education is an essential part of a person's development. Education not only provides a foundation in academics, but also in social, emotional, and life skills.

Children with autism spectrum disorder experience some unique learning challenges. The correct accommodations, modifications and supports can help a child thrive and grow in an educational setting. It is important to understand the factors that impact learning and skill acquisition in order to plan and develop the right materials.

Parents are an integral part of a child's education. It takes a team to support a child with exceptional learning needs. Open communication and cooperation provides information and feedback for parents and the teaching staff. Parents spend the most time with their children and can provide insight into how they function and perceive the world. Parents are also their child's advocate, making sure their child is getting the support they need in order to be successful.

Teachers have the role of guiding and supporting a child in the classroom. They need to understand the autism diagnosis. The curriculum may have to be modified for students with autism or changed altogether to make achievable goals. The prime goal is to make the curriculum meaningful and accessible to a child with autism, which can require a lot of thought and creativity in an inclusive classroom.

Learning for educators is on-going and lifelong, just like it is for students. It is important to keep acquiring new knowledge and shedding those notions that are no longer working. We are fortunate to live in a world where information is accessible and training/courses are available through the click of a mouse. We can communicate globally, collaborate and share best practice ideas.

During my 13 year teaching career, I had the privilege of working alongside educators who were knowledgeable and passionate about teaching and supporting students with special needs. Those passionate teachers made a big impact in my children's lives and continue to do so. The school community plays a big role in a child's life. If everyone works together, the outcome is a strong one. Education is the springboard for lifelong learning and enjoyment. My children, now in their twenties, still enjoy educational pursuits as part of their on-going development and life enrichment.

Schools are part of a greater community - a place where a child will spend hours of their formative years. A strong home/school relationship will serve a child well beyond the classroom. Good teachers make all the difference in a child's life as do parents who are effective advocates working with the school team. A collaborative approach will give a child a strong foundation and help them feel safe and secure, surrounded by people who care.

*Sincerely,*



**Maureen Bennie**

Director, Autism Awareness Centre Inc.



# I HAVE A CHILD WITH AUTISM IN MY CLASS THIS YEAR

## HOW DO I BEST SUPPORT THEM?

Teaching a child with autism can be both rewarding and challenging at times. If this is your first time teaching a person with autism, it can feel overwhelming knowing what to do or understand what makes that child tick. Luckily, there are lots of resources out there to educate and guide teachers to help make a child's school experience a good one.

It is important to understand that an educator's role is to guide the child and not try to change who that child is. None of us can predict the future outcomes for a child or what they may achieve later in life. Good teaching fosters growth and development, paving the way for a child to reach their full potential.

## Develop a relationship with the family

There is a tendency to think that the parent is the child's best advocate and they should be finding the opportunities. While the advocacy piece is often true, knowing where to look for services is often too difficult unless the parent is well connected. We need organizations to link parents to good programs. Agencies often work together and know each other; they know of openings, upcoming classes, etc. Hiring in-home staff is challenging if you don't know where to look for the staff, conduct an interview, or do the paperwork that is often required.

A good place to start is contact your local autism society. They offer information nights, help with applying for adult funding, work with various groups in town, hear of opportunities, receive resumes, and most will have pamphlets from organizations. Many have parents of adult support groups – other parents are great resources.

## You need someone behind you

Parents know their children best and can be your greatest source of information.

- Work collaboratively with parents. Come up with creative solutions to problems or ideas to further the child's development.
- Develop a system for regular home/school communication that works best for both parents and teachers. Will that be through e-mails, phone or a communication book?
- Get to know the family situation (i.e. single parent, other siblings, language barriers, cultural differences)
- Ask for parental input on the [IEP](#). What are some goals that you both share for the child?
- As much as possible, use similar materials, routines and language between home and school. If the child uses real photos for schedules at home, use photos for school schedules too.
- When meeting with parents, try and talk about the child's strengths rather than focusing on the weaknesses.

## Build a Relationship with the Student

Challenging behavior can occur when there is no trust, respect, or understanding. Relationship building is the cornerstone of what we do in the [Low Arousal Approach](#) to reduce challenging behavior. When a child feels valued, they will give you their best. When things go wrong in a trusting relationship, you can recover and move on.

- Respect the child for who they are. They are more than just a label.
- Understand their diagnosis. [YouTube](#) can be a great resource to find short videos explaining aspects of autism.

- Standardized tests are not a true indication of what student can do. Explore beyond reading the cumulative file. When I was a teacher, I never read those files until after I had time to interact with the student.
- Presume competence.
- Care about the child's happiness and well-being. Everything else falls into place when the child is happy and secure.
- Recognize small steps in a child's progress.
- Foster inclusion by creating meaningful connections and interactions with classmates.

## Understand the diagnosis

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) covers a broad spectrum. The saying goes, if you've met one child with autism, you've met one child with autism. ASD is a neurological disorder, which is important to know because much of what is exhibited is due to this neurology.

- Use a consistent communication system (PECS, photos with text, visual schedules). Verbal children will need these supports as well.
- **Stabilize** the child first before teaching begins. This can take up to 6 weeks, but it is time well spent. Make sure the child is regulated, know the sensory profile, have a stress plan, and allow for regular body breaks.
- Develop **relaxation techniques** such as deep breathing, yoga, or deep pressure to alleviate stress and anxiety.
- Understand the role that **anxiety** has in regards to behavior and how it can affect a child's well being.

## Curriculum considerations

The curriculum may have to be modified for students with autism or changed altogether to make achievable goals. The prime goal is to make the curriculum meaningful and accessible to a child with autism. This can require a lot of thought in the inclusive classroom. Some points to consider:

- Expand on a child's interest. For example, a love of dinosaurs can lead to the study of fossils, other life forms at the time of dinosaurs and eras such as the Jurassic or Precambrian era.
- Provide opportunities to apply learning to real life.
- Allow a lot of time for practice until critical mass is achieved.
- Use **technology** to enhance learning.
- Use supports that make the day more accessible for the child. (Noise cancelling headphones, use of a computer rather than pen to paper).
- Teach skills like self-regulation and mindfulness.