



General Recommendations

for Supporting Individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder

HANDS in Autism Program

- * **Do limit verbal instruction and supplement with visual strategies** – Individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) generally have strengths in visual processing; verbal information can be difficult for them to process. Use visual supports, modeling, and physical prompts to help ensure understanding.
- * **Do prepare ahead for transitions** – Individuals with ASDs often have difficulty adjusting to changes and tend to be more successful when given time to prepare for and supports to use during the transition. Consider using visual schedules, timers, and other cues both to let the individual know a transition is coming as well as to let him/her know what to expect *after* the transition.
- * **Do realize that behavior is a form of communication** – Individuals with ASDs often have difficulty using communication in a functional way. Even verbal individuals can struggle to use their words in times of stress or anxiety. Remember that negative behavior is often an attempt to communicate needs and desires rather than a personal attack on others.
- * **Do use concrete language** – Individuals with ASDs often have difficulty understanding figures of speech, analogies, sarcasm and exaggerations. Be careful to say exactly what you mean as your words may be taken literally.
- * **Do use simple sentences** – Be clear and concise. Long sentences require longer processing times, and individuals with an ASD often have difficulty processing verbal information. Use short, simple sentences.
- * **Do try to build on successes** – Whenever new skills are being taught, it is important to build on the individual's strengths. If the individual is learning to get dressed, expect him/her initially to do only one step of the dressing process and then slowly add in steps as s/he becomes ready. If the individual is struggling with an assignment, break it into smaller pieces and add in supports to ensure success. Always try to end activities with a success.
- * **Do remember that behavior problems are not part of the diagnosis** - Common behavior problems such as noncompliance, aggression, and tantrums should be addressed and not simply excused as part of the child's diagnosis.
- * **Do use rewards and reinforcers** – Most neurotypical individuals learn new skills or stop inappropriate behaviors because of social reinforcement (i.e., the desire to make others proud). Individuals with an ASD are generally not socially motivated, thus it may be necessary to build in other, more concrete rewards for learning new tasks or engaging in appropriate behaviors. Be sure to use rewards that are actually motivating to the individual!
- * **Do allow choices when possible** – All individuals become frustrated when they feel they lack any control. Determine situations in which the individual can make a choice (even if you decide what those choices are). When it is NOT time to make a choice, be sure not to offer choices. Do not ask questions (e.g., Can you come do your homework now?) when “no” is not an acceptable answer.
- * **Do avoid setting expectations too low or too high** – Individuals with ASDs are very capable of learning and making gains. Although skills that may come naturally to typically developing individuals may need to be specifically taught to those with an ASD, skills *can* be learned. Keep in mind, also, that goals should be realistic and skills may need to be broken into smaller pieces to be taught successfully.