

Autism awareness

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Autism Awareness Angi Reid Sisk ESE Instructor Pillar October 24, 2011

Autism Awareness Autism is a disability that affects thousands of children today. The causes are yet to be known but there are many theories floating around as to how children develop this disorder. More importantly than how they have gotten the diagnosis, is what can be done to help them thrive in their educational environment. Many of these children are starting school and are faced with an entirely new set of challenges other than adjusting to life in a home setting.

There are many common characteristics that children with autism exhibit; educators must be aware of these traits and understand the best way to deal with them and other needs required by the students due to this disability. It is vital to be knowledgeable in the best teaching strategies and have access to support services and aids available to give children with this disorder the tools needed to achieve success along with their non-disabled peers. Autism has six distinct characteristics that involve students with the disability, (Turnbull and Wehmeyer, 2009).

Several characteristics accompany students with autism that can drastically impact their progression in a general classroom environment. One common characteristic that children on the autism spectrum face is difficulty with speech. Children with autism are likely to develop speech more slowly than other children. In some children they may never start talking and with others they could develop speech and then lose it suddenly or over a period of time. Students with autism may experience the lack of social language skills; they can also exhibit lack of eye contact and unusual facial expressions.

These deficiencies are not done intentionally, but because students with autism have an inability to communicate on the same level as their other peers, (British Columbia; Ministry of Education, 2000). For the students who have developed speech it can differ in other ways such as odd pitch tones or repetitive speech patterns. In the past studies were done and showed that only about fifty percent of individuals with autism would acquire full use of complete accomplished speech, (Turnbull and Wehmeyer, 2009).

Today those statistics have drastically increased and show that with appropriate therapy including help from speech pathologists and other trained educators; the number of individuals that increase effective speech has grown to eighty five to ninety percent especially with early intervention. Speech therapists can help children with severe language impairments develop great communications skills and give them the needed skills to better communicate with their peers, (Powers, 2000). Social development is another common characteristic that students with autism share.

Many find this characteristic to be the most alarming trait that children with autism share. Social interaction between autistic students and their classmates and teachers can be extremely difficult. This often occurs because these students may not have the ability to socialize well with others and could also exhibit other attributes like poor eye contact and can be resistive to comforting from others including their parents. Autistic students have difficulty understanding the feelings of others and how to distinguish that those feelings are separate from their own.

They also have a hard time being empathetic and understanding the needs of their classmates and instructors, (Turnbull and Wehmeyer, 2009).

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Commonly children with autism can have a hard time establishing relationships in school settings because they tend to interact with others awkwardly and in a rigid manner, British Columbia: Ministry of Education, 2000). Most children with autism do not begin exhibiting the strong lack in social interaction until around the age of two years, (Powers, 2000).

The progression that children make socially depends widely on their cognitive development; children who are less cognitively impaired tend to react better in social situations. Repetitive or stereotypical behavior is very common and can range from motor movements to repeated verbalizations. Autistic children can have very powerful interests and preferences that may be quite different from other students in their classroom. Sometimes distress can be caused accidentally by disrupting a student's routine, (Powers, 2000).

Unfortunately these behaviors can have a large impact on students learning process and the way that they handle themselves in a classroom. Situations or happenings that can seem insignificant to us can throw them completely off and impede their quality of learning. One reason for this is because students with autism can be insistent with routines being the same and can have obsessions with certain objects or belongings, (Turnbull and Wehmeyer, 2009). On many occasions autistic students will have a hard time with transition from their house to the school environment because of the urgency for the structured routine that they thrive on at home.

This characteristic can display stereotyped behaviors such as lining up toys or objects or repetitive flapping of their bodies or toys. Students with autism also have challenges with sensory and movement behavior. Children with these issues can react very differently to their peers and various situations in

the classroom. Children facing sensory problems may not respond the same to environmental stimuli. They may not have a reaction to something that is hot in the same way that a child without sensory problems would react.

On the other hand they could over respond to the stimulant, (Autism Society of North Carolina, 2009). This characteristic could also cause students to exhibit hypersensitivity to light or certain taste, smells, or how objects feel, (Turnbull and Wehmeyer, 2009). Sensory issues can cause problems with intervention and teachers should always be aware of the risks that therapy can bring to students due to sensory differences, (Volkmar and Weisner, 2009). Environmental stimuli can be very disturbing and even painful at time for children with autism.

This can apply to limited types of sensory input or all forms of it; this can be caused by a disorder with the child's sensory processing, An individual's tactile system which includes the skin and brain allows a person to perceive and respond in the right manner to experiences in the environment, for example staying away from fire or snuggling up with pleasure in a cozy throw blanket. When autistic students have problems or disturbances in their tactile systems they may do the opposite. They may withdraw from trying to be comforted or from affection; this is called tactile defensive.

These responses are a result of a tactile misconception and can lead to other behavioral problems. (British Columbia: Ministry of Education, 2000). Problem behaviors is a commonly shared by autistic children. This can be aggression toward oneself or others. This happens more often when the student is frustrated or in a situation that cause over stimulation or confusion, (Autism Society of North Carolina, 2009). This can cause major

disturbances in a classroom setting if the student shows violence toward the teacher or their other classmates. Even if the child is not aggressive toward others, there is the worry of them hurting themselves by biting, scratching, and in more severe cases head banging. Teachers can help to control these situations by modeling the appropriate behavior and helping the students with the right way to handle stress and positive reinforcers, (Turnbull and Wehmeyer, 2009). Students with autism that are entering the school system have many needs and all of these factors should be taken into consideration for the optimal success of any child with a disability in a general curriculum classroom.

One important need for a student is their physical space and how it is cohesive to their comfort ability. The environment where a child with autism learns is extremely important because students on the spectrum have a hard time regulating their focus and attention especially in complex classroom settings, (Volkmar and Weisner, 2009). The nature of the environment of a child's classroom when faced with a disability can either help them progress or encumber their educational experience.

It is important that the class be appealing for all of the students attending but equally as important that it not be distracting for a student with autism. Organization of the room is key in getting the child to engage with his or her peers and to do this in a manner that is comfortable to them. There should be a special place for the student to remove themselves if needed that has a serene and calming meaning it should be free from clutter and other things that could over stimulate. Obvious distractions such as computer screens should be kept out of eye sight so the focus can remain on the teacher.

Predictability is also an important need to address with students with autism. A good way to address these needs is by having set routines where the student knows what to expect next. The teacher could use bells or timers to help the student know when to transition or to signal other daily reminders. Making transitions and moving from one exercise to another can be difficult and cause stress to the student which can be eased by incorporating simple techniques into the classroom which give the student a sense of security.

Students with disabilities have a need for more one on one interaction in the classroom because they have hard time processing information as quickly as the other students. This need can be addressed by having a well trained para-professional that can help the student complete school work and other tasks assigned during the day. An aid can help the students to make the right decisions for positive behavior and can provide overall assistance in areas of need. Positive reinforcement is greatly needed on a daily basis and can be very encouraging to student with a disability.

Focusing on the students strengths are a great way to motivate and help them excel in other areas. Collaborating with families is a good way to see what kind of methods work at home and then try to incorporate them into the classroom. Encouraging the student to participate in all of the activities along with the rest of their classmates will show that you believe in them and expect the best from them. A huge need for children with autism is help with social interaction. It is not that they do not want to make friend, it is that they do not possess the skills to know how.

It is not an easy task to influence a child with autism's social development. Social settings can cause distress so they need to be handled correctly and it

helps to limit their social experiences to shorter time limits so that the experience does not become unpleasant, (Powers, 2000). When children have a good relationship with their teacher they are shown to have better relationships with their peers, (Turnbull and Wehmeyer, 2009). Environmental stimuli have a large affect on the outcome that a student with autism has in the classroom.

Teachers need to be aware of their responses to certain stimuli and learn what bothers the student and try to accommodate these needs whenever possible. Factors such as sound and lighting should be considered into the planning of the classroom and the configuration of the room. A need for extra time is a must for students with any type of disability. The teacher should always give the student extra time to complete assignments and class activities. The student may need extra time to process general information and request that you give them pertaining to instruction. Extra time will allow them to process the information more clearly.

When children begin school especially primary grades after they have left preschool, they are faced with new challenges and expectations based on increased “ psychological and physical maturity”, (Volkmar and Wiesmer, 2009). Students are provoked to work more independently and there is much more self directed learning occurring in the classroom. It is possible and is happening more frequently now that students with ASD’S are functioning well in school with the help from all of the options available now. There are fully inclusive classes and programs that supply mainstream teaching along with special education services.

When teachers make accommodations for students with autism it helps them to function on a more appropriate level. Students with autism can have a difficult time with various sounds and lights that they hear and see throughout the course of their school day. Ear plugs or noise cancelling headsets can be very beneficial in helping them eliminate some of these disturbing factors, (Stokes, 2011). When students leave the classroom to go to lunch or other activities they are introduced to sounds that they are not familiar with; these components will help in these situations.

Another great tool and accommodation for students are visual or graphic schedules. These are good tools to let the students know what activity come when and in what sequential memory order they are to perform them in, (Powers, 2000). These schedules should be composed from left to right or top to bottom so they are not confusing to understand and have very clear graphics. Students with autism can become very involved in computers and it can give them a sense of calmness and really help to educate them on various subjects.

Computers like visual charts give a clear and concise message for the activity being focused on. Computers can also be used as a reward and a bonus for good behavior. If the children are exposed to computers at home it gives them a sense of familiarity at school. Another way that educators can accommodate their students is by collaborating with the special education teacher on tips and strategies on the best methods to implement in the classroom and positive reinforcers that can help the teacher help the child to put forth their best effort.

Special education teachers can also spend time with the paraprofessional or the aid to help them in specific instruction on how to help the students on individual learning skill sets. A crisis plan is a tool that all teachers who have students with disabilities in their classrooms need on file. These are put into place in case a child has an emotional outburst or some other type of emergency during the day that would call for immediate assistance, (Stokes, 2011). This plan should cover everything from sensory issues to obsessive compulsive factors and how to address them in the best possible way.

This plan should be collaboration between the parents, administrative staff, the special education teacher, and the general classroom teacher. This plan could coincide with the IEP plan which addresses learning goals and outcomes. Both of these plans in conjunction with each other make a great tool for the teacher. Autism affects so many live today; almost everyone has contact with or knows someone affected with this disability. Education and early intervention is the key to giving students with this disability the best opportunity for success.

Understanding all of the characteristics for this disability can greatly help the educator to understand and meet the needs of their students and achieve success. All students deserve the right to an education in the most least restrictive environment with the best services available. If educators use their resources and work in collaboration with the families and other support systems; their students will learn in a positive and stable environment.

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