Helping Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders to be Ready to Learn

Susan Hepburn, Ph.D.
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Art and Science of Teaching

- Building Rapport
- Considering Executive Function Skills
  - Attention
  - Organization
  - Persistence
- Maximizing learning

Attention

- Shifting attention
  - From own agenda to another’s agenda
  - From favorite topic to less preferred topic
  - From internal world to external world
  - From self to other
- Sustaining attention
  - Short attention span; particularly for less preferred topics or abstract concepts
  - Tendency not to finish what has been started
  - Easily distractible

3 Kinds of Attention Problems

- Maximizing learning
“Missing the forest for the trees”

- Local vs. global processing
- Overly focused on details
- Missing the “big picture”

Helping Children Shift Attention

- Clear, simple verbal direction to what to attend to
- Visual cues to focus attention
- Advanced warning of shift in attention
- Clear endpoints for activities
- Routine for shifting attention
- Practice attending to nonverbal cues of others

Helping Children Sustain Attention

- Clear indication of how long attention should be sustained
- Provide frequent breaks
- Reinforce/reward appropriate attending

Give a task to do/some kind of active involvement in activity

Reduce distractions in the environment

Give directions 1 step at a time
Sustaining attention (cont.)

- Consider seating the child towards the front of the classroom near good peer models.
- Be aware that too much auditory information without visuals is difficult to attend to for most of these kids.
- Give specific listening assignments (e.g., list of words to check off when heard).

Helping Children to Focus on the Whole as the Sum of the Parts

- Provide verbal and visual cues concerning the “big picture”.
- Highlight the most important concepts.

Explicitly link main ideas and supporting ideas.

Planning/Organization

- Many kids will need help:
  - Setting goals
  - Planning how to get to goals
  - Initiating actions to meet goals.

Contributions by: Sally Ozonoff, Sue Thompson & Jennifer Stella

Difficulties in planning may lead to daydreaming and withdrawal into own world.
Difficulties with Self-Monitoring:

Many kids will need reminders & instruction on how to check their own work

Difficulties with Cognitive Flexibility

- Many kids need coaching to:
  - initiate a different problem-solving strategy
  - accept changes in the assignments or routines

Use an assignment notebook

- Teacher takes the lead in monitoring its use
- Student will need to be prompted to add/delete assignments
- Use existing systems that look “normal” – Daytimer, etc.

Break assignments down into steps

- Use clearly numbered sequences to illustrate progression
- Webs or flowcharts might be useful
- Actively involve student in monitoring completion of assignments

Some students need help remembering social rules in different situations
Some students need help learning to inhibit impulses

For large assignments...

- Show student how to break large tasks into steps and check-off when each step is completed – observe completed steps, student may not report well
- Have regular meetings with student to monitor progress
- Send written description of large assignments (with due dates and steps) to parents

Allow a headstart on transitions

- Student may need more time to organize self for next activity
- For some students, chaos of other children making a transition is overwhelming – see if student can start earlier or later than other students
- Whenever possible, reduce transitions
- Use buddy system for room changes

Teach a priority system for tasks

- 1 = urgent, do right away
- 2 = medium priority, have a few days
- 3 = not urgent, but also doesn’t take much time to do
- Each day: compose a list of things to do with a balance of 1’s, 2’s, and 3’s

Post a daily schedule for class

- List times and activities
- Identify changes with a symbol or color coded mark

Consider Using Technology to Help Students Stay Organized

- “CourseNotes” is an Ipad app that helps organize notes and content for classes
- “iHomework” is an Ipad app that helps track assignments and supports planning
- “Record Lectures” and “Notability” provide multimedia ways for students to engage in classroom content
Persistence: Encouraging Active Participation

Techniques
- Teach child to ask for help
- Develop tasks/activities with clear endpoints
- Provide a hands-on component to language-based activities
- Reinforce the child for effort and attention more frequently
- Keep activities brief and institute a work-break routine

More techniques
- Take frequent breaks
- Exercise
- Have back-up materials available
- Add visual structure to tasks
- Distract child during waiting time
- Structured teaching - provide predictability

Kids with low persistence are at risk for problem behaviors...
- Long activities
- Difficult tasks
- Group work
- Activities that require waiting
- Open-ended activities
- Broken or lost materials
- Unclear expectations

Encouraging participation
- Don’t expect internal motivation to do things doesn’t want to do
- May need to be very creative about motivation
  - Incorporate special interests into assignments when possible
  - Use autonomy and control as rewards
- Increase individual, dyad, small group work

Encouraging Participation (cont.)
- Give specific assignments per work period (e.g., “3 answers”)
- Present concrete rules for repetitive behaviors and interests
- Present concrete rules for use of unstructured time
Create opportunities for leadership

- Involve student in teaching/explaining certain activities; this will:
  - Teach about perspectives of others
  - Shape communication skills
  - Give opportunities for building reciprocity and understanding of the other

Maximizing learning

Some educational modifications to consider

How to teach new concepts
(Klin & Volkmar, 2001)

- Explicitly
- Rote/rule-governed
- Verbally
- Parts-to-wholes
- Sequentially
- Emphasize cause and effect

If the child processes slowly:

- Avoid timed tests
- Encourage completion - provide visual cues for starting and stopping and require only enough work that child can finish with other students and experience closure
- Require completion of part of assignment

If the child struggles with handwriting...

- Consider oral tests or projects instead of papers
- Encourage typing assignments
- Reduce amount of copying that must be done
- Make sure worksheets have enough response space for large writing
- Use multiple choice instead of fill in the blank
- Emphasize quality, not quantity
- See if child can purchase school books and highlight (instead of taking notes)

If the student has visual-spatial weaknesses that make math difficult...

- May need visual cues to align numbers in math problems, use decimal points, dollar signs, etc.
- Provide a step-by-step approach to solving problems
- Encourage “talking through” word problems
- Try to reduce amount of repetitive writing
- Give an example of a completed assignment
Monitor for reading comprehension

- Some students will become expert "decoders" without truly understanding what they are reading.
- Actively teach how to identify main ideas, supporting points, character perspectives, etc. Can be done in a rule-based approach.
- Provide the student with the text the night before so that he/she can preview it.

Be ready for “parallel activities”

- If an activity is appropriate for the other students, but is likely to be frustrating for the student with HFA, consider designing a parallel activity that teaches the same concepts but in a different way. Allow students to choose which activity to do.

Be careful about overwhelming the student with homework

- Families often report that homework is a significant stressor.
- When giving homework, be sure to give complete instructions.
- Whenever possible, provide study hall towards the end of the day with a tutor available to complete homework.
- Whenever possible, set a homework routine.

Use Computer-Based Instruction

- Practice skills with educational software
  - Fast ForWord for phonological processing and other important literacy and language skills
  - Interactive CD-ROMs for narrative structure, science, math, special interests
- Practice writing via email
- Practice research via internet

Focus on real-life skills

- These students may need more assistance in adaptive behaviors than in academic skills.
- Transfer of skills is always important; therefore team needs to be consistent.
- Never too early to think about vocational training and the social skills necessary to work with others.

Plan on Year-Round Home-School Collaboration

- Most kids benefit from year-round, consistent attendance in a structured program.
  - Could be extended school year
  - Could be summer camps
  - Could be home-based
In Conclusion

- Think about building rapport
- Consider attention, persistence and planning
- Modify to encourage success