

Parents and teachers who are new to working with autistic kids may feel overwhelmed and confused. Children with autism have very different needs than other children. Even in the absence of learning disabilities and pronounced developmental delays, these children require individualized teaching and attention. As the parent, teacher, or therapist of an autistic child, it is your obligation to ensure the child has the best chance possible to overcome his obstacles and reach his potential.

Tips for Working with Autistic Children

The following 12 tips for working with autistic children are useful to parents, teachers, and therapists. You can adapt them to any setting to improve communication, reduce the likelihood of regression and tantrums, and increase learning potential.

Learning Tips

1. Think and teach visually. Many autistic kids are visual thinkers and learners, and using pictures and other visual aids during teaching is helpful. Visual aids are especially effective when teaching number concepts, directional terms, and word recognition.
2. Use an area of interest, a fixation, or a special talent to connect with the child, improve academic skills, and increase attention. If the child is interested in bugs, incorporate bugs into your lesson plan or therapy session. For example, you can count toy bugs or play a video about bugs with subtitles to improve word recognition. If the child has tactile sensory problems, searching for bugs outside may be a motivational tool to encourage acceptance of different textures, such as grass, sand, or water.
3. Be aware of environmental distractions, such as bright lights and loud sounds, which may interfere with learning or comfort. You must consider sensory needs during teaching and therapy. Some children learn better when moving or using their hands, while other children may require silence or near-darkness in order to concentrate. Explore a variety of sensory environments with the child to determine which one is most conducive to learning.
4. Utilize technology, such as television, CDs, and computers. Because autistic children usually respond better to visual cues than verbal or written instructions, software programs such as Mayer-Johnson's Boardmaker may be beneficial. Some children find it easier to communicate by typing than by speaking or writing. Encourage use of the computer and keyboard to improve communication.
5. Avoid figurative language, and make your expectations simple and clear. Use only concrete terms, and reinforce those ideas with pictures or modeling. Avoid lengthy verbal instructions, and break tasks and instructions into clearly defined steps. Wait for the child to complete the first step before moving on to the next one.
6. Be aware of generalizations. Children with autism often associate a skill or behaviour with one specific location. For example, the child may use a fork and spoon at home without realizing he must use utensils when away from home. Mastery of each skill may need to take place at a variety of locations.

Behaviour Tips

1. Do not reinforce undesired behaviour. If the child asks for juice, give him juice, even if he really wants milk. Use prompting to help the child respond appropriately, and then reward correct responses. Ignore negative behaviors and incorrect responses, but do not punish the child.
2. Stick to a routine. Kids with autistic disorders need routine to feel secure. Even the slightest disruption in schedule can cause regression or tantrums. A daily planner that includes photos or other visual aids is a helpful tool for many parents and teachers. Schedule meal times, sleep times, and therapy at the same time every day. Prepare the child in advance, whenever possible, for schedule changes or trips away from home.
3. Use repetition to modify behaviour, teach new skills, and improve communication. Autistic children learn and retain information more easily when given that information repeatedly and in a variety of settings. Contrary to what some people believe, repetition will not encourage robotic speech or behaviour in an autistic child.
4. Tackle one problem at a time when attempting to modify behaviour. If the child has multiple behavioural problems, make a list of these problems and rank them in order of importance or severity. Address behaviours that place the child or his caretakers at risk first. Choose one problem at a time, and then work with the child until that behaviour reaches an acceptable level. Trying to change too many behaviours simultaneously is rarely effective.
5. Use modelling to improve socialization. Because they have a difficult time reading and processing social cues, autistic children require help to know how to act and respond in social situations. One of the most effective means of teaching social skills is through modelling. If your goal is to teach the child to shake hands following a social introduction, you must model this behaviour by shaking hands in front of him when encountering new people.
6. Be patient and understanding with yourself and the child. Working with an autistic child can be frustrating, and it may take considerable time before you see improvements. Remember to take frequent breaks, and do not feel discouraged if your attempts are initially unsuccessful.