

Developing literacy skills

Children with autistic spectrum disorders often lack imagination. They have difficulty seeing life from somebody else's perspective. When they do seem to have a good imagination this can be restricted to limited topics of special interest.

Young children with autism may have no interest in books except as objects. They sometimes have obsessions with certain books or catalogues and refuse to look at any other books or find it difficult to share a book and complain if you try to turn the book the right way up. They may also have difficulty learning to read and write. These skills are complex and require us to concentrate on several things at once.

Developing an interest in books

If a child is only interested in certain books, such as catalogues or books with numbers and letters, these make a good starting point. However, you need to ensure that he moves on from this stage and does not become stuck.

You could use photographs of familiar people or pictures cut from catalogues to make books that will interest the child. Introduce other books linked to his interests in order to develop time when you read together – make it a routine daily activity where you sit down and share a book. This can be during free play or a structured work session.

Choose books with clear, bright pictures that you think the child might enjoy. If they are linked to his special interests try to expand the field as much as possible.

Books with noises or flaps are good for young children and tactile books are sometimes popular and certainly easy to make if you have time.

For a young child with poor communication skills, it is important to choose repetitive, simple stories and keep language at a level he can understand. At first, you may only manage to get through the book, turning one page at a time, and all you need to say is, 'Turn the page' in a repetitive, interesting manner. You may then be able to explore the book more fully by lifting flaps, feeling textures, and pressing buttons to make sounds, depending on the design of the book. Point to pictures that might be familiar (cat, meow!) and prompt the child to point to the picture and say the word.

Book bags or stories with props are helpful for all young children, but particularly for those who have difficulty understanding the language and concept of a story. Stories can be prepared in advance and used daily until the child is ready to move on to another book. For example, a story about animals may come with assorted toy animals; the child learns to associate the pictures and the story with the animal by matching the correct animal to the picture in the book, the spoken word and the sound the animal makes.

For a child who is learning that written words have meaning, the book bag activity can be extended so that the child matches the written word to the toy or prop and the picture in the book.

Use a magnet board or felt board with pictures from the book to tell the story; make the pictures big and bright. When the child starts to recognise written words, he can match the words with the pictures on the board.

It is important when looking at a storybook together to keep language simple and not to start reading a story with complex sentences if the child does not have the language skills to understand.

Group stories can be made more accessible to children with language difficulties by using props, puppets, and large pictures. To include a child with autism in a group story, give him a toy linked to the story, a sound or a choice he can make. For example, if you have a picture for each page, children in the class can take turns coming up and choosing the correct picture for that page to place on a magnetic board, felt board, or piece of mounting card with strips of Velcro across it.

Books of photographs with a single word or a short sentence describing each picture, as well as storybooks about children, families and familiar communities can be more meaningful to children with an autistic spectrum disorder than books in which animals dress in clothes, drive cars and talk to each other. The latter can be very difficult for some children to understand, although they will enjoy them if they have seen the characters in a video or film.

Books about characters the child particularly likes will be motivating, but may need to be rewritten or retold in simple language. You could use the characters to make books to help a particular child read and enjoy stories if you have a child who is very difficult to motivate.

Poetry can become more accessible if it is accompanied by sounds or other sensory input, such as the sound of wind or a whisper. Some children with autism may need more repetition to understand and enjoy a poem, but if you have a good short poem with a dramatic punchline, why not include it at the end of every session?

Children with autistic spectrum disorders who can read may do so without understanding what they are reading. You can help them understand that stories have meaning and are not just a series of words on a page by making books using photographs of themselves and their family or friends. Spend time each day talking about familiar scenes in pictures and photographs before moving on to short picture books depicting everyday situations.

Teaching children with autistic spectrum disorders to read

Some children with autistic spectrum disorders learn to sight-read easily. They do not understand the sounds the different letters and groups of letters make, but seem to have a precocious skill in knowing what the words are. This skill is called hyperlexia. If a child has hyperlexia everyone will be impressed by his ability when other children are struggling to learn to read. However, it is important to help a child with an autistic spectrum disorder to not only read but also understand what he is reading. He needs to be aware of not only the content and plot of the story, but also the meanings of different words and concepts.

Other children with autism have more difficulty learning to read. They may easily learn by rote the names and sounds of letters, but be unable to understand that the sounds fit together to form a word. When they see a letter on a page, that is what they see; a letter name and a letter sound. They may appear to be learning to read because they know some storybooks off by heart, but then they fail to progress. They need a lot of help to understand that words have meanings and to see the whole word, not just

the letters they have learnt. In cases like these, it can be easier to use a multisensory approach and very motivating materials.

Words will be given meaning when they are attached to something that is meaningful to the child. You can start developing early reading skills by labelling items in the environment. At home you could label the fridge, television, different rooms, etc. Likewise at school label items of particular interest to the child. A first reading book can be made showing photographs of him at school using the things he enjoys.

If a child knows some books by heart, photocopy the pictures, cut up the sentences and ask him to stick the sentences back in order and read them back to you. At first, this may be a simple matching exercise, finding the correct words and sticking them under the sentence, but, as the activity becomes more familiar, leave some gaps in the sentences so the child can fill the words in without the visual prompt.

Teach whole words, starting with familiar names, words in the environment and words in books the child already knows. It sometimes helps to make up cards with the word and symbol on one side and the word alone on the other. It is then more likely that the child will be successful, which is very motivating. At the simplest level, you can make up a book of photographs of family members or favourite foods and teach the child to match the appropriate word or name with each photograph.

When a child can read some words and is gaining in confidence, work on initial letter sounds. For example give the child a set of pictures/symbols with the associated word minus the initial letter; the child then has to select the correct missing letter to spell the word matching the picture/symbol.

Children with autistic spectrum disorders have difficulty with imagination. They might find it easier to read stories they can easily relate to or non-fiction books about things that interest them.

Help children make their own books. Use photographs, pictures, drawings, or computer graphics. Encourage the child to talk about what is on the page and scribe for him if necessary. Use the child's own words, even if it is only one word.

Reading and writing require sequencing skills. Many children with autistic spectrum disorders have difficulty sequencing. Very early skills can be taught by sequencing patterns. For example, building a tower or threading beads following a coloured sequencing guide. At first, the child matches the beads to the guide and threads them. Then, as he becomes more confident, he may have ten beads but the guide shows the pattern for eight beads, then six, then four, until he is able to continue a pattern of three or four beads.

Sequencing language activities can be practised by using sets of sequencing cards, retelling events and stories in the correct sequence, understanding phrases such as "What happened before?" and "What happened next?" Use photographs of the child doing an activity – making a fruit salad or getting dressed, and sequence them to make a book. Take it step by step.

Helping children with handwriting difficulties

Children with ASD often have difficulties with fine-motor skills. They may not have enough control to hold the pencil and form a letter. Writing requires the physical skill

of holding a pencil and forming a letter and the understanding that what they are doing has meaning. Either of these skills may be difficult for a child with autism. A lack of imagination may mean the child does not understand that the graphics they are using have meaning and represent objects.

What you can do

Pencil skills

Start with early pencil skills. Can the child copy a straight line (horizontal, then vertical) or a circle? Can he draw a face or a person? Teach him to copy first a horizontal line, then a vertical line, then a circle. Use a physical prompt if necessary or share a large sheet of paper.

When the child is happy and confident using a pencil, show him how to hold it properly. It is important to do this because children with autism can be very resistant to change so it will be very difficult to alter how they write if you do not start them on the right track when they are young. Here are some ideas:

- Use large sheets of paper and write on them with highlighter pen, creating thick lines the child can trace over.
- Use a white board, a flip chart, or draw with chalk on a wall or on the ground.
- If the child holds his pen loosely and makes light marks that are difficult to see, give him fat, brightly coloured pens.
- Make cards with patterns for the child to trace over. Laminate them so he can write directly on the cards and you can wipe them clean. Use lines, simple shapes and spirals, depending on the ability of the child.
- Drawing half a face or half a shape that the child has to finish is good for developing pencil skills. You can start by drawing half on a large sheet of paper and show the child how to copy on his side of the paper. When he has the idea you can make up laminated cards for him to finish.

Capitals and lower case letters

Children are sometimes taught to write in capitals at home. This may seem sensible because capitals are easier to form and children learn them more quickly. However, it is very difficult to teach a child to use lower-case letters once they have learnt to use capitals and writing in capitals is very slow. It is therefore better to use both capitals and lower case letters, with greater emphasis on teaching lower-case letters.

Cursive writing

Because some children with ASD have such difficulty learning to write and are so resistant to change, it may be worth considering teaching cursive writing from the beginning.

Lines

Many children with ASD need lines as a guide when they are writing. They have difficulty creating their own imaginary lines and sometimes their writing gets larger and larger and uneven.

Writing independently

Children may learn to trace or copy but have difficulty writing independently. When a child has learned to trace over his name confidently, leave off the last letter. If he does not fill it in, leave off the end of the last letter. Each time he writes his name leave off

a little bit more. If necessary prompt him to complete his name, but try to do it lightly and withdraw the prompt next time.

Developing understanding of words

Teach words that are meaningful to the child. Children with autism will sit and copy over letters with no understanding of their meaning. They may find it hard to transfer the skill of forming letters along a line in a book to writing words that have meaning.

Teach words they can read that are linked to their interests. Gradually expect him to do more writing. It will develop his confidence and it will then be easier to find other ways of encouraging independent writing.

Overcoming fear of failure

Children with ASD can become anxious about making mistakes. This sometimes prevents them doing any work unless they feel confident they can do it perfectly.

The child needs to be reassured that it is OK to make mistakes. Sharing the mistakes you make and demonstrating that it is OK is a good way of reassuring the child when they make their own mistakes. In writing, it is usually better not to let your child use a pencil eraser to erase mistakes, but to support your child in making corrections, and perhaps, for older children, in introducing the idea of producing draft copies before producing a final neat copy. However, at times you may find it easier to let them use a pencil eraser initially, then gradually limit when they can use it. Maybe you could let them use it for tasks they will find difficult, but not for routine tasks.

Reference material

Children sometimes find it easier to write independently if they can see the alphabet on their book or table. They then have a visual reminder of what the letters look like.

Keyboard skills

Teach keyboard skills to children with autism who have writing difficulties. Make sure right from the beginning that they use both hands. They may start off typing with two fingers, but they should use their left and right hands for the left and right sides of the keyboard.

Whatever difficulties a child with autism may have when developing his literacy skills, a consistent approach that combines repetition with creative use of the child's special interests to develop teaching materials is a good starting point. As the child gains confidence new topics can be introduced, providing they follow small steps and do not demand too big a leap in understanding. It may seem at first they you have to spend a lot of time adapting materials for one child. However, you will find with practice that you can develop new materials quickly.

Further reading:

Hannah, L. (2001). *Teaching young children with autistic spectrum disorders to learn: a practical guide for parents and staff in mainstream schools and nurseries.*