

Structured teaching

Physical structure

This refers to the way in which the environment is organised. There are clear visual boundaries segmenting the space into recognisable parts. This helps the children understand what they are expected to do in each area. In the area set aside for work, distractions are kept to a minimum.

The schedule

This tells the child visually what activities will occur and in which order. Using objects, photos, pictures, numbers or words (depending on the individual's developmental level) the child is helped to understand a sequence of events.

Work systems

Through these systems the child is taught:

- What task/activity do I have to do?
- How much do I have to do?
- When will I have finished?
- What will I have to do next?

Visual clarity

Tasks are presented visually so as to make the expectations clear and highlight the important information.

The most important aspect of structured teaching is that the child can see exactly what the task is and what will happen when it is finished. S/he has a schedule showing the order of activities and tasks are presented visually so that s/he is clear what has to be done. For a very able child this may mean that s/he has a written list of instructions detailing the task or activity. For a young child doing a sorting task, it may mean that there are several objects to sort and a visual prompt such as coloured bowls or big and little bowls to show how they should be sorted. Tasks and activities are based on the child's skills and needs and taught in a step-by-step way so that important prerequisite skills are not missed out.

Using structured teaching reduces anxiety and improves attention and motivation. It also discourages a high level of dependence on an adult. Organising work visually so that a child with autism can see what s/he has to do and not be distracted by unimportant details is always important and should be kept in mind whenever work is presented.

Structured teaching is particularly useful when:

- your child is distractible, inattentive, or unhappy (at that time)
- you want to teach your child to complete a task or series of tasks independently
- you want to teach a new skill and your child is having difficulty understanding what s/he has to do.

Structured teaching is useful for teaching independent dressing and washing skills, providing focus to learn new skills and, as your child gets older, it helps develop independent working skills so s/he knows what is expected and does not constantly need an adult by his/her side.

Developing and using timetables and schedules

Many children with autistic spectrum disorders need to know what is happening now and what is going to happen next. They find change difficult to deal with and can be distressed by unexpected events and cancellations. They often have difficulty organising themselves and can feel extremely anxious when faced with the unknown.

Timetables and schedules are therefore useful at home and school. A child who is familiar with the routine of the day will feel more relaxed when s/he can see it laid out in pictures or words in front of him/her.

Timetables and schedules can use photographs, symbols, drawings, or words, depending on what the child will understand. The important thing is that they are clear, unambiguous and do not give too much information at once. They can be written in list form on a sheet of paper or lined up on a strip of card. A schedule can be used to break down the day or a single activity into manageable steps. It can be used to show the routine of the day, help organise and structure busy times or teach particular skills.

Making a visual timetable

Materials

- to make symbols:
 - black marker pen
 - white paper/card
 - if you can laminate the symbols they can be used time and time again
- to make photo prompts:
 - photographs
 - if you can laminate the photographs they can be used time and time again.
- to display the timetable:
 - a board (cardboard or wooden board)
 - an area on a wall or cupboard door to display the timetable
 - a method to attach the symbols/photographs onto the board, e.g. Velcro (the best), Blu-tack, etc.

Designing and using a visual timetable

- For a young child a timetable using clear symbols or line drawings is best. The first thing to do is teach the child what the symbols mean. This can take

several weeks, so start with a very simple timetable and use it consistently every day.

- Have the symbols for the main activities of the day lined up from top-to-bottom or from left-to-right on a piece of card. It is also helpful if you can make a small box or pocket at the bottom to keep the finished cards together. If not, a posting box or plastic wallet next to the timetable will do just as well.
- For children who enjoy looking at photographs, you may want to have a photograph of the child doing each activity instead of (or in addition to) the symbols. However, make sure the photographs are clear and unambiguous, as a child may just look at one thing in the picture (for example, bubbles) that is not available every day.
- Schedules can be an enormous help in encouraging a child with autistic spectrum disorder to organise him/herself. For example, they can help a child to get dressed and be ready for school in the morning or with the bedtime routine in the evening. Having the guide gives them extra reassurance that nothing has changed.
- This technique can be used to help with other weekly activities and outings, such as shopping. It can be reassuring for the child to have a weekly schedule of these posted up somewhere. Use words, drawings, or photographs, whatever is easiest for the child to follow, and be sure to keep it up to date.
- You can use schedules and lists to teach independence skills. For example, going to and using the toilet, hygiene routines, getting ready to go out (either school or on a family outing).
- Lists and schedules giving instructions should be tried out several times with an adult to make sure the child knows what to do and check that the instructions are clear and unambiguous. It is surprising how difficult it can be to give clear, step-by-step instructions to a child who is unlikely to fill in any obvious omissions.
- The schedule is organised with the first symbol/ word at the top /left and then sequence remaining symbols top to bottom or from left to write.

The learning environment

It is very important to create an environment that is as conducive as possible to learning:

- **Timing**
Find a time to play when s/he is alert and happy, not hungry or tired, and when you have time, energy, and enthusiasm to devote to him/her. Choose a time when you are unlikely to be disturbed and when you are not distracted by other tasks. You are then more likely to get a positive response.
- **Noise**
Having a television, radio, or music on while doing other things can make it more difficult to concentrate. If you are trying to play constructively with your child it is a good idea to turn everything off and let him/her concentrate.
- **Distractions**
When you play with your child clear the table or floor space of clutter and unnecessary toys. Keep out only the toy/activity you are playing with. As you finish with toys do not leave them lying around but put them away, out of sight

in a box or bag. This way your child will not be distracted by the next or precious activity and will be more likely to stay on track. If you have a child who is very easily distracted and who fiddles with everything, keep your house as free of clutter as you can. Some children can be very easily distracted by things such as toys, ornaments, and household goods and you may have to make quite drastic changes to aid concentration. To minimise distractions you could consider creating a 'work area' (or even a 'work room' if you have the space) for your child in your house. The 'work area' should have a table with 2 chairs on one side, with the table surrounded on 3 sides by high plain walls (or the table placed in the corner of the room against plain walls) so that they cannot see out and are therefore encouraged to concentrate on the activities given to them.

- **Seating**

A child who is comfortable and properly supported will be in a good position to play and free to concentrate on learning new skills. Equally, a child who is extremely fidgety will benefit from proper seating because s/he will be encouraged to sit still and because s/he will find it more difficult to escape to evade you! Depending on the activity and your child it may be better to sit opposite him/her when playing/working together. It will then be easier for him/her to make eye contact with you, to see your face, mouth, eyes, and expression and to see what you are going to do and to copy it. However, it may also be more convenient to sit alongside him/her especially when working in a work bay. As with most activities, it is better to use different techniques depending on the child and the nature of the activity. For example, when singing songs always sit face-to-face.

Making activities achievable

- **Break skills down into small steps**

You can make things easier for your child by breaking new skills down into smaller and more manageable steps. Rather than trying to teach a new skill in one go, aim to get there gradually.

- **Start by making things easy**

Introduce any new skill by using toys that are easy for your child to use and understand. Then as s/he becomes more competent, gradually make the games more challenging for her.

- **Forward and backward chaining**

These are two useful techniques. If you think of an activity as a chain or sequence of tiny actions then forward chaining is when you get a child to perform the first action in the sequence which you then complete, and backward chaining is when you get a child to perform the last action in the sequence which you have started. You then gradually increase the amount your child has to do as s/he becomes more competent until s/he is doing the whole activity.

- **Be aware of where your child is developmentally**

Follow your child's developmental progress and see what sort of skills s/he should be working towards. If you give your child something to do which is way beyond what s/he can do then s/he will have little chance of success, quickly lose interest and become frustrated and angry.

- **Motivation: use your child's interests**

Children with autism often do not have a great urge to explore and experiment with toys. They may need to be given the motivation to learn. You can use your understanding of what interests and excites your child to provide the motivation.

- **Exaggerated praise and encouragement**

Children with autism often need a lot of exaggerated praise and encouragement because they may not readily pick up on adult pleasure and approval. Praise often has to be exaggerated. When a child does something particularly good for the first time, give lots of praise (spoken and gestured) with big smiles, laughter, and clapping to reinforce what you are saying (of course any praise must fit in with behaviours that will not cause distress to your child). It can then be reduced down as the skills become more commonplace. Try to be positive and encouraging with your child. Get yourself in a mind-set where you look at his/her attempts in a positive way and concentrate on successes while ignoring failures. Always praise your child when s/he is attempting a new skill, no matter how short a period of time was spent in attempting the new skill.

- **Rewards**

If your child does not find your praise and encouragement sufficiently motivating, you can of course use tangible rewards such as food, drink, and cuddles. Other rewards could be games or activities depending on your child's interests. To use rewards effectively keep them small, immediate and under your control. Use them slightly randomly so that your child sometimes gets one for free and sometimes gets none. This will prevent him/her getting totally fixated on the reward because you do want her to learn to enjoy the task for its own sake. Young children need to see an immediate connection between their behaviour and the reward. With rewards it is worth remembering that:

- You eventually want praise and success at an activity to be enough motivation by themselves and the rewards to be less crucial, otherwise you will be forever bargaining with your child.
- You have to be even-handed in giving out rewards – if you have other children you may not feel it is always appropriate to be rewarding one child and not the others.

- **Rotating and varying toys**

Children (and adults) get bored with toys that are around all the time. Keep a good half of your toys locked away and change them round every few months. Keep out the things your child is playing with, making sure you have a variety of toys and put the rest away. When you rotate the toys your child will probably jump on the 'new' toys as if s/he had never seen them before.

- **Give your child longer to respond than you think s/he needs**

Children with autism can take a long time to respond (if indeed they do respond), so we must give them more time. When you are playing with your child and want a smile, a noise, or a word and have had enough of waiting for a response, count to ten and wait again. Give your child plenty of time. Be patient.

- **Repetition and perseverance**

You will probably find yourself repeating and repeating and repeating words, actions or gestures in order that eventually your child will understand and respond. There is no substitute for repetition.

- **Lack of response**
One of the hardest things to cope with as a parent is the lack of response that a child with autism often displays. It is very draining to be constantly giving your child love, attention, time and care and feel that s/he is giving nothing back. There is little you can do except persevere and love your child. You will be rewarded, even if it is only in a seemingly small way.
- **Adopt a multi-sensory approach**
Rather than just talk about an object, try to engage the other senses at the same time. So if you are talking about fruits, handle them, feel and touch them, smell them, shake them and taste them too.
- **Routines and predictability**
Children thrive on routines and structures in their lives because they enable them to understand what is going on around them and to recognise and eventually predict situations, creating a feeling of understanding and security. However, routine does not mean rigidity. Some children get fixated on routines and so need some sensitive variation within the routine to prevent fixations from occurring.
- **The importance of generalising skills**
In order to say that a child has achieved a certain skill, s/he has to demonstrate that s/he can do it not just with familiar toys but also with unknown objects, in all sorts of circumstances and for a variety of people. Give your child lots of opportunities to use different materials in a variety of situations when playing so that she can learn to experiment and explore and expand his/her knowledge and understanding. Again such variation must be done with sensitivity to the child's needs and learning ability.
- **Don't get fixated on one skill**
It is difficult to isolate one particular skill because skills develop in an interrelated and complicated way. It is more important to support your child in learning a variety of skills at any one time dependent upon your child's interests and abilities.
- **Completing tasks**
If you ask your child to do something and s/he does not want to or cannot do it then you should complete the task yourself saying perhaps 'Mummy put the piece in then'. The point is that you want your child to feel that it is important that she completes an activity or game. If you ask her to do something and she does not do it so that you merely shrug and put it aside she will form the impression that it does not matter whether or not she does it and will be less likely to co-operate in the future.
- **Stay in tune with your child**
Enjoy your child and follow him/her in his/her play, in his/her language and in his/her activities. Copy. Go along with your child. Enter his/her world and respect and learn what s/he is about. If you are doing something with your child and s/he does something unexpected do not necessarily correct him/her, go along with it and see what happens. Empathise with your child. See things from his/her point of view rather than always be trying to get him/her to conform to your own world and expectations.
- **High expectations**
Have high expectations of what your child will achieve. Don't impose barriers. Work towards him/her achieving all skills and fulfilling his/her potential. You will then give your child the opportunities, respect, and the environment s/he

needs to develop. Concentrate on small steps at a time. Give everything your best effort and demand that s/he does the same.

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*. London: The National Autistic Society.

Newman, S. (1999). *Small steps forward: using games and activities to help your pre-school child with special needs*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd.