

VISUAL STRATEGIES - For Improving Communication and Behaviour

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Recognising that students have different learning styles leads to the discovery that most students with ASD are visual learners. That means they understand what they see better than what they hear. The significance of this observation has immeasurable implications for communication, social interactions, behaviour and teaching.

Communication impairments transcend all aspects of the life of a student who experiences autism. While it is common for educational programming to focus on developing communication skills for these students, that focus in most settings tends to be directed primarily toward developing the student's expressive communication skills. In many environments, comparatively little attention is aimed toward increasing the student's ability to understand the communication in his life. An inability to effectively take in and understand information can be a significant factor in the student's ability to participate in family and school environments. To meet this challenge, numerous systems and strategies have been developed focusing on the use of visual supports to improve communication. Visual supports have proven to significantly improve both receptive and expressive communication, educational participation and overall behaviour.

How important is the communication challenge for students with ASD?

It is critical! Communication is one of the primary areas of difficulty for these students. The difficulty is pervasive, affecting a wide range of skills including the student's ability to understand social communication and environmental cues, perform self-management or organizational tasks, and develop effective expressive communication. Improving communication is one of the most important goals.

Many of these students talk. Do they still have a problem?

Communication is more complex than 'just speech'. It involves multiple skills including establishing attention, taking in information, interpreting that information, remembering past information, and eventually formulating a response. The communication disability of these students is not just a problem with expression. It is not determined solely by a student's ability to speak. It can permeate all aspects of this communication process.

Can you explain this more?

Consider this example: Effective communication requires the ability to rapidly establish and shift attention, take in and process information and formulate responses appropriate for the situation. These students may experience difficulty accomplishing these skills at the speed necessary to participate effectively in communication interactions. Their comprehension of the demands in their environment may be based more on piecing together visual cues and expected routines rather than understanding specific verbal messages. Their lack of cooperation or lack of independence may really be the result of not understanding fully what is expected of them or what is going to happen. These students may be accurately interpreting only fragments of a communication message.

Why don't these students understand?

There can be many, many reasons. One reason is that communication can happen very quickly. Forms of communication such as speech and some gesture are transient; they remain present for only a short period of time and then they disappear. These students do not seem to be able to focus their attention and process the information as rapidly as is necessary to handle many communication situations. A spoken message may be finished before the student is focused enough to receive it.

How do you help these students receive the information?

Speech and other transient forms of communication disappear quickly. In contrast, visual information such as objects, pictures, and written language are non-transient. They remain present long enough to provide an opportunity for the student to engage his attention before the message disappears. As a result, many of these students appear to understand what they see better than what they hear. The visual information can remain visible long enough to enable the student to focus on it or return to it as needed to establish memory for the message it is communicating.

How do you make communication easier for these students to understand?

By using visual tools and supports to aid communication. Visual tools provide a non-transient foundation for more effective communication. Using visual support builds on student's strengths rather than placing more demands on their area of greatest difficulty. When visual tools are used to give these students information and directions, their comprehension can increase significantly. For many students with severe communication difficulties, the use of visually supported communication is more effective and efficient than just talking to them. The visual tools assist students in processing language, organizing thinking, remembering information and other skills necessary to function effectively.

What are visual tools and supports?

They are those things we see. Body movements, environmental cues, pictures, objects and written language can all be used to support communication. Look around! Our environment is full of signs and logos and objects and other things that we can use for communication supports. In addition, we can create special pictures or tools to help meet specific communication needs.

Can you give me some examples?

There are too many to list Schedules and calendars are the most common visual tools used to give students information. Step-by-step directions; choice boards, and classroom rules provide structure in classrooms. They help students by creating an environment that is more predictable and understandable. Visual tools used to give information are probably the most helpful, particularly for gaining student's positive participation and for avoiding behaviour problems.

Behaviour problems! How do visual tools avoid behaviour problems?

They help students understand what they are supposed to do. They help clarify what not to do. Rules, tools to teach self-regulation, and tools to teach alternate behaviours help students know what to do.

Why do behaviour problems exist?

The most critical step in attempting to structure environments and solve behaviour problems is to identify why the behaviour difficulties exist. For students with autism spectrum disorders, it becomes obvious that many of them are the result of a student not understanding what is going on in his life. It is common to assume that students understand. In reality, many times they don't. Visual tools help students by supporting changes and transitions. Many different visual tools have been a part of programs that have resulted in successfully reducing or eliminating communication, social, and behaviour challenges. The purpose of using these aids is to enhance the student's understanding of what is happening in his life and what is expected of him.

Behaviour difficulties may also occur because students have difficulty expressing themselves. Whether they are verbal or non-verbal, the strategies these students use to get their wants and needs met and to interact with others may not work efficiently. Visual tools can provide the support necessary to help both non-verbal and verbal students get their wants and needs met more effectively.

Understanding why problems exist and where communication breakdowns contribute to behaviour difficulties is a significant step toward developing successful solutions. Once a student understands, he is more apt to comply with the demands of the setting.

How important is it to use visual strategies for these students?

Using visually supported communication is an extremely helpful approach for students with communication and behaviour challenges. Expanding the use of visual strategies is a needed dimension in developing appropriate communication skills, social interaction skills, and positive behaviour and participation of students with autism spectrum disorders. Many people use a few visual tools in their homes and educational environments. Few people use this medium of communication support nearly as much as would be beneficial for these students.

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