

AAIS Early Years Tier 1 ASD Awareness Training

Session 2: Strategies

This session will provide practical visual strategies to support a meaningful learning environment.

Research and literature suggest the child with ASD is a visual learner. It is important that we support the child by using visual strategies, as this enhances their understanding and communication.

Temple Grandin, a famous American author, researcher and inventor who has a diagnosis of ASD stated, "I remember very little of what I hear... unless I can form a visual image..."

It is good to remember a child's ability to speak does not determine their need for visual strategies. The use of visual supports relates to their understanding, not their verbal ability.

In 1996 Schopler found, "Visual information is more easily processed than verbal".

Physical structure is the organisation of the learning environment both inside and outside. This examines how the classroom is set up, the arrangement of the furniture and the organisation and labelling of the materials and the activities. It helps the child make sense of their environment so they understand what happens in a specific area and clarifies where they should be. It also helps foster independence.

Make sure your environment is divided into the following areas, for example, cloakroom, snack, story, lunch, play, toilet and quiet space/calm area.

Arrange the furniture, materials and general surroundings so there are clear physical boundaries, which will add meaning and context to the environment. You can see from these pictures that other settings have used chairs, tape and storage units to show the child where the activity is contained.

Remember the physical structure of outside is as important as inside! The placement of play equipment and resources for example cones, tape and chalk can help the child visually understand the boundaries.

Once the physical areas are established, consider the organisation of the child's day. The use of visual timetables and schedules helps the child with ASD to understand what is happening and in what order.

A visual schedule helps the child to independently follow the structure of the day as it shows the child what, where and when to carry out an activity. It also teaches organisational and sequencing skills. When used as a continual point of reference, it can promote a sense of security, confidence and a reduction of anxiety.

A schedule can support the transition between activities as well as the introduction of new and non-preferred tasks. It facilitates the promotion of positive behaviour as the child will often be more willing to follow visual directions than verbal ones.

A schedule can also be used to teach the child to cope with change. It may be a whole class timetable or individualised, depending on the needs of the child, to support them in accessing the curriculum and aid participation in school life.

Here is a diagram displaying the progression of schedules. Assess where your child is developmentally and select the most appropriate type of schedule.

This is an example of a left to right object schedule. And this is 'a top to bottom', True Object Based Icon or 'TOBI' for short.

Here are another two examples of schedules. A top to bottom photograph, and a 'symbol and word' schedule.

Assess the type of schedule the child will need i.e. object, photograph, symbol or word. Decide if it will run Left to Right or Top to Bottom. It is important to teach the child to use their schedule independently.

Remember to include all activities, such as snack/lunch, outside and home time.

The ASD child should have some form of visual schedule or timetable.

If a child has difficulty with sequencing or a visual schedule is too overwhelming, you can use a First & Then visual. This is an example of a 'first and then' card. When using this strategy it is beneficial for all staff to consistently employ the same terminology 'First' and 'Then'. When introducing this strategy use activities the child finds motivating. Once established, progress to the 'First' activity being less preferred, with the 'Then' being a favourite or motivating activity.

You may also use this as a strategy to promote positive behaviour.

The child with ASD may have difficulty understanding and coping with change. A schedule can be used to teach a child change, using a universal "no" to show when an activity will not be happening.

A schedule explains where to be, whereas an activity/work system explains what the child needs to do when they get there. The system will clearly demonstrate what and how much work the child has to do. The concept of finished or all done is visually explained, as well as what the child will do next.

The system will always work from left to right, with clearly structured activities to encourage independence. Once the tasks are completed, they are placed in the 'Finished' box.

The child may need to be taught the tasks first at a one-to-one teaching table, to ensure they are carried out independently.

For the child who finds it difficult to stay on task, needing constant adult reassurance, lacks motivation or presents with poor organisational skills, an activity/work system will be very beneficial.

Click on the link to see a short video of an activity system in action. Look out for the child working independently, left to right and placing the completed tasks in the finished box.

Here are examples of structured activities, the child works from left to right with a clear finish/end point.

You can structure up any activity the child may be using in the class, here are a couple of examples.

Routines can be arranged from top to bottom or left to right. Having visual routines displayed for particular areas (such as toileting, hand washing or snack), provides a helpful reminder of the individual steps required to carry out a task. There must be a clear start and finish point.

Here is an example of a left to right routine for toileting.

This slide shows a top to bottom washing hands routine.

Research has found that often the child with ASD presents with difficulties in social skills. Awareness of others and developing friendships can often be a challenge. Again it is important to assess where the child's main difficulties lie, for example with turn-taking, waiting, listening, sharing, greetings and the ability to sit and concentrate. Target these areas and devise an intervention programme, to promote and develop good social interaction skills.

Social skills are best taught during naturally occurring events. It is important to never miss a learning opportunity. You can teach these skills through play, group-work, table-top and turn taking games.

Use a visual aid to teach the social skill of taking turns. Here we have two examples of turn taking visuals. These promote visual understanding of whose turn it is and how long the child has to wait until it is their turn again.

Timers and visual countdowns clearly demonstrate there will be an end point to the activity. This can help lower anxiety levels, as the child can visually see the time gradually coming to an end, especially during non-preferred activities.

Wait cards help to visually show a child when they have to stop and wait. These cues may be helpful if the child has difficulties with this concept.

The universal “no” symbol, can be used in a variety of situations. Research suggests that using the “no” sign as a visual aid, is more effective than just using the verbal instruction.

The stand, sit and line up visual cues teach the child about personal space. The child with ASD who presents with sensory needs often responds well to the use of these visuals.

The Super Symbols are visual reminders that refer to some of the basic rules often used in schools. These include: good listening, good looking, good sitting, quiet, hands down and sit on seat. These symbols can be used by all staff to support verbal instructions throughout the school day.

Individual reward systems work well for a child with ASD because they can see what they are working towards, at the same time encouraging positive behaviours. The reward system must be highly motivating as well as achievable. As the child’s motivator can often change it is important to consult with parents.

Emotions can be hard to understand for the child with ASD. Here is a personalised example of a visual step-by-step guide to assist with calming down and self-regulation. Verbal instructions can escalate the child’s emotions, using visuals can be more helpful.

Here are two more examples of self-regulation visuals.

Sometimes the child will need a “calm down” area when overstimulated or anxious. This can be a quiet area within the classroom, or a sensory area within the school. It may be beneficial to include some of the child’s preferred or special interest items.

It is important to know the child’s individual needs, especially regarding emotional regulation. Seek advice from parents and other professionals who know and have worked with the child. We have included some examples of calm down items that some schools and parents have used. However the child may need more individualised items such as pictures of washing machines or car fresheners.

Often the child with ASD may have communication difficulties. A home/school diary is a two-way communication system between parents and staff. The parents can use the information provided to discuss the events of the day with their child. Home/school diaries also prevents long, unscheduled and public discussions.

An ASD friendly environment, will be organised, calm, orderly and predictable. On-going visual supports need to be provided, such as schedules, routines and work/activity systems to promote independence. Finally provide other visuals to support and help solidify rules and aid communication.

The autism advisory and intervention service provide a range of trainings, please click on the link to see what is currently available.

Resources are also available on the Education Authority's AAIS website via the link provided.

To conclude, thank you for taking the time to watch this Tier 1 Training. I hope this training has increased your knowledge and understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder, and what you can do to help a child with ASD. We value your feedback and would appreciate it if you could complete the training evaluation you will receive.