

Top 9 Things Educators Should Know About Students with Autism

If I don't see it, I don't hear it!

Most students with autism are processing language as pictures. When they are required to convert language to pictures in their heads, they can easily misunderstand what you are saying. If you find yourself repeating something, you probably need to write it out, create a concept map, or draw it out.

Reading Nonverbal and Paraverbal Language

Students on the spectrum struggle to read the nonverbal language and tone of voice of others. As a result, they miss out on the cues that tell us when the listener no longer wants to hear what we are talking about, when we have said something that has upset the other person, when someone is using sarcasm, or the need to wait for the person to finish their conversation with someone else before we interrupt. Teaching students to read your non-verbal and tone of voice communication will help. Start by pointing out what is happening with your eyes and eyebrows when you are concerned, happy, disappointed, etc. Students can learn to cue in to these elements.

This is a Communication Disorder

Students in your class may seem to be communicating well based on how they speak. It is not uncommon for these students to be using phrases that they have learned in one setting and applying it to yours. If they do not get the response they have gotten with a phrase when they have used it before, they become frustrated.

Perspective-Taking Difficulty

Autism is not just a communication disorder, but a Perspective-taking deficit (See Nonverbal and Paraverbal bullet points below). Stick figures with speech bubbles and thought bubbles or writing out cause and effect-type diagrams can be helpful to teach perspectives.

Predictability is Key

Not being able to read peers and social situations creates a world where they are being constantly surprised and startled. To reduce anxiety, increase predictability. Having your agenda for class posted for each lesson, referring back to your agenda as you complete one activity, checking it off, and showing that you are moving on to the next item will greatly reduce anxiety. Creating routines for activities and sticking to them greatly helps. Cueing upcoming transitions and using the clock or a countdown timer adds a visual support.

Literal Processing

Students who convert language to images make language very concrete. They will interpret what others say very literally. It helps when we teach idioms and figures of speech.

Forest for the Trees

These students are not sure what is important in each environment, and so they pay attention to everything. They are usually better at analyzing and evaluating than they are at synthesizing. They will see the individual parts and pull things apart but struggle to see the larger whole.

Reading Comprehension

Most of these students learn to read by matching words to objects or pictures. This gives them a very literal interpretation of the written word. This strategy works well for nouns and verbs that put the objects in motion and descriptive and limiting adjectives. What does a "very" look like? What does a question mark do to a picture? These students will often score two to four grade levels below their peers on reading comprehension even though they are reading material at a high school level. Start by teaching reading comprehension strategies using non-fiction and work towards fiction. Perspective taking is a deficit so understanding a text that uses a narrator will be difficult.

Executive Function

These students struggle with keeping things organized and monitoring their progress on goals. Creating checklists, teaching them to reference the rubric, labeling where items go in drawers or on shelves, and teaching routines help.