

Strategies for supporting autistic children in early childhood settings



ECE resources

Autistic children are very capable of learning new skills and of interacting successfully with peers and adults. In some cases, they may need more or different types of support to thrive in a busy, and sometimes overwhelming, early childhood environment. This resource provides some simple strategies for supporting autistic children in an early childhood setting. It covers strategies for increasing engagement and participation, supporting communication and understanding, responding to a range of behaviours, and teaching new skills. The value of including parents is also discussed. It is important to remember that every autistic child is different, and that none of these strategies will work for every child. Teachers should select strategies based on their knowledge of the needs and interests of the child and the desires of their family or whānau.

Supporting engagement and participation

All children are more likely to be engaged and participate when they enjoy what they are doing.

Boosting motivation. To motivate autistic children to engage in the setting, make a list of their favourite toys, books, foods, and social games (such as tickles or songs), and allow them to engage with these things as much as possible (within reason). Try to give children many opportunities to choose activities or toys, and consider creating a box of the child's favourite toys and encouraging them to choose the object that they want. Teachers can also join the child in an activity they are already doing.

Positioning. It is beneficial for teachers to try and maximise the time that the child spends facing them, without placing stress on the child or making them feel uncomfortable. For example, teachers can sit facing the child at a table or on the floor, or hold toys, books, and desired objects near their face. It is also useful to make sure they are facing the child when they use outdoor play such as the swings or slide, rather than standing behind them. This helps to support joint attention and interaction.

Managing distractions. Autistic children can find it difficult to focus when there are lots of toys or other children around. Although it can be difficult to manage distractions in an early childhood centre, teachers can try to bring out one favourite toy at a time, or collect a few favourite toys in a basket and encourage the child to choose one. It can also be helpful to find quieter areas, without too many toys or other children, in which to play social games with the child.

Following the child's lead. Take time to observe the child and notice their goals and interests. Teachers can then join in the child's play in the following ways:

- Imitating or copying the child's actions
- Narrating the child's actions using simple words, phrases, or sound effects such as 'roll' if the child is rolling a ball, or 'bang bang bang' if the child is using a hammer
- Finding opportunities to help the child, which could include handing the child objects which are out of reach, opening containers or packets that the child cannot open, or operating trickier toys such as wind-up toys or bubble blowers

Supporting engagement with peers. It can be helpful to encourage peers to join in with autistic children. Both neurotypical peers and autistic children may need a bit of help to ensure that the interaction is successful. These are a few strategies for promoting positive interactions with peers:

- In social games, ensure peers have a 'turn' too. For example, during a game of chase, let a peer take a turn at chasing. Just be aware that the peer may need some help to learn the 'rules' of the game.
- Help autistic children to notice what peers are doing and to copy. Draw attention to interesting actions (like someone doing a big jump) and help autistic children to copy. If peers find an interesting object, encourage them to show it others, and help autistic children to practise showing interesting objects to peers.
- When autistic children are interacting with peers, try to take yourself out of the interaction and position yourself behind them so you can provide 'invisible support' as needed.

Supporting communication and understanding

Some autistic children are very good at communicating their needs and understanding others' communication, while others may need additional support in this area. The strategies below are examples of evidence-based practices for supporting communication and understanding between autistic children and their neurotypical teachers and peers.

Picture exchange. Some autistic children who do not yet communicate using spoken language may benefit from learning an alternative form of communication that can be easily understood. One option is to teach the child to exchange laminated pictures with adults and peers to communicate their wants and needs¹. Generally, it is best to start by teaching the child to request their favourite toys, foods, and activities using these pictures because they are likely to be very motivated to do so. For example, it might be helpful to practise this skill at snack-time or lunchtime, when there are lots of natural opportunities to ask for food. Teach the child to request with pictures using the following steps:

1. Sit opposite the child at a table
2. Place the target picture in front of the child
3. Hold up the desired item (such as a cracker) and wait
4. If the child does not hand you the picture, prompt them to do so
5. When the child has given you the picture, either independently or prompted, give them the desired item and enthusiastically label it ('cracker!')

Once the child learns to ask for items when the single picture is right in front of them, they can be taught to do more difficult tasks including going to get the picture when it is further away, finding the correct picture from a selection of four different pictures, and communicating other things such as rejecting items or activities they do not want, and commenting on the world around them.

Visual supports. Some autistic children have trouble understanding other's spoken communication and may benefit from [visual supports](#) throughout the early childhood environment. These visual supports can take many forms including:

- **Visual schedules** which show each activity that will take place that day or during a particular time of day
- **Visual activity schedules** which show each step of a given activity, for example, getting dressed or washing hands

- **'First then' schedules** which show how a less desired activity is followed by a more desired activity, which can help children understand that washing their hands will be followed by a snack, for example.
- **Visual timers** which visually represent the amount of time that is left for a given activity, which can help children anticipate transitions from one activity to another.

Responding to a range of behaviours

Young children, including young autistic children, sometimes use behaviours that others may find challenging to communicate their wants and needs. This could include hitting, screaming, biting, destroying property, or running away. Children generally use these types of behaviour to get something they want, such as access to items and activities that they like, or to avoid or get rid of something they do not want. Teachers can teach children appropriate ways to get things, or to get rid of things, as a replacement for challenging behaviour. This could include words, gestures, or alternative forms of communication such as the picture exchange technique described above. To understand what is causing the behaviour, and how to address it, teachers need to ask:

1. What is cueing the behaviour? What happens immediately before it?
2. What is the purpose of the behaviour?
3. What behaviour is easy for the child to use instead?
4. How can I help the child to use this replacement behaviour?

Teaching new skills

Like their neurotypical peers, autistic children often need explicit support to learn new skills. The following approaches are particularly beneficial for autistic children.

Providing clear cues. All children are more likely to learn new skills when there are clear and consistent cues for the expected behaviour. This can include words, gestures, actions, long pauses, and visuals. When deciding an appropriate cue for a behaviour, think about what supports other children of the same age.

Prompting and modelling new skills. You may need to prompt or model a new skill for a child before they are able to do it themselves. Try to give as little help as possible – otherwise the child may not learn to do the skill independently. Examples include:

- Spoken instructions (for example, saying 'wash your hands')
- Gestures (pointing at the sink)
- Modelling (washing your own hands)
- Physical prompts (taking the child's hands and placing them under the tap), although note that this is the most intrusive prompt.

Rewarding new skills. All children are more likely to repeat a new skill when it is followed by a reward. For example, children's reaching behaviours are rewarded and reinforced when they get the toy they reached for. The best rewards are those that logically follow from the behaviour. Each time a child uses a new skill, either independently or with prompting, make sure that it is rewarded.

Increasing teaching and learning opportunities. All children learn faster when there are more opportunities to practise a skill. This could include practising the skill several times in a row or increasing the number of opportunities throughout the day.

Including parents. Research suggests that parents can effectively use strategies to help their young children², so it may be helpful to share these strategies with the parents of any autistic children whom you support. It would also be helpful to have regular goal-setting or individual planning meetings, to make sure that parents understand what is happening in the early childhood setting, and that teachers are drawing on families' extensive knowledge and understanding of their children's strengths, needs, and interests, and responding to their goals and aspirations for their children .

References

This resource provides a very brief overview of strategies that teachers can use to support autistic children in an early childhood setting. The resources below contain more in-depth information about each of these strategies.

Lang, R., Hancock, T.B., & Singh, N.N. (Eds.). (2016). *Early intervention for young children with autism spectrum disorder*. New York, NY: Springer.

Ministries of Health and Education (2008). *New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline*. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

Rogers, S.J., Dawson, G., & Vismara, L.A. (2012). *An early start for your child with autism: Using everyday activities to help kids connect, communicate and learn*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Endnotes

1 Bondy, A.S., & Frost, L.A. (1994). The picture exchange communication system. *Focus on Autistic Behavior*, 9(3), 1-19.

2 Wong, C., Odom, S.L., Hume, K.A., Cox, A.W., Fettig, A., Kucharczyk, S., ... & Schultz, T.R. (2015). Evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with autism spectrum disorder: A comprehensive review. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(7), 1951-1966.

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