

[Send to printer](#) [Close window](#)

Autism Teaching Strategies

Elementary and middle school teaching methods for ASDs parents can use at home

BY AMY SIWIEC AND COURTNEY SHILLING



Grade School: The Child as an Individual

Whether you are teaching a child with or without an autism spectrum disorder, differentiating instruction is essential.

Addressing each child's unique strengths and needs is key to maximizing potential. Some children benefit from visual cues while others respond to auditory prompts. No two are the same. The sooner you make adjustments and ensure that a child is able to grasp the concept in a manner that is accessible to him, the more he will learn and grow.

Many children enjoy mixed mediums, a fact I take into consideration when planning my elementary-grade lessons. For example, I will utilize the Smartboard, select a story to read and prepare a hands-on activity. One student may find videos and visuals the most meaningful. A hyperlexic student will absorb the most information through reading. A third is most responsive to learning through tactile manipulatives. As a bonus, all three students likely will get something extra out of every avenue of instruction.

This all fits into a trait we attempt to develop: flexibility. Life always will be filled with unexpected moments and schedule changes. It is important to instill a sense of resilience so kids with ASDs can learn to process and adapt to unanticipated circumstances.

I find all my students benefit from a visual schedule. They can see what comprises their day and how it will take shape. To keep them on their toes, I will sporadically flip two blocks, announcing, "We will do health now, then math." Some get visibly frazzled, but they eventually become more and more accommodating, bouncing back quicker and quicker. Teachable moments built into daily life hold the possibility to imbue positive behavior and character traits.

That said, everyone can benefit from a little structure. The establishment of routines keeps efforts focused, promotes sound decision-making and ultimately enhances the ability to self-regulate. Children especially thrive on routines. The best tip I can impart to parents is to leverage this innate inclination, for it is one of your greatest advantages.

For example, create a visual chart to assist with bedtime: Brush teeth, dress in pajamas, read one story, give hugs and

kisses, get in bed to sleep. Your child will reference this chart, work within the framework and begin to look forward to the routine. A routine can assume any shape, can be adjusted as needed and will yield gratifying, long-lasting results.

Next page: Middle school teaching methods for kids with ASDs

Middle School: A Balancing Act

As children with autism spectrum disorder progress through higher grade levels, creativity is often a major aspect in implementing instructional strategies. It can be difficult to ensure that students receive curriculum materials designed for their instructional level and take the more mature interests of older students into consideration. Curriculum may be adapted to include visuals or broken down into chunks of information. Spending extra time preparing a lesson prior to implementing it will reap many rewards, as the student with unique needs will receive instruction in accordance with his individual learning profile.

Certain instructional practices are often employed when teaching students with ASDs. Small-group or individualized instruction may be necessary in addition to whole-group lesson presentation. New concepts need to be broken down into steps and reinforced through frequent checks for comprehension as well as guided practice before independent tasks are given. Manipulatives, hands-on activities and making concepts relatable to the student's experience can all aid in the acquisition of new skills. Even after a new skill is mastered for the first time, it may need to be revisited frequently to ensure it will not be lost.

As students get older, the balancing act between what is possible in a school setting versus what a student will experience in the real world begins. Students still need the support of a consistent, expected schedule to be successful with academics and school routines. However, they also need to begin utilizing crucial strategies to cope with inevitable unexpected changes in life and assimilate into a more public sphere.

Older students need to work more on community training, social skills development and the acquisition of job skills. Such skills will prepare them for their future plans, whether they involve independent or group living, employment or continued education at a post-secondary school. To this end, a teacher must gauge what the student is able to do independently and what tools are available for the student to be able to carry them over into adult life.

Amy Siwiec and Courtney Shilling are elementary school and middle school classroom teachers, respectively, at The Vanguard School, a program of Valley Forge Educational Services (VFES). For more than 50 years, VFES has offered a wide variety of educational services for children and young adults, 2 to 21 years of age, with special needs and their families. Programs include the Luma Center for Development and Learning, Summer Matters and the Vanguard Transition Center.