
Supporting Children with ASD and Behavior Concerns During COVID Closures (Also Applicable Outside of COVID!)

When Parents Become Teachers



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Academic Background:

CAGS (Special Education)- UMaine Orono

Graduate Certificate (Applied Behavior Analysis)- Salem State University

M. Ed. (Special Education)- Salem State University

B.A. Sociology (Social Inequality and Diversity)- UMass Amherst

Time in Education (MA and ME Public and Special Purpose Schools):

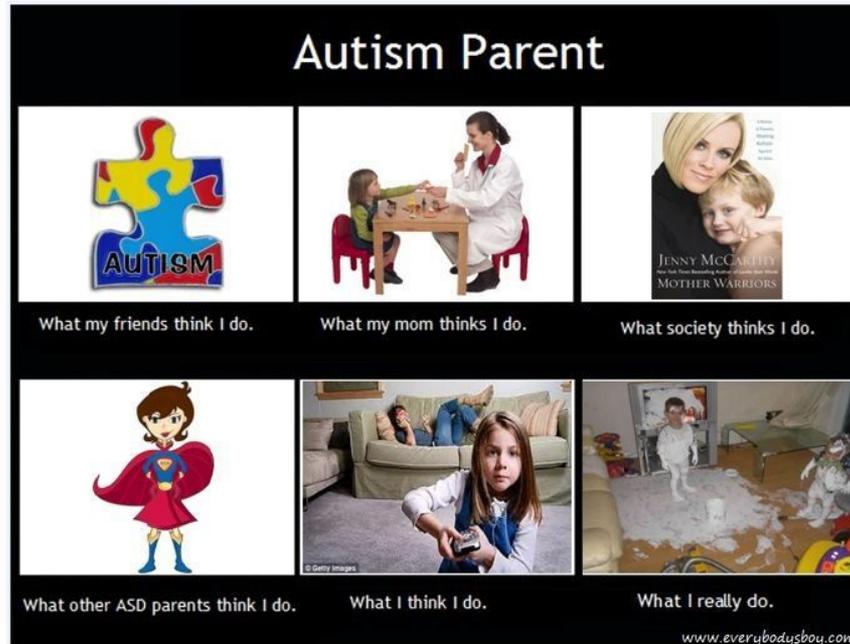
Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA)- 3.5 years

Special Education Teacher- 4 years

Special Education Support Staff- 6 years

Supporting children with Autism is not easy

It truly takes a village to raise a neurotypical child- so what about when your child is not neurotypical? Does it take TWO villages?



Understanding Behavior

Keep in mind that teachers and specialists train for years to learn all that they know- it's ok that you might not understand everything. We know that you are doing your best and THAT IS OK.

Know that all behavior serves to gain or avoid
3 main ideas:

- Attention
- Specific items/activities
- Sensory-based needs

ALL Behavior Is COMMUNICATION!!

If you can figure out what it is that the child wants to access or avoid, you can teach them how to gain or avoid it in an appropriate manner (such as using functional communication- keep reading to learn more)

Some behaviors are ok to allow- sensory seeking behaviors such as rocking or spinning are helping your child to self-calm. If they become dangerous, then we should intervene. Otherwise, it's ok to allow them. (If other people feel uncomfortable, that's THEIR problem.)

Attention, Specific Items/Activities, Sensory Needs

Attention:

- Some people talk about “positive” or “negative” attention- for many kids, attention is attention. They will often take what they can get, and sometimes it’s much easier to get attention for doing “the wrong thing” than for behaving appropriately. (How often do the quiet kids get praised for being quiet versus the loud kids asked to quiet down?)
- For some, attention is desirable and they will try to gain it. For others, it is not and they will try to avoid it.

Specific Items/Activities:

- This can include preferred: games, movies/shows, people, foods, etc
- It can also include disliked: games, chores, schoolwork, people, foods, etc
- As with attention, sometimes behavior is an attempt to gain and sometimes an attempt to avoid these things

Sensory Needs:

- This can include: lighting, textures (of clothing, foods, toys), touch (including pressure), smells, sounds, etc.
- Again, some behaviors seek to gain and others to avoid these sensations.
- Some behaviors help us to feel good- spinning, flapping, twirling our hair, tapping our leg- and they are ok to allow!

Keeping Routines and Schedules

Children with ASD thrive on routine- change is difficult, especially when it is not planned and when they do not understand the reasons for the change (COVID is a perfect example).

Keep a routine but don't get too focused on the details- you DO NOT need to plan out every second of every day- focus on the big picture.

Schedules inside of schedules are an easy way to do this.

See the sample schedule and visuals to the right (more details on the next page)!

Sample Daily Schedule:

Wake up

Get Dressed/ Eat Breakfast

Morning Schoolwork

Play Time

Lunch

Afternoon Schoolwork

Play Time

Dinner/ Hygiene

Bedtime

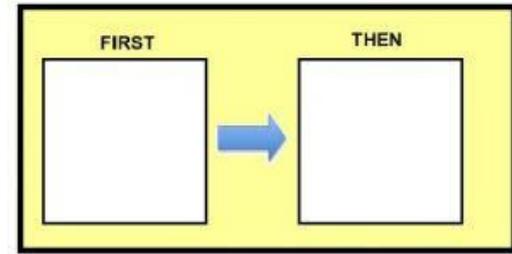


Schedules Inside of Schedules

OK so waking up, getting dressed, and eating breakfast was relatively easy, but now it's time to do schoolwork...

TIPS:

- Have a list of 5 tasks that could be completed, and have your child pick 3
- Try using first/then principles, such as "first work, then play time"
- Use visuals as much as possible
- Never expect a child to stop doing their favorite thing and start doing something they hate (even adults have trouble with this)- try using "buffer" activities in between



Here are some websites that offer great advice as well as samples of what this might look like:

- [Autism Classroom Resources](#)
- [Carrots are Orange](#)
- [A Mother Far From Home](#)
- [Free Printable Behavior Charts](#)

Also look for (FREE) apps that can help with this- many offer the ability to swipe a task from left to right to indicate that it is "all done"- seeing this visual can also be helpful for kids!

Using Reinforcement Systems

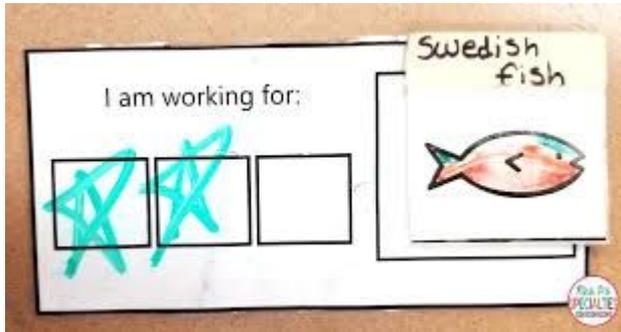
Token boards can be a great way to help motivate children- they offer a visual representation of progress and have a clear end, which helps with transitions.

Keep in mind when deciding on reinforcers (rewards) to use:

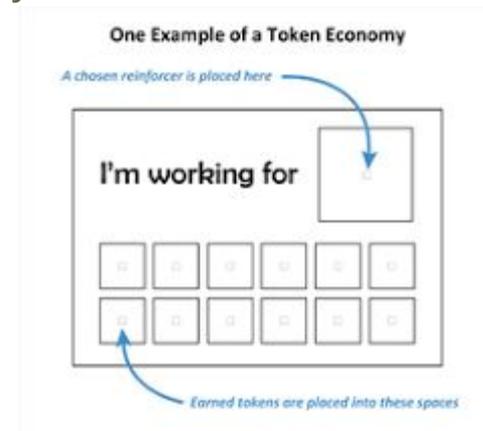
- Reinforcers don't work if the child is satiated on the reward. (EX using cookies won't work if the child also has free access to cookies- you will need to limit cookies so they become more desirable)
- Try using short bursts- most kids can't handle waiting too long. They will engage in problem behavior to get their immediate needs met and might not make it to earn the reward (EX using cookies might be hard if they have to wait the whole day- maybe try giving a piece of cookie every 10 minutes)

Reinforcement Systems continued

Keep your system structured and visual- this can be done as simply as drawing boxes on a piece of paper/ whiteboard and making check marks or putting a sticker in the box as you go.



You can also use a token board in a token board- use small rewards for each time they complete the mini board (for a given activity) then also tie that into a bigger board for a whole day or AM/PM reward



Allow for “Mistakes”

None of us has a perfect day every day. Allow for some mistakes.

- You could have leveled rewards based on behavior (9-10 tokens gets the best prize, 6-8 gets medium, 5 or less gets ok)
- You could have opportunities to “make up” for tokens not earned- bonus token for helping clean up or for using a calming strategy when upset
- It’s also ok to not earn every time- you could say “we will try again tomorrow” then move on

Keep in mind that behavior almost always gets worse before it gets better- you are trying to make changes, and change is hard. It ok- just stay strong and stay the course. It will get easier with time.



Teach Functional Communication- communication that is functional (for all)



Especially when we are upset, even the best speakers amongst us can have trouble communicating.

We can teach our children how to communicate even when they are upset by using “functional communication training”

This means that they are able to let us know what’s bothering them, even when they can’t find their words.

Functional Communication continued

Teach a way for your child to communicate with you using nonverbal and verbal means- this might mean saying “I need a break” or “I need help”. You can teach them to use their words or to use a picture cue.

Be sure to honor their communication. If they ask for a break, this does not mean you have to give them a break to do their favorite thing. Maybe it means they can take a break (with or without you) to take some deep breaths and calm down before trying again.

Prompting the use of a break is also a great way to teach- be sure to reward functional communication!

Here are some great resources and samples of what this might look like:

- [Autism Adventures](#)
- [Autism Circuit](#)
- [Speech and Language Kids](#)
- [Teachers Pay Teachers Download](#)



How to “Take a Break”

OK so we’ve gotten as far as requesting a break... now what?

- Try using a timer to keep breaks short (around 5 minutes)- if needed you can allow the child to ask for “one more minute” (only allow this once per break)
- You can also have “ending the break” (aka getting back to work) be a way to earn a token, if you are using a token system
- Remember, this is a break to help get back on track NOT a break for a favorite activity (that is earned by finishing the expectation)

Suggestions for what to do on a break:

- Try these [sensory activities](#)
- Here are some great [calming activities](#)
- More on [break cards](#) here



Social Stories (First introduced by Carol Gray)

Social stories can be a great way to help kids to retain information- you should reread them frequently as a reminder of what to do.

Here are some social stories shared by the staff of Woburn Schools:

[About the Coronavirus](#)

[About Social Distancing](#)

[On Video Chats](#)

[Wearing Masks](#)

Here are some other great resources on social stories:

- [Autism Parenting Magazine](#)
- [Autism Speaks](#)
- [ABA Resources](#)
- [Families Together](#) (scroll down for social stories)

Not all social stories look the same, but they should all contain pictures and simple language- you can also try writing your own! Use “first person” language to help your child understand that the story is about them.

Steps to Crisis/Calm

Both crisis and calm occur in steps—sometimes we go up and down more quickly or slowly, but rarely does the switch flip immediately



Interaction Strategies- Avoid Power Struggles!

DO

- Use a calm, polite, neutral tone
- Use a low voice volume
- Say “please” and “thank you”
- Go to the child’s level
- Make eye contact
- Maintain appropriate proximity
- Approach from the side
- Use neutral body language
- Be aware of the child’s body language
- Keep instructions concise and clear
- Use “I messages”
- Be careful with humor
- Allow time for processing
- Use more start requests than stop requests

DO NOT

- Bark or nag
- Shout or raise your voice
- Stand over the child
- Demand eye contact from the child
- Stand too close or too far away
- Approach from behind
- Use menacing body language
- Ignore the child’s body language
- Be too wordy or impatient
- Use “you messages”
- Take it personally



Help, Prompt, Wait

The Help Strategy- Helps the person understand that there are more appropriate ways to get the same information. Based on assumption of a communication problem.

The Prompt Strategy- Prompt them what to do rather than the disruptive behavior. Prompt to do an incompatible behavior or high probability behavior.

The Wait Strategy- Give time to calm down, wait it out (Why Am I Talking?)

The Power of YET- Carol Dweck

Don't forget:

Behavior change takes time.

Behavior usually gets worse before it gets better.

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)



Keep on keeping on!

I hope that this was helpful. In addition to the linked resources, I'd like to thank the amazing staff at the Woburn School Department for their support and especially for the school psychologists and social workers for sharing their social stories!



Click the picture link above for an important message!



How Did We Do?

Your feedback is important and will help us to make considerations about future offerings. Please click the link to submit feedback. Remember that you can always reach out to your child's special education teachers and team chairs for specific concerns about your child.

[Feedback Form](#)

References/ Additional Resources:

[Carol Dweck MindSet Works](#)

PBS

[Carol Gray Social Stories](#)

TED Talks

[Life Space Crisis Intervention](#)

[QBS Safety Care](#)

[Michelle Garcia Winner's Social Thinking](#)

YouTube