



Supporting Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders





Developed by Kids Included Together with Funding  
From the National Foundation for Autism Research

## Supporting Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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## Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders

**Autism is a spectrum disorder that affects individuals differently.** Each child is an individual with his or her own unique strengths and challenges. Autism spectrum disorders are neurological disorders that affect a child's development in the following areas: communication, socialization, and behavior. They include autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Rett's Syndrome, and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder.



**In an out-of-school time program, a child with autism may need support in the following areas:**

- Interpreting verbal & non-verbal forms of communication
- Initiating & responding to social interaction
- Adjusting to the program routine & schedule
- Processing & regulating sensory input from the environment
- Coping with change or uncertainty

## Supporting Communication



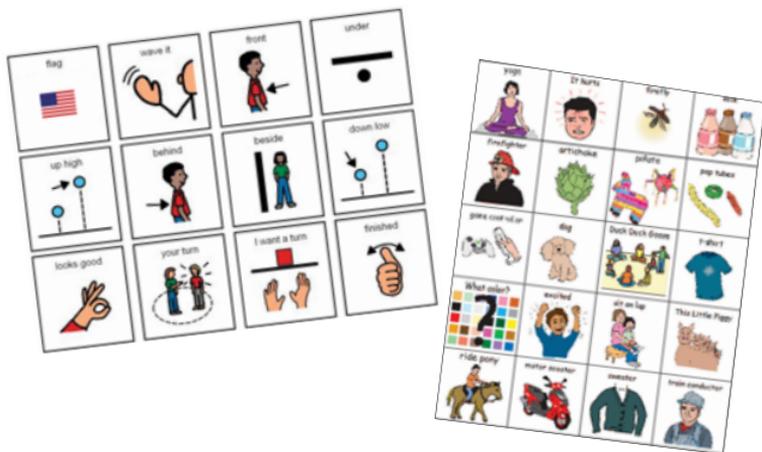
**More than words** Supporting communication includes much more than encouraging verbal language. It involves careful observation, clarifying verbal and non-verbal communication and using visual supports and cues. All children communicate through their behavior. The first step to supporting a child's communication is to observe their behavior. Ask yourself questions like, *"What does the child's behavior look like when he is having fun? What does it look like when he seems overwhelmed? What does it look like when he appears upset?"* Watch for subtle cues to learn how the child uses his behavior to communicate his wants and needs.

Video resources and FAQ's on strategies to support communication are available at [kitonline.org](http://kitonline.org)

**Clarify communication** Children with autism may have a difficult time interpreting non-verbal communication like body language and facial expressions. When a child does not naturally pick up on subtle cues, clear, simple explanations may help. For example, to help a child interpret your body language when you are busy, tell her what to look for: *“When I have my head down and I am reading something, I am busy. You can ask me if I am busy if you are not sure or you can come back later.”* Processing and interpreting verbal communication may also be difficult for a child.



## Supporting Communication



**Visual supports** Adding a visual component to words, activities, games, and interactions can help to support communication for children with autism. Many children have a difficult time processing verbal language in a noisy and busy program environment. Visual cues can clarify communication and provide a support for a child if she has trouble processing the actual words. Visual supports can be added to almost everything in a child or youth program. The following are some simple ways to incorporate visual supports:



Pair simple signs and gestures with spoken language (internet videos are a great resource for learning simple signs).



Hold up an object that corresponds to the topic of conversation or directions (i.e. hold up a jacket while you say, "Get your jacket").



Take pictures of the steps involved in an activity.

Make a choice board with pictures of the choices available during free time.



Provide written instructions for a game in a school-age program.

Simplifying directions and communication may be necessary to support a child. For example:

Use fewer words: "Sit down" versus "Can you please come over here and sit down?"

Break down activities into smaller steps.

Speak slowly and clearly.

Give the child more time to respond.

Pay attention to the pitch and volume of your voice. See what works best for the child.

## Supporting Communication

Early childhood and youth programs offer children many different types of opportunities to engage in social interactions and make friends. Many



children develop the ability to grasp unwritten social rules and norms without explicit instruction. Children with autism may need your

help learning how to interact with and respond to their peers.

**Teach popular activities** Identify the games, toys, and activities that are popular with the children in your program. Spend time thinking about how to break down a popular activity into small, teachable steps for a child with autism or explain a playground game in an easy-to-understand format. Encourage the child's family to promote the popular items at home and practice the steps involved in a game.

**Explain abstract concepts** Slang and metaphors may be difficult for children to understand. It may also be hard to distinguish between playful name-calling (like “homie” or “G”) and hurtful name-calling (like “stupid”). Children with autism may need help in learning what slang words mean and how to interpret them in a school-age or teen setting.

**Model how to use communication supports** Children may be hesitant to interact with a peer who does not use words to communicate. Adults can model how they use pictures, gestures, or communication devices to talk with the child. Encourage peers to practice using these supports to play and interact with the child.

## Supporting Behavior

As children with autism navigate your program environment, they are working hard to interpret communication and the social world and regulate their responses to sensory stimuli. Establishing a predictable and stable environment and supports will help children feel secure and promote positive behavior.

**Establish a consistent routine & schedule** Children with autism often look for things that are predictable and stable. Following a consistent program routine and schedule will provide a base of support. Use visual supports to communicate the schedule and help a child prepare to transition from one activity to another.

**Prepare children for changes** Unexpected changes and events are inevitable in a early childhood or youth program. For a child who relies on consistency, sudden changes can feel devastating. You can help a child cope with changes by spending time talking about and explaining the changes before they happen. For example, if a child's teacher is going on vacation, let the child know ahead of time. Show pictures of where the teacher is going and talk about what will happen at the program while his teacher is away.

Instructional videos on visual supports are available at [kitonline.org](http://kitonline.org)



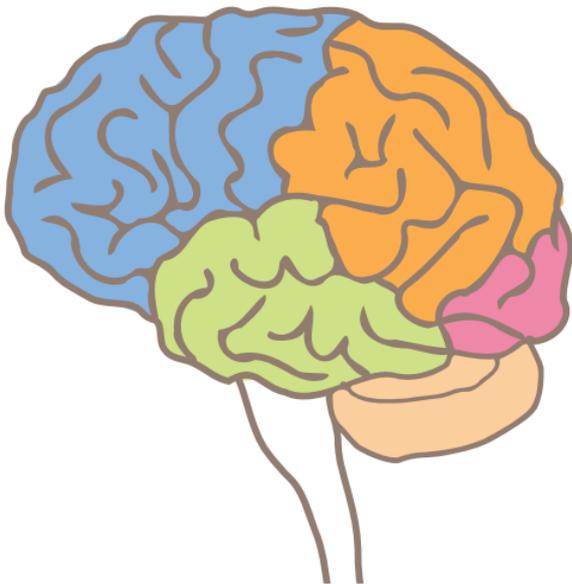
**Pay attention to the environment** Many children with autism spectrum disorders are either over or under sensitive to the stimulation in the environment (lighting, sound, smell, material, touch, etc.) Paying attention to what is going on in the environment and how a child reacts will provide clues on what types of environments work for the child and which cause stress. Quiet, small group activities might work best for one child while active, movement-based activities work best for another child.

## Helping Children Understand Their Peers

Inclusion promotes relationships and understanding and celebrates diversity. Child and youth program staff should not highlight how one child is different or unusual or make anyone feel uncomfortable. It is important to answer children's questions about their peers with autism in an open and honest way\*. Asking questions is a way to gain understanding and a great opportunity to initiate interaction. Here are some themes that you can use to address children's questions:

**Not everyone's brain works the same way** Spend time explaining to children that all brains are wired differently. This means that sometimes children act in a way that we do not understand or have never seen before. Facilitate discussions and activities to help children realize how everyone is different and behaves in different ways.

**All children like to play and have fun.** Emphasize that all children play in different ways. Point out that sometimes kids play alone when they have trouble understanding a game or activity. Support children in using patience with one another and finding ways to spend time together throughout the day. Facilitate small group activities and create opportunities for all children to play.



## Helping Children Understand Their Peers

**All children use their senses to experience the world around them** Explain that everything we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell affects how we feel. Sometimes we can be overwhelmed by a bright light, a sudden noise, a sour candy, or a strong smell. Some children feel their senses very strongly and it is harder for them to feel okay with sensations. Set up a quiet space for children where they can take a break. Highlight what it is for and how to use it. Encourage the children to remind each other where the quiet space is when the world feels too overwhelming.

**Most children do not notice all the small details in the world around them** Draw attention to the fact that some kids notice all the small things that most people don't notice. They might walk into the gym and see the floor boards, the basketball, the net, the nails in the bleachers, the whistle around the coach's neck, and many, many other details instead of the gym as a whole. Since seeing all the small things can be overwhelming, encourage children to keep everything in its usual place and minimize clutter from backpacks and personal belongings.

\* **Remember to maintain confidentiality.** Knowledge of or information about a child's disability is confidential. Staff should never tell other children or families that a child has autism without written permission from the family. Staff can work to increase understanding of differences without giving the child a label or disclosing her disability.

**Resources for Professionals** To access KIT's instructional videos on clarifying communication, using picture supports, and facilitating interactions, please visit [kitonline.org](http://kitonline.org). For assistance with specific questions about supporting a child with autism, email [info@kitonline.org](mailto:info@kitonline.org).



## References

Donnellan, A. & Leary, M., *Movement Difference and Diversity in Autism/Mental Retardation* (DRI Press, 1995)

McGinnity, K. & Negri, N., *Walk Awhile in My Autism* (Cambridge Book Review Press, 2005)

Sabin, E., *The Autism Acceptance Book: Being a Friend to Someone with Autism* (Watering Can Press, 2006)

*The Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Partnership*, (Autism Asperger's Digest Magazine, May/June 2008)

*Youth Advocate Programs, It's about Relationships: For you, for your child* (unpublished document, 2006)

## Recommended Book List for Adults

*Making Lemonade* by Judy Endow  
(Cambridge Book Review Press, 2006)

*The Way I see It* by Temple Grandin (Future Horizons, 2008)

*Walk Awhile in My Autism* by Kate McGinnity and Nan Negri  
(Cambridge Book Review Press, 2005)

*You're Going to Love This Kid* by Paula Kluth  
(Paul H. Brookes, 2003)

## Recommended Book List for Children

*10 Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew* By Ellen Notbohm (Future Horizons, Inc., 2004)

*A Walk in the Rain with a Brain* by Edward M. Hallowell (ReganBooks, 2004)

*All About My Brother* by Sarah Peralta (Autism Asperger Publishing Co, 2002)

*Blue Bottle Mystery: An Asperger Adventure* by Kathy Hoopmann (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001)

*Different Just Like Me* by Lori Mitchell (Charlesbridge, 1999)

*Ian's Walk: A Story about Autism* by Laurie Lears (Albert Whitman and Company, 1998)

*The Autism Acceptance Book: Being a Friend to Someone with Autism* by Ellen Sabin (Watering Can Press, 2006)

*My Friend with Autism* by Beverly Bishop (Future Horizons, 2002)

*The Don't-give-up Kid* by Jeanne Gehret (Verbal Images Press, 1996)

*The Silent Boy* by Lois Lowry (Laurel-LeafBooks, 2003)

*Trevor Trevor* by Diane Twatchtman-Cullen (Starfish Press, 1998)



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