

Visual Strategies Leverage Autism's Strengths to Improve Lives.

Imagine you have a beautiful child who is saying his first words, imitating basic gestures, and hugging you. Then he suddenly stops. He stops using words. He becomes easily upset. He withdraws from your touch.

Although autism does not always present itself in this way, this is the reality that unfolds for many families living with autism, a developmental disability that affects social, behavioral, academic, cognitive, and motor skills. Autism is a spectrum disorder and children may show mild to severe symptoms in these skill areas.

According to the Autism Society of America, autism currently affects up to 1.5 million Americans and is growing at the alarming rate of 10 percent to 17 percent annually. Costs to the U.S. are a staggering \$90 billion annually and are expected to grow to \$200 to \$400 billion in the next 10 years. Current figures have prompted Congress to increase funding in research and treatment for the disability but relief is not likely to be immediate. For the millions of parents and professionals working with individuals with autism, the pressing issue is “What can I do to help?”

“Although no cure exists for autism,” says Amy Maguire, Co-founder of Sandbox Learning, “many families and professionals are discovering methods which leverage the disability’s strengths to improve the lives of these affected children. “For example, many children with autism have a deficit in auditory processing, but they have a relative strength in visual processing. Therefore, using visuals in the learning process leverages the strong visual

processing of children with autism to enhance learning. This use of visual prompts has been applied to social, communication, and other functional life skills with amazing success.”

For social skill development, stories frequently are used for children with autism to teach social norms, to understand and manage feelings, to explain new experiences, and to address difficult skills. Parents, teachers, and speech therapists often write their own stories to address specific concerns.

The Sandbox Learning Company (www.sandbox-learning.com) has developed an online system that creates customizable, printable stories focusing on a variety of skills unique to the needs of many children with autism. These stories combine the traditional benefits of stories with customized text and images to enhance the learning experience for children. The customization plays to the visual processing of children with autism to convey the social skills lesson.

Kimberly Powers, a special education teacher in Gwinnett County, GA uses these stories to work with students in her classroom and said, “Having the Sandbox Learning Company’s customized stories adds a ton because the kids can really make a connection. It makes them feel special and helps them get the materials better.” Kimberly has found that her children really love the stories. “They loved it! They thought it was the neatest thing ever!”

“The idea is by customizing the images to look like the child and the text to reflect elements of the child’s life,” continues Maguire, “the child better identifies with the materials and the

learning experience is significantly enhanced.” Some of the story topics include Meeting People, Sharing, and Feeling Angry.

“Visuals also have been shown to promote language development,” adds Maguire a former teacher who holds an M.A. in Special Education. Deficits in communication skills are a well documented characteristic of autism and many children have a limited ability to functionally communicate their needs, feelings, or interests. “Imagine not being able to communicate that you want a drink of water, a snack, or a favorite DVD. Picture exchange communication system (PECS) uses pictures to provide a way for children who are non-verbal or have limited communication to communicate their needs. In this system children exchange photos or line drawings for preferred items.

PECS teaches professionals and parents how to develop functional communication using photos and icons. PECS not only has been shown to promote communication, but in many cases has helped reduce problem behaviors in children by allowing them to communicate their needs.

Visual strategies also help children with autism develop functional life skills. “Simply moving through the day is a challenge for some children,” explains Maguire. “Traditional verbal prompts such as ‘Time to clean up and go outside,’ often are not as effective with children with autism. However, creating a visual schedule helps children with autism make the transition from one activity to another.”

Visual schedules include a sequence of drawings or pictures which indicate the order of activities for the school day or home routine. This method focuses on the child's visual strengths and often can improve a child's ability to move independently. Using visuals is a keystone of the well-respected Teaching and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) program. The Chapel-Hill, NC based organization trains parents and professionals on ways to structure the classroom and home to use schedules and individual work tasks for instruction.

With the prevalence of autism, using teaching methods which work with the strengths of autism may go a long way to helping children with the disability. These visual strategies are just the beginning.

For more information about learning materials designed for children with autism and others with developmental disabilities, contact Sandbox Learning at (336) 757-1255. Or online at www.sandbox-learning.com.

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