



Autism Support

Strategies for Assisting Learners

***General Considerations***

When working to support learners who are autistic, it is vitally important to talk to the student and to parents/carers before the student enters study

Try to understand the condition and accept the students as they are.

Ensure that all staff who will have contact with the student with autism, understand the condition too.

Support staff should be available to assist the learning process and for emotional support.

***Specifics***

Each TLC should:

Agree with the learner what is expected of them in the way of attendance, work etc.

If they are to take tests, ensure office staff are notified of the need for them to have extra time. This must be requested when booking tests.

Ensure that the learner understands exactly what he/she is being asked to do in the workplace by addressing them by name. They may not take in general instructions if in a group

Try to use specific language. Elaborate language may confuse the student and he may interpret what is said literally. Explain idioms and unspoken assumptions.

Do not expect the student to transfer skills from one area to another. Each session will appear separate from the others with its own requirements for attention and activity which have to be learned.

Establish rules about participation and be firm without being aggressive. These learners may appear rude and egocentric, expecting instant attention and quite unaware of their actions and words. They should be told (repeatedly if necessary) why this aspect of their behaviour is a problem.

Establish what happens if there is a difficulty. The learner may need somewhere they can go to cool off if a situation becomes too stressful.

***Tutorial Support***

Effectively used, tutorial support provides an opportunity for dialogue between a student and a member of staff in which learning requirements are identified and planned. The student will be encouraged to recognise their learning strengths and learning needs, and asked to create and direct future tasks, projects and assignments.

Tutorial time allows the staff member and student to look back over work done, explore and reinforce the learning achieved, and celebrate these achievements. It also allows them to look forward to future learning via target setting and work preparation, and empowers the student to organise and reflect upon his own work.

To set up tutorial time for a student with autism, the following need to be considered:

* Is the process student-centred, or does it assume an ability to communicate and imagine which is not there?
* How can communication be made more effective?
* How is the agenda set? Is this empowering for the student?
* How are the abstract concepts of reflection, evaluation and forward planning to be managed?
* How can the process be kept alive through the week until the next tutorial?

For a tutorial to be successful there needs to be clear understanding as to what the meeting is for, when it will occur and how long it will last.

It should also be clear how the content will be communicated and how the responsibilities for decision making and on-going action are arranged. These issues also apply for students with limited speech or understanding.

***Setting up Tutorials***

The location and time of the tutorial need to be known by the learner. The place needs to meet the learner’s needs. For example somewhere familiar, comfortable, quiet and distraction free, not in a room the learner uses for other purposes. This will help the learner associate the room with tutorial activity.

Try keep to the same time and day each time, and *use an appointment card or another visual stimulus to act as a reminder* of the meetings details.

Make it clear what the learner is expected to do at the end of the tutorial time.

The structure of the tutorial will depend on each learner. Do not underestimate conceptual difficulties. They may have good vocabulary and expressive skills but still have difficulty in understanding language and social behaviour. Keeping a good structure to the meeting, especially visual structure, is important so that the student can concentrate on the content of the tutorial is important. Social stories can be helpful.

There is a need to have good understanding of the individual’s learning style as well as likes, dislikes and anxieties. Try to make the discussion visual. For example, use comic strip conversations. They help students who are not always aware of their own emotions or that what they are thinking is not known to others.

Colours can be used to identify moods and emotions. Incorporate the learner into the narrative. The learner can then identify with the desired outcome and can maybe learn an effective strategy to a certain stimulus that can be reinforced by turning it into a social story or drawing.

Use checklists for learners to complete, using words or pictures to evaluate their success in completing tasks, managing their own behaviour and reaching other short term goals. Diaries, action plans and lists are highly structured visual support mechanisms to help keep the learner on target. Discussion can be reinforced with pictures, photos or videos of the student. The TLC must have a good knowledge of the learner’s communication skills and learning style. Many learners will need support organising their work and tasks for the week, knowing where they should be, what they should be doing socially and what to do when they need to ask for help.

The tutorial can also provide time to address issues of behaviour, social rules and how the learner conducts themselves. Railway maps can be a useful visual structure. Plan a route like taking a train journey. Follow-up work can look at the learner’s journey and how successful it was, and new rules can be drawn up. Pictures, diaries and lists remain after the tutorial as a visual reminder of the tutorial. They can be pocket sized cards. If all staff know of their existence, they can be used to ensure consistency of approach.

Tutorial time is vital for learners with autism. It provides an opportunity to check the response of the student to the course he is on and to help with any problems which have arisen, as well as celebrating achievements.

***Keeping in Touch***

A good way of keeping in touch between tutorials may be via email or text messaging rather than phone calls. This is because students with autism are often very computer literate and prefer visual ways of communicating rather than verbal. Changes of lesson time, location, timing or staffing could be given via the computer or the mobile phone, and reminders could be initiated for important deadlines such as essay hand-in dates.

***Feedback and praise***

When demonstrating achievement, it is important that each TLC does this visually. Demonstrating through their VQ manager portfolio to show progress after each assessment will instil a feeling of achievement and self-being in each learner.

Read through feedback and use this as a motivating tool by praising every effort made.

***Communication and Autism***

For most of us, communication is a tool for social bonding. By sharing our thoughts, opinions, experiences and emotions, we get to know and understand other people and ourselves. We are also able to form and maintain relationships.

For effective communication to happen it is important to have ALL of the following:

* WHAT: something to communicate - a message
* HOW: a way of communicating - common to both sides
* WHO: somebody to communicate with - you cannot communicate alone
* WHY: a purpose - motivation to communicate.

Some people with autism lack an understanding of what communication is for. Not realising they can have an impact on their world and the people in it, they may fail to develop the essential communication skills the rest of us take for granted. Autism is a condition which affects social communication, both verbal and non-verbal.

Some people with autism have delayed language. Some do not develop speech at all. Others have excellent verbal ability. Even where there is speech, wider aspects of communication, like understanding hidden meanings and interpreting body language, may still be affected. The same is also true in reverse – people who are completely nonverbal may understand more than others think.

***Communication difficulties and Autism***

Difficulties in using and understanding language:

* Problems with pace, volume, quality of speech, tone and inflection of voice
* Echolalia – repetitive echoing of the speech of others
* Incessant talking, with no regard to the interest or attention of the listener
* Making comments out of context
* Making tactless remarks and/or using inappropriate language
* Use and understanding of body language – facial expression, gesture, proximity, body position, eye contact
* Literal understanding – problems with irony, idioms and metaphors, jokes and
* teasing, judging the sincerity of other people’s words
* Processing delay
* Following instructions
* Expressing and understanding emotions

Difficulties with social use of language:

* Social timing – may interrupt conversation
* Poor concentration
* Lack of joint attention and shared interest
* Letting people know s/he has something to communicate
* Starting, ending and keeping a conversation going
* Taking turns in conversation
* Knowing if the listener is interested, understands and is paying attention
* Difficulty recognizing suitability of when and where certain topics can be talked about, who to, for how long and the appropriateness of language to be used

Tips to improve your communication with people with autism

Modify your own language

* Say their name first to get attention
* Keep language short and simple
* Say what you mean and mean what you say – be clear and specific
* Avoid inferred meaning and ambiguity
* Avoid or explain irony, sarcasm, jokes, turns of phrase
* Give instructions in correct order of action and break down into small steps
* Be positive – avoid ‘no’ and ‘don’t’ and say what you want to happen, not what you don’t want to happen
* Make abstract concepts concrete
* Give more time for processing information
* Provide visual support to make your communication clearer
* Be aware that the ability to talk does not mean that they will understand the subtle nuances of communication
* Teach specific skills for essential language functions e.g. asking for help, asking for a break from activity, making requests, accepting and rejecting requests, expressing pain, anxiety and other emotions, explaining that s/he doesn’t understand
* Create as many communication opportunities as possible