Learning Tactics to Help Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are unique individuals with wide variations in symptoms; however, there are common learning styles among individuals with ASD. In her book, The Source® for Intervention in Autism Spectrum Disorders, Phyllis Kupperman suggests some general "tactics" to address these core learning styles and help children with ASD reach their goals. Not all children with ASD will need all the tactics. Look at each child's particular learning style and intervention strategies and goals. Then choose the tactics with the best fit. These suggestions are intended as jumping off points for interventions rather than prescriptions of what to do.

1. **Use visual patterns.** Children with ASD may be visual learners. Use visual, graphic, and written patterns. Not all children are attracted to the same type of visual material. They may prefer photographs, line drawings, illustrations, or cartoons with exaggerated features. Consider individual differences in perception and focus and how that influences the visual images used. Use the same set of visual pictures, graphics, or written words until the child is successful at identifying or using it. Then select other pictures of the same objects or words in a different font so that the child can begin to generalize.
2. **Teach vocabulary.** Children with ASD have difficulty picking up vocabulary from the background stream of language. They may understand a particular word in one context but not automatically understand its meaning in another context. Teach vocabulary specific to each activity. Beware of words with multiple meanings and idiomatic language.
3. **Use simple grammar.** Since children with ASD learn language primarily through gestalt processing, they are often confused by too much language, particularly in new or upsetting situations. Simplify the grammatical structure of questions and explanations and speak slowly.
4. **Use examples and demonstrations.** Children with ASD may or may not feel the need to engage in pretend play, greet a friend, ask a question, or sit at a table. Just telling these children that it is nice to say "hi" or wave when you come in the door doesn't usually carry over into everyday life. They need to practice greeting people in many different settings. They usually cannot go from the "general" to the "specific." Instead, demonstrate and give many examples so that eventually they can go from the "specific" to the "general." Broaden the scope of the examples across environments so they know the response is expected everywhere.
5. **Repeat, repeat, repeat.** Often children with ASD need many repetitions before information is fully absorbed into long-term memory. There is comfort in repetition and in knowing exactly what to expect in an often confusing world. One reason computer programs are attractive is because they are predictable and exactly the same each time. Most children move on from repeating the same script or sequence of events when they feel they have mastered it. As adults, we often feel we have to constantly present something new, but children with ASD need things to be the same. We can find a balance by repeating, repeating, repeating, and then planning for change.
6. **Follow the child.** Join in the child's activity when the child cannot respond to what is being presented. Then gradually draw the child into new interactions. Follow the child and take advantage of teachable moments. For example, a favorite toy may become the object to stimulate a request, pretend with, hide and find, tickle, or swing in a sheet.
7. **Use cloze sentence formats.** Wh- questions are particularly difficult for most children with ASD. Even the most concrete what questions can be confusing because the word itself is intangible. While children are learning wh- questions, use cloze sentence formats to clarify the communication. Instead of asking, "Where did the class go today?" use the sentence, "The class went to _____." Modeling the proper pronoun in a cloze sentence is a bit of a problem, but using gestures and intonation markers usually helps. If you want to know what a child wants to eat, the cloze sentence model is, "I want to eat _____." A written sentence strip or a nonverbal gesture may also be helpful. Many children with ASD memorize questions and their answers verbatim at first. Then they go on to learn different answers to the same questions.
8. **Go from concrete to abstract.** One of the primary functions of human language is to communicate abstract ideas. While high-functioning individuals with ASD can eventually come to understand abstraction and inferential thinking, they come to it through direct experience and concrete examples. A child can learn the concept of kindness by being shown specific ways of being kind: sharing toys, helping someone, and using polite words. Sometimes these examples need to be even more concrete (e.g., "When you let Sammy play with your truck, you were being kind"). Use many concrete examples to develop an abstract concept.

9. **Use rote learning.** If a child truly learns something, the new information and ideas can be associated with previous knowledge, compared, contrasted, and used flexibly. Rote learning is often viewed as purememorization without much understanding or application. Since children with ASD can often memorize bits of information but have difficulty associating the new information with previous knowledge, teachers question whether these students have truly "learned" the new material. We all have learned some information in a rote fashion (e.g., the multiplication tables and a list of the Presidents of the United States). It is better for children with ASD to be introduced to information and to learn to repeat it back than not to present the information (Heward, 2003). Use rote learning abilities to expose children to vocabulary, ideas, and concepts that may become useful to them later.
10. **Use lists and schedules.** Children with ASD often have difficulty with executive function. They have difficulty planning and carrying out tasks. They do better when a particular task, a sequence of events, or a plan for the day is organized. Lists and schedules are important tools and can be used throughout the day. Even non-readers often do well with simple lists because the lists are tangible. Parents can carry small writing boards so they can quickly write a schedule like "1. Bank, 2. McDonald's." Lists and schedules help introduce the concepts of first and then. Tantrum behavior is dramatically reduced when a child can delay the strongly desired activity and do what is asked of her first.
11. **Develop behavior systems.** Many children with ASD benefit from structured behavior systems. Even when a child is not involved in a discreet trials or applied behavioral analysis program, behavioral tactics can be helpful. The following tactic has been used successfully to modify particular behaviors.

    1. When you write the goal and objective, state them in a positive way. Say what the child will do, rather than identify the behavior to be extinguished.
    2. Make an incentive chart and write the objective at the top.
    3. Set up a positive reward system. Many families use a simple chart with a picture of a small reward at the end. The reward pictured should be something the child wants. The child earns a star each time the target behavior is observed. Allow older children to negotiate the number of stars needed to earn the reward.
    4. Guarantee success. Make sure the child can achieve the target behavior and earn the stars in a day or two at first. Modify the target behavior or the number of stars needed so the child will learn that her efforts will be rewarded.
12. **Develop teamwork.** Children with ASD do not automatically transfer learned information and behavior from one environment to the next. Teachers, parents, and therapists need to communicate with each other. Everyone needs to know which prompts elicit the desired responses and how to prepare the child for success.
13. **Develop communication systems.** Implement a communication system for parents, school personnel, and outside professionals. If families, therapists, and teachers can work hand-in-hand, the benefit to the child is enormous. It is helpful to devise a way to keep everyone up-to-date and to raise questions and concerns. Formal or informal meetings and emails are some ways for groups to communicate with each other.
14. **Expand the context.** Those with ASD tend to learn in particular situations and conscious efforts are required to transfer new skills to different contexts. A behavior or language pattern developed in a therapy setting needs to be practiced in the classroom, at home, and in the community in a variety of activities and with a variety of people. Help individuals with ASD realize that games learned with their siblings, for example, can be played with classmates. They need to learn that rules at school (e.g., use a quiet voice) also apply at home.

Use these general tactics for specific interventions in language development, academic achievement, and development of social skills. For example, if the child's goal is to write a logical narrative, the general tactics of using visual patterns and following the child will help achieve that particular goal.

Adapted from The Source® for Intervention in Autism Spectrum Disorders by Phyllis Kupperman

Heward, W.L. (2003). Ten faulty notions about teaching and learning that hinder the effectiveness of special education. *The Journal of Special Education*, *36*(4), 186-205.

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