

Strategies for Effective Teaching and Learning

Tips for Teaching High-Functioning Individuals With Autism Spectrum Disorders

- **Avoid abstract ideas whenever possible.** Individuals with autism spectrum disorders frequently have problems with abstract and conceptual thinking. While some students may eventually acquire a few abstract skills, others never will. When abstract concepts must be used, use visual cues, such as gestures or written words, to augment the abstract ideas.
- **Avoid speech students might misinterpret.** Most high-functioning people with autism spectrum disorders use and interpret speech literally. Until you know the capabilities of the individual, it is recommended that you avoid
 - idioms (*save your breath, jump the gun, second thoughts*, etc.);
 - double meanings (most jokes have double meanings);
 - sarcasm, such as saying, “Great!” after someone has just spilled a soft drink all over the table; and
 - nicknames.
- **Break down tasks.** If a pupil doesn’t appear capable of learning a task, break it down into smaller steps, or present the task in several different ways (e.g., visually, verbally, and physically).
- **Assist students with organizational skills.** Individuals with autism spectrum disorders often have difficulty with organizational skills, regardless of their intelligence and/or age. Even a “straight A” student with autism spectrum disorder who has a photographic memory can sometimes be incapable of remembering to bring a pencil to class or remembering a deadline for an assignment. In such cases, assistance should be provided in the least intrusive way possible. Strategies could include putting a picture of a pencil on the cover of the student’s notebook or reminders at the end of the day of assignments that are to be completed at home. Always praise the pupil when he or she remembers something he or she has previously forgotten.
- **Prepare students for change.** It is important to prepare the student for all unexpected changes, such as an assembly, a substitute teacher, rescheduling of classes, and so forth. Use a written or visual schedule to prepare for change.
- **Make adjustments for auditory and visual distractions.** Be aware that normal levels of auditory and visual input can be perceived by individuals with autism spectrum disorders as too much or too little. For example, the hum of fluorescent lighting is extremely distracting for some people with autism spectrum disorders. Consider environmental changes, such as removing some of the visual clutter from the room, or seating changes if the student seems distracted or upset by his or her classroom environment.
- **Facilitate group work.** If a class activity involves pairing off or choosing partners, draw numbers or use some other arbitrary means of pairing. You could also ask a class leader whether he or she would agree to choose the individual with autism spectrum disorder as a partner. This should be arranged prior to pairing. The pupil with autism spectrum disorder is most often the individual left with no partner. This is unfortunate because this student could benefit most from having a partner.
- Most importantly, be positive, be creative, and, most of all, be flexible!

SOURCE: Original adaptation from S. Moreno, “Tips for Teaching High-Functioning People With Autism.” Available at <http://www.aspergersyndrome.org/Articles/Tips-for-Teaching-High-Functioning-People-with-Autism.aspx>. Used by permission.

For additional recommendations, see <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/Tips-for-Teaching-High-Functioning-People-with-Autism>.