



How to support school-age children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Additional Chapters : Learning

What are the learning difficulties commonly encountered by children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (“ASD”)?

When children with ASD start primary school, they may face greater difficulties in learning than their peers. Below are some of the common reasons behind:

- **Uneven cognitive development:** Intelligence is one of the factors that influences children’s learning. Studies have found that around 25% of children with ASD has borderline intelligence which undermines their ability to learn in mainstream school. Even if some of them have normal overall intellectual development, their cognitive profile may be uneven. Some children may have extraordinary memory, readily acquire factual and systematic knowledge. However they may be weak in comprehension, imagination and creativity. Hence they find it difficult to understand some abstract concepts in their study.
- **Weak comprehension skills:** Research has shown that many children with ASD are weak in receiving instructions and integrating information. They find it difficult to receive and process auditory and visual messages at the same time, and are difficult to understand and learn from daily life experiences. They are prone to misunderstand the meaning behind words, and they will give irrelevant answers to teachers because of misinterpretation. As they tend to pay excessive attention to details, they have difficulty abstracting the main ideas of a passage. They may find subjects like reading comprehension and composition daunting. Furthermore, they often have rigid thinking and lack flexibility. They find it difficult to draw inferences and apply their knowledge in a flexible way.



- **Attention problems:** Some children with ASD also have attention problems. Their attention span on different matters may vary considerably. For example, they are easily distracted when studying subjects that are complicated or uninteresting to them. On the other hand, they may be obsessed in things that fascinate them, or focus too much on minor details and overlook important aspects. Besides, some of them will be easily distracted by faint noises or objects in the classroom (e.g. the clock on the wall or noises from the air conditioner) and hence unable to focus on their studies.
- **Weak motivation:** Children with ASD are sometimes being criticized as poor in motivation and passive in learning. In fact, they usually have special and narrow interests that become their obsessions. As a result, they lack motivation for doing other things, including their studies.
- **Weak organisation skills:** Children with ASD often have problem with their organisation skills. They may be messy and disorganised in their daily life or studies and require extra support and guidance from adults. When they are asked to pack their schoolbags, organise their circulars and homework, and take care of themselves, they may either fail to complete the tasks or require substantial help from adults. When being assigned a project or writing task, they usually do not know where to start as there is a large amount of information to be processed. Their performance in examination is also undermined by their poor time management and examination skills. Teachers may misunderstand that they have attention problem or poor motivation, but actually their difficulties stem from their weaker organisation skills.
- **Atypical sensory responses:** Children with ASD tend to be more stubborn and resistant to changes. When interacting with the external environment, some will show atypical responses (e.g. hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity) or even engage in self-stimulatory behaviours. They will be upset and become emotional if they cannot adapt to changes in their environment, which subsequently affects their learning. In more serious cases, they may harm themselves or become aggressive. Such cases must be referred to specialists early in order to identify the root cause of the problem so that proper treatment (such as behaviour modification or medication) can be administered. (Please refer to Chapters of “Behaviour and Emotions”)



How to enhance the learning ability of children with ASD?

Parents can observe and identify their children's strengths and weaknesses, and try to find out factors that affect their learning performance. Parents can make effort to address the children's areas of difficulties and draw on their strengths to make up for their weaknesses. The following strategies can be used:

- **Give clear instructions and specific guidance to boost children's motivation:**

- ✧ Give clear and concise instruction, avoid giving too much information or command at one time.
- ✧ Guide them to think with concrete steps and frameworks.
- ✧ When teaching abstract concepts, parents can give more daily examples to facilitate their understanding and guide them to comprehend and analyse the issues from multiple perspectives.
- ✧ Intentionally teach them how to do assignment and skills to tackle examination. For example, they can practice writing weekly journals, then composition; make use of "mind maps" or the "6W's method" to organise their ideas; jot notes and build a useful vocabulary list or word bank for writing. More importantly, encourage them to participate in different extra-curricular activities to enrich their life experiences and writing idea.

- **Use visual strategies:**

- ✧ Children with ASD are better visual learners than auditory learners. More visual strategies and strengthened visual cues can be used to enhance their understanding. For instance, when teaching abstract concepts such as money and change, parents can explain the idea with the help of pictures or real-life objects.
- ✧ Adopt a visual learning mode by using visual cues and mnemonic to help children identify and remember the main points more easily.



✧ Visual strategies can be applied to the children's environmental setting, routine building and skill acquisition.

- **Build up organisation skills:**

✧ In order to build up organisation skill in children, parents can break down tasks into small steps. With visual cues and demonstration, parents can guide them to complete the task step by step in an organised manner.

✧ Divide boring and tedious tasks into small parts so that children will have a greater motivation and stronger sense of accomplishment when they finish them.

- **Use rewards and fun activities to boost children's motivation for learning:**

✧ Parents may incorporate children's favourite topics into their learning activities. For example, parents can use animal as an illustration to boost their motivation to learn if they like animals.

✧ Pay careful attention to the likes and dislikes of the children, make use of rewards to boost their motivation for learning and help them to develop good behaviour.

✧ Parents may consider offering tangible rewards and setting up behavioural contract to encourage their children to complete the tasks.

✧ In the end, if children fail to complete the tasks, parents can review if the tasks are too big or too difficult for them to handle, or there are other reasons.

✧ Guide children to set realistic goals and have reasonable expectations on themselves so as to avoid frustration on both sides.



- **Create a favourable learning environment and reduce external stimulation:**

- ✧ Pay attention to children's sensory responses (e.g. over or under sensitive to light, sound, temperature and touch) and try to prepare a suitable environment. This helps to reduce external stimulation and improve their attention.
- ✧ Guide children to set up a personal work system and good habits in order to help them to focus on their tasks and minimise distraction.
- ✧ Make use of graphics, photos and symbols to remind children of the task requirements and procedures.

- **Establish daily routine and structure daily schedule:**

- ✧ For children who are more rigid about their daily routine, parents can tell them the possible changes in advance. Appropriate reminders and role-playing rehearsals can help to reduce their anxiety.
- ✧ Guide children to establish a daily routine. Set up a timetable for work and rest will make their life better organised.



Daily Living Skills

What are “daily living skills”?

Daily living skills include:

- ✧ Self-care skills such as getting dressed, comb hair, wash face and bathing
- ✧ Learning-related skills such as writing skills and skills in packing school bags
- ✧ Simple chores such as sweep floor, wash dishes and make bed

Why is it so important for children with ASD to acquire daily living skills?

Children with ASD often have problems in motor coordination. They are weak in planning and organization, usually require assistance from parents in order to complete the daily task. If parents can learn appropriate method to guide their children, they can help them to become more independent, which in turn boost their confidence and enhance their social skills.

How to help children to develop “daily living skills”?

Here are some tips for developing daily living skills in children:

- **Cultivate motivation for learning**

Children are unwilling to learn daily living skills because they lack the motivation. Parents can patiently explain the reasons behind, the importance and benefits of good mastery of daily living skills. Apart from instant encouragement and praise, parents can also give small presents as rewards for their good efforts.



- **Enrich knowledge**

One must have adequate knowledge about the daily living skills before learning them. As such, parents can help children better understand the details of each step and the strategies for completing these tasks by giving demonstrations and hints.

- **Set clear and specific goals**

Parents should work with their children to establish clear and specific goals. They should break each goal into short-term targets so as to enhance their sense of accomplishment. These goals should match with the children's needs and ability, and be quantifiable. For example:

Long term goal:

The child can brush teeth by himself within a month.

Short term targets:

1. Child can squeeze toothpaste onto toothbrush by himself within 1 week
2. Child can rinse mouth by himself within 2 weeks
3. Child can brush part of his teeth with toothbrush within 3 weeks

- **List out clear and specific steps**

Children with ASD often have problems in their planning and organization skills. Parents can guide them to list out clear and specific steps to follow so that they learn different living skills efficiently. For example:

Long term goal:

The child can organize his schoolbag after completing homework



Steps to follow:

1. Put homework, handbook and signed circular into a white folder
2. Put textbooks and exercise books of Chinese, English, Mathematics and General Studies into red, yellow, green and blue folders respectively
3. Put other textbooks and exercise books, and all the folders into school bag
4. Check pencil case and put it in school bag
5. Put Octopus card, tissue paper, water bottle and other necessities into school bag

- **Evaluation**

Upon completion of each short-term targets and long-term goal, parents can evaluate with their children and decide if the goals and steps should be further adjusted. Parents should listen carefully to their children's concern and come up with solutions together, and encourage them no matter they achieve the goal or not. By doing that, they will have the confidence to move on to the next goal.



Bullying

Bullying happens when an individual or a group of people with more power, repeatedly and intentionally harm, intimidate, or coerce another person or a group of people. Common forms of bullying include verbal assault, social isolation and extortion, and even physical violence.

Why children with ASD are more likely to fall victim to bullying?

Children with ASD often have communication, social and behavioural problems. The following factors might make them more vulnerable to bullying:

- Their passive personality and language problems may cause them fear to tell the truth, or unable to retell the incidents in detail.
- Their difficulty in expressing themselves and odd behaviours tend to attract ridicule and teasing from peers. Their ignorance of prank sometimes leads to more bullying.
- Because of their weakness in “mind-reading” and perspective-taking, they may misunderstand others, violate social norms or get into direct confrontation with others. Such behaviour can be offensive and ultimately leads to social isolation.
- Their withdrawn behaviour and narrow interests make it difficult for them to develop friendship. Their solitary life also makes them susceptible to bullying.

How to effectively protect children with ASD from bullying?

- Parents can teach their children how to handle their emotions (e.g. keep calm even when being bullied, and do not make things worse by fighting back).
- Teach them through role-playing how to turn down unreasonable requests, raise complaints to trusted individuals and protect themselves.



- In case of being bullied, parents should first keep calm. Then parents can help the children to recount the whole incident calmly. If necessary, role-play, writing and visual images can be used to help the child to express himself. Parents may ask close classmates and fellow parents for more details and discuss the problem with relevant staff of the school.

Long-term preventive measures

- Maintain good communication with teachers and school social workers, and proactively learn more about how the children are adapting in school.
- Teach them to observe verbal and non-verbal communication cues in order to discern malicious pranks from harmless jokes.
- Provide guidance in choosing peers to befriend with, and help them fit into groups or communities.
- Encourage and guide them in recounting past events and experiences in daily life.
- Help them to develop strengths and talents in order to gain appreciation and acceptance among their peers.

Conclusion

While children with ASD are more likely to fall victim to bullying, they may also become bullies and abuse others physically or verbally, owing to their difficulties in taking other's perspective or empathising with them. Parents may refer to the above principles and methods in handling such issues.



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