



Including Children with Autism In Afterschool Settings



*A Guide to
Best Practices for
Program Providers*

by
Boston Children's Museum
Lisa Jo Rudy
Tim Porter

WHY A GUIDE FOR INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM?

With autism diagnoses rising fast, you're almost certain to have at least one child with an autism spectrum diagnosis in your group. Knowing that a child has this diagnosis, however, tells you very little. Kids with autism may be bright or cognitively challenged; talkative or non-verbal. They may have serious behavior issues, or appear shy and withdrawn. How can you include, support and teach a child with autism? This guide will give you some specific resources, tools and ideas.

The rate of autism spectrum diagnoses is rising. Just recently, the Centers for Disease Control reported that 1 out of every 88 American children is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder; and 1 out of every 55 boys is autistic. We don't know whether there are really more people with autism or whether our new definition of autism, along with other factors, is causing an apparent rise. Either way, we have a large number of people with autism, and the numbers seem to be increasing. But autism looks very different in different people:

Joey is so quiet you'd never know he was in the room. He is completely absorbed in his own world, flicking bits of paper, rocking, or pacing. He has a few words, but has a very hard time communicating with other people. It's hard to engage him, because he's not very interested in other people or in typical activities. In fact, he may get very upset or even hit and yell when he's asked to stop doing what he prefers in order to join the group.

Jonathan is very bright, talks a mile a minute, and seems to be a computer genius. He has a tough time, though, when the topic turns to anything EXCEPT computers – so he finds ways to stick with his favorite topic. Other kids find Jonathan difficult because he won't share, rarely makes eye contact, and is apt to grab or hog materials that he finds interesting.

Shonda is compliant and pleasant, but her voice and topics of conversation are "off." Instead of conversing with other people, she rattles off scripts from TV shows or movies – sounding exactly like the characters. It can be hard for her to understand spoken direction if there are more than one or two items in a list of instructions.



WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT AUTISM?



Before digging into all the challenges faced by kids with autism and the people who work with them, it's important to look at some of the very real plusses of working with children with autism. Here are just a few:

- **Kids with autism are genuine.** If a child with autism says you are beautiful, he means it. If he says he's sad, you can believe it.
- **Kids with autism almost never tease.** In fact, many children with autism find it hard to understand what teasing is, or why anyone would want to do it.
- **Children with autism almost never lie, cheat, or manipulate others.** In some cases, their sense of justice won't allow it; in other cases they just don't have the tools to imagine how others might feel.
- **When children with autism are angry or upset, it's for a good reason.** Kids with autism aren't just trying to get attention – they're communicating!
- **Children with autism can be passionate learners.** If a child with autism is interested in baseball, she might know more about her favorite players than almost anyone else!
- **Children with autism may have great talents.** Some people with autism are extraordinary musicians, mathematicians, designers, artists, computer programmers and more.
- **Children with autism truly need you.** Unlike many children you'll work with who would probably be just fine in any afterschool program, children with autism need your patience, imagination and understanding to flourish. When your student with autism is thriving, you can take pride in what you've accomplished.

AUTISM IN A NUTSHELL: A GUIDE TO TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Autism is a developmental disorder. Its symptoms include differences and disabilities in many areas including social and communication skills, fine and gross motor skills, and sometimes intellectual skills. Autism is also a spectrum disorder. This means you can be a little autistic or very autistic. At the high end of the spectrum is Asperger Syndrome, sometimes called The Little Professor syndrome. At the low end of the spectrum is autistic disorder, which often includes profound developmental delays and challenges.

Conversations about autism are often filled with vocabulary that mean a lot to parents, teachers and therapists with autistic children – and very little to other people. While you don't need a great deal of autism background to talk about the disorder, it is useful to know and understand at least a few words of the language. These terms are almost certain to come up as you discuss and work with kids on the autism spectrum; the better you understand their significance, the better you'll understand your kids.

ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis):

ABA is a common therapy used to help kids with autism learn to behave more typically using a system of rewards. For example, a therapist might ask a child to name an object; when he does, he receives a treat such as an M&M. ABA may also be used in afterschools.

Autism Spectrum:

Autism is a "spectrum disorder," meaning you can be a little autistic or very autistic. Right now, the autism spectrum includes five separate diagnoses, but in 2013 there will be just one "autism spectrum" with three different levels of severity based upon the need for support.

Asperger Syndrome:

Kids with Asperger's are likely to be very verbal, and are often bright. They are also, though, likely to be immature, and may have little idea of how to interact well with other kids. They may be pushy, easy to tease, quick to cry or get angry. They may have very specific interests, and find it tough to pay attention to anything outside their area of interest.

Autistic Disorder:

Kids diagnosed with autistic disorder (or, sometimes, "autism") are likely to have more severe disabilities. They may have an intellectual challenge. They may have no spoken language or few words; they may use words oddly or incorrectly. They may have significant behavior problems, as well. With so many issues, these kids are likely to come with an aide provided through their school or an agency.

Echolalia:

Kids with autism often have amazing memories for words, phrases and scripts. You may hear a child in your group reciting from a TV show, or using phrases from favorite movies instead of using his or her own words. This is called "echolalia" (echo talking). Sometimes the phrases are really used to communicate ideas; sometimes echolalia is more of a calming technique.

FBA (Functional Behavioral Assessment):

When a child has difficult behaviors in schools (lack of focus, aggression, etc.), a functional behavioral assessment can determine what sets off the behavior and suggest ways to manage it.

Floortime:

Floortime is a type of play therapy in which the adult encourages the child to close “circles of communication” by taking turns, sharing ideas, role playing, or otherwise playing together. It’s not important what you do together; what matters in Floortime is that you and the child with autism are communicating back and forth, and having fun doing it.

IEP (Individualized Educational Plan):

Most children with autism have a personalized plan for their academic, social and behavioral growth. That plan, called the IEP, is created by the parents and school district and includes goals, benchmarks and accommodations. Often, the IEP (or a summary of the IEP) can be very useful to afterschool professionals in planning for and managing the experience of a child with autism.

PDD-NOS:

PDD-NOS stands for Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. Kids with a PDD-NOS diagnosis are a very mixed bag. They may be very capable or quite disabled – and you’ll need to ask a lot of questions to get a full understanding of what these kids can do, what their needs are, and so forth.

Perseveration:

Perseverating means “focusing on one thing to the exclusion of anything else.” Kids with autism are very prone to perseveration, and this can get in the way of learning, sharing, or interacting with others.

Sensory Dysfunction/Sensory Integration:

Many kids with autism experience light, sound, smells and tastes more or less intensely than other people. As a result, they may be very easily overwhelmed by bright lights or loud noises; alternatively, they may crave lots of crashing, jumping and strong tastes. It may be necessary to work with parents or therapists to modify your space for a child with these issues. See the *Issues You’ll Encounter (and What to Do About Them)* section of this guide for ideas for supporting and accommodating sensory issues.





Social Story:

A Social Story is a short story using pictures and words and is created specifically for an autistic child (or adult) to prepare them for an upcoming event or to help them understand and behave appropriately in social situations. Social Stories often describe a situation in terms of physical space, expected encounters, social cues, the perspective of others, and they often suggest how a child might respond to the situation presented. See the *Resources* section for websites where social stories can be built or downloaded.

Stim/Stimming:

Stimming is short for “self-stimulation.” Kids with autism often flick their fingers, rock, pace, or otherwise move their bodies. Most researchers think this is a way to keep themselves calm and focused. See *Issues You’ll Encounter (and What to Do About Them)* for more specific information about how to accommodate and provide for kids who need to stim.

Task Analysis (TA):

Kids with autism rarely learn just by watching and imitating. Instead, they need direct instruction in just what to do, and in what order to do it. Through task analysis, you provide specific instructions for every part of a task (for example: take off your coat; hang your coat in your cubby; open your backpack; take your lunch out of your backpack; put your lunch in the lunch corner; hang your backpack up; etc.).

Token System or Token Economy:

Older children may not receive immediate rewards for good work, but may instead receive incremental tokens such as gold stars, stickers or smiley faces that can be exchanged for rewards after a period of time. If a child in your group uses such a system at school or at home, you may want to use the same system in the afterschool setting.

Visual Teaching Tools:

Kids with autism are often very visual learners – so a combination of words and pictures are often very effective teaching tools. iPad apps and sign language may also be used. It’s important to know, though, that many kids with autism also learn well in other ways, so it’s a good idea to ask questions and experiment.

ISSUES YOU'LL ENCOUNTER (AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM)

While it's possible that you'll have one student who exhibits many of the behaviors below, it's very unlikely. On the other hand, if you have several autistic children in your group, you'll probably see all of these behaviors at one time or another. Sometimes, it's relatively easy to accommodate or even build on different learning and thinking styles. There are, however, some autistic behaviors that are difficult to manage in a typical setting. For more information about these symptoms and treatments, you can visit *Autism Speaks'* "video glossary" at <http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/video-glossary>.

Aggression

Kids with autism very rarely hurt another person maliciously. They may, however, hit or bite in reaction to something they perceive as a threat or a taunt. They may even hit or bite to communicate their feelings when they feel stressed by loud noises or bad smells. The causes of autistic aggression aren't always obvious, so there's a good chance that no one has done anything "wrong" to cause the behavior.

Aggression is never okay for any child, but because the child with autism may not intend to hurt or may not understand the impact of his or her actions, it's important to respond appropriately. Simple measures such as separating the child from a loud group or providing a sensory object (a squeeze toy, silly putty, or something similar) can often make a big difference, as can a weighted vest (sometimes available from the child's home or school). In some cases, an opportunity to run, bounce, or carry heavy objects can be calming. If such measures don't work, consult with the child's parents or, if appropriate, with their therapist or behavior expert.

Bolting

It is not unusual for a child with autism to bolt from the room or away from the group. The reasons are not always obvious, so it's not easy to predict when or why a child might suddenly run or attempt to leave the room. In many cases it is possible to plan for an "emergency escape" by asking the child, in a calm moment, to choose a go-to spot where he feels safe. Remind him of that space when anxiety rises, and reward him for going to that space rather than bolting from the room. Place bells on outside doors so that you can be alerted if someone runs out unexpectedly. In a non-classroom situation, you may need to assign an aide or peer to keep an eye on the bolter. If you are anywhere near a street or other dangerous setting, it is VERY important to maintain control over the environment, and to assign a reliable person to supervise the child.

Bullying

Children with autism may be bullied – or they may be, or appear to be, bullies themselves. Any child with a difference or disability is likely to be a target for bullying, and children with autism have several strikes against them. First, they may not recognize bullying for what it is since they have a poor understanding of social cues. Second, they may not be able to communicate well enough to describe the bullying. Third, they may be unusually sensitive to good-natured teasing, or mistake a friendly tap for a slap. While children with autism very rarely intend to injure others, they may often become anxious or upset and respond physically or with strong language ("get away from me!").

There are two ways to address these issues. First, you may want to provide information about autism to your students so that they can better understand why a peer with autism might not want to be included in a group activity (see *Resources* section for books and videos that may be helpful). Second, you will certainly want to work with the child with autism to help him/her understand the rules. You may need to use a social story (see the *Resources* section for more tools to create your own story) to help get across your message. If teachers and parents use a token system of rewards for good behavior, you may also want to replicate that system in the afterschool setting.

Fine and Gross Motor Problems

Most people with autism have some level of difficulty with fine and gross motor control. This means they're likely to have trouble with typical activities such as cutting with scissors, using glue, writing, and drawing. They may also be physically awkward, and have a very hard time with coordination in areas such as ball skills, dodging, hitting a target, bike riding, and so forth.

You can adapt many activities for a child with motor problems. For example, pre-cut shapes can make arts and crafts easier and more rewarding. A glue stick is easier to manage than liquid glue. T-ball is easier than softball, and certain sports (swimming, hiking, bouncing, chase games, etc.) are much easier for kids on the autism spectrum than soccer, basketball, or jump rope. In general, kids with autism are likely to do better with open-ended, non-competitive activities that require only limited teamwork or collaboration.

Lack of Focus

Children with autism may have a hard time focusing for a long period of time, listening to and following directions, or remembering what was said several minutes earlier. There are various possible reasons for this, including difficulty with translating spoken language, difficulty with planning and organizing ideas and activities, and so forth. To address these issues, it's best to use several simple tools.

1. Preview your activities

Instead of saying "We're going outside to play baseball now" let your class know your plans in advance. At the start of the day, use visual schedules, charts, social stories and other tools so that everyone understands that, for example, **FIRST** we will have snack, **SECOND** we will have homework time, and **THIRD** we will go outside to play baseball.

2. Chunk (break) your directions or discussions into short, simple statements

For example, instead of saying "Take out your books, turn to page ten, and read the first two paragraphs to yourself," you might say "Everyone take out your books and put them on the table. Now, turn to page ten. Raise your hand when you're ready." Then check in to be sure you were fully understood.

3. Consider using tokens or rewards for paying attention and responding appropriately.

This is particularly effective if the child has a similar system in place at school and/or at home.

Meltdowns

Meltdowns are temper tantrums. Unlike typical tantrums, however, meltdowns can occur apparently out of the blue – often as a result of frustrations or sensory overloads that may be invisible to most people. It is somewhat rare for meltdowns to occur as a direct result of negative personal interactions or physical pain. More often, they occur as a result of changes in schedule, unavailability of favorite food items or toys, changes in venue, and other disruptions to the usual routine.

Rather than allowing tantrums to rule the situation (which is unfair to the other children and unhelpful to the child with autism), it is best to plan for and help children with autism to predict and manage change. One relatively easy way to do this is to provide a social story that explains what will happen and how you would like the child with autism to respond. (e.g.: Tomorrow we will take a field trip. We will go to the zoo. We will visit the bird house. If the birds are too loud, I can ask my teacher for headphones.) Ideally, you'll be able to read the story over with the child at least a few times, and then send it home to be used again before the change is implemented.

If, despite all your efforts, a child with autism does melt down, it is rarely an intentional ploy for getting attention or disrupting the group. It is usually simply a response to frustration or an expression of anger or physical sensory overload. If possible, it's best to plan for meltdowns in advance by planning with parents, teachers, etc., and having soothing options available. These can range from separate, quiet spaces and/or pop up tents to favorite toys, videos, or foods.

Perseveration

Unlike a real interest, a perseveration doesn't lead to exploration of a topic or activity. For example, a child who perseverates on Disney movies won't expand that interest to film making, acting, storytelling, etc. They simply want to focus on Disney movies. Perseveration is often a form of self-stimulation, and the same approaches can work for perseveration as for stims (see below).

Sensory Issues

One of the most common issues you'll encounter with kids on the spectrum is over and under-reactivity to lights, sound, and general sensory input. Some kids with autism are bothered by fluorescent lights, others by fluttering paper, loud bells, and so forth. Others are upset by sticky glue, crying babies, or even the smell of certain foods. There are also kids who actually need sensory input to help them focus.

You can address these issues in many settings by asking parents, teachers, therapists and the children themselves for information about sensory issues and how they're addressed in other settings. Then, follow the same plan. For example, you might: choose incandescent lights over fluorescent lights when possible; avoid loud noises; muffle or change the sounds of bells; provide sound-muffling headphones to the child; or find quieter options for play. Some kids with sensory cravings may relax when playing on swings, climbing jungle gyms, or just running around a track. Others do well with weighted vests (often available through schools or parents), medicine balls, heavy backpacks or other heavy lifting. Some settings also set up low-cost pop up tents as "retreats" for kids who might need to escape from a very chaotic situation (parents may be willing to donate tents).

Speech and language problems

It is important to know that children with autism are very rarely intentionally disobedient. Most of the time, if someone on the spectrum doesn't follow instructions, it's because they either didn't hear or didn't interpret your words. Those children with no speech or very limited speech may use sign, picture cards, spelling boards or computerized "talking boards" or iPad apps to communicate. If this is the case, you'll need help in establishing and maintaining communication. Depending upon your situation, the child may come to your program with a 1:1 aide who can help you include the child with autism. If there is no aide, you should talk with the child's parents or their school, teacher or therapist about how best to communicate with and support the child.

More difficult will be the "in between" kids who do have speech – but may not use speech in typical ways to communicate. In addition, while these kids may be able to read and write, they may have a very tough time hearing, translating and responding to spoken words in the usual amount of time. Thus, you may have to repeat yourself, explain your instructions one step at a time, and supplement your verbal instructions with visual guides. These children may also be encouraged to draw or write about their feelings, using reflection forms or processing sheets. Many websites offer these sheets, such as this one: <http://bit.ly/JEt2z7>.

Children with Asperger Syndrome may appear to have no speech or language issues, but this appearance can be misleading. These are the kids who can't recognize sarcasm or humor, or who react badly to friendly teasing or horseplay. These children are actually more likely than others on the spectrum to be easily embarrassed, bullied, or isolated. Look out for these instances, and address them directly.

Social Cluelessness

What do you do with a child who says "no" when asked to join a group, has no idea that Elmo is uncool for a 4th grader, or prefers throwing dust in the air to playing video games? The reality is that inclusion, while it is an ideal, isn't always possible with a child on the autism spectrum. But rather than shrugging and saying "oh well, if that's what he wants I guess it's okay," you can try some of these strategies:

- Build a group activity around the child's interests and/or abilities. If she loves trains, work as a group to build a train track, and allow the child with autism to run the train. If he loves animals, build an arts and crafts activity around animals.
- Don't ask "do you want to be included" – simply go ahead and include the child with autism in activities that are carefully selected for success (see the *Ideas That Work* section for tips on selecting activities that will work well for children with ASDs). Rather than trying to coax a child with autism to try something new, it is often effective to use a kind but firm tone, place the child with autism with supportive peers, and say "your turn!" Then provide the support that is needed – and no more – to break down tasks or provide extra direction. Provide lots of praise for a job well done.
- Help peers to understand the child with autism, and explain that a "no" will sometimes come from anxiety rather than meanness. Coach peers to share simple activities such as swinging, sliding, blowing bubbles, or running relay races. Explain that a child with autism may not always want to be part of a group, but may enjoy playing together some of the time.



Stims

Self-stimulation (stims) may take the form of rocking, humming, pacing, flapping, or flicking. If a behavior doesn't create a problem for your group, then there's no need to do anything about it. But if it does create a problem you have some options. Try substituting a less disruptive behavior for self-stimulation. For example, suggest that the child squeeze a squeeze toy instead of rocking, or roll clay instead of humming. You might also try rewarding good behavior with opportunities for stimming. For example, you might reward five minutes of quiet behavior with five minutes on a swing, or bouncing on a "rebounder" (a small, low-cost mini-trampoline).

Unusual Play

Children with autism see things differently. As a result, they may play differently from other children. For example, a child with autism might use objects from a play cooking set to build a machine, or might stack pieces of train track on top of one another. It can be very difficult to change these unusual styles of play, and doing so can lead to upset.

Many of the same tools can be used in these situations as are used for managing stims, perseverations and meltdowns. In addition, you can make use of therapeutic play techniques to begin to help the child with autism move toward a wider range of interests and symbolic play (see *Ideas That Work* section for specific therapeutic play examples such as *Floortime*).

INCLUDING KIDS WITH AUTISM: HINTS AND TIPS



It isn't always easy to include kids with autism, because kids with autism may not wish to be included. Even if they do want to be a part of your program, they may have difficulties with various aspects of typical activities, and become frustrated or the target of teasing or even bullying. As a result of these difficulties, many people simply work around children on the autism spectrum – allowing them to “do their own thing” in the same physical space as their typical peers. While this is fine occasionally, it is not the best alternative, either for the child with autism or for his classmates. Inclusion does however require a bit of imagination and flexibility. These tips are often helpful in facilitating real and meaningful inclusion:

- 1. Establish a Routine.** Everyone prefers to know what's coming next; kids with autism are especially responsive when there is a clear structure and routine.
- 2. State the Rules Clearly.** Make sure everyone fully understand rules such as “no hitting”. If necessary go over them one-on-one with children on the autism spectrum. Post the rules prominently, both in written and in visual form.
- 3. Use lots of visuals.** Visual charts, checklists, tokens for good behavior, illustrations and videos can all make communication much easier. You can also find and/or create social stories and use them with your whole group. Everyone can gain from the experience of hearing and seeing stories to prepare them for new or difficult experiences.
- 4. Differentiate instruction.** If group members are working on a complex art project, consider simplifying the project for your group member with autism. Instead of having them draw and cut out shapes, for example, provide them with pre-cut materials to arrange. The final outcome will look the same, but the child with autism will be given a better chance to succeed.

5. Support Transitions. Changing routines or even moving from one space or activity to another can be tough for kids with autism. Be sure your students know what's coming and when it will happen. If desired, use a visual timer (the "Time Timer" <http://www.timetimer.com/> is a commonly used and very effective tool) to help kids count down to a transition.

6. Assign a peer buddy. If there are kids in your group who enjoy taking responsibility and being role models, you can assign them to work with an autistic child to help them focus and take part. Be sure to rotate peer buddies though, so that no child spends all her time as a mentor!

7. Give a job. Kids with high functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome often enjoy taking leadership roles. When possible, provide them with opportunities to move around, manage simple tasks for the group (passing out materials, helping with clean-up), etc. A very high functioning child might also be able to serve as a helper to others in areas such as computer use.

8. Use a token-based reward system. Gold stars and rewards are particularly popular with kids on the autism spectrum. By offering an earned reward, you may be able to promote appropriate behavior and help kids with autism to manage their own needs.

9. Remember the sensory environment. If a child with autism suddenly seems anxious or upset, and you can't see an obvious cause, it is very possible that he or she is reacting to some kind of sensory input. It could be a smell from the cafeteria, the scream of a siren in the street, or the flicker of a fluorescent light. While you can't manage or change all sensory input, it is helpful to do as much as you can – and to recognize the possible issues that arise when a child with autism is being hit with a "sensory assault."

10. Choose appropriate activities. While kids with autism may have a hard time playing team sports or taking part in language-heavy activities, they may be terrific at others. Some good options include musical activities, simple race and chase games (relay races, for example), climbing, hiking, drawing and, in many cases, drama and acting. Many kids with autism also enjoy and are good at working on computers, building with legos and similar toys, playing with toy trains, etc.

11. Get input. Ask parents, teachers, and the child himself what is helpful, interesting, or problematic for that child. Some kids react well to a little time out in a quiet spot; others need lots of physical input (crashing, bouncing, etc.) to calm down. Some have a toy or soothing object that can help.

12. Ask for help. If a child with autism is too much for you to handle, or is so far behind your group that there is no reasonable way to accommodate him, you can ask for help. Most importantly, the child's parents are your best resource. Many children with autism also have aides who may be able to travel with them to afterschool programs. If that's not the case, there may be other options available through your organization or through the child's school or healthcare program (see the *Resources* section for more information about where to turn for help).

IDEAS THAT WORK

Here are some simple, practical tools to support and include a child with autism in your afterschool program. These are just suggestions; you should experiment with what works best for children in your group.

Connect Your Program with School and Home

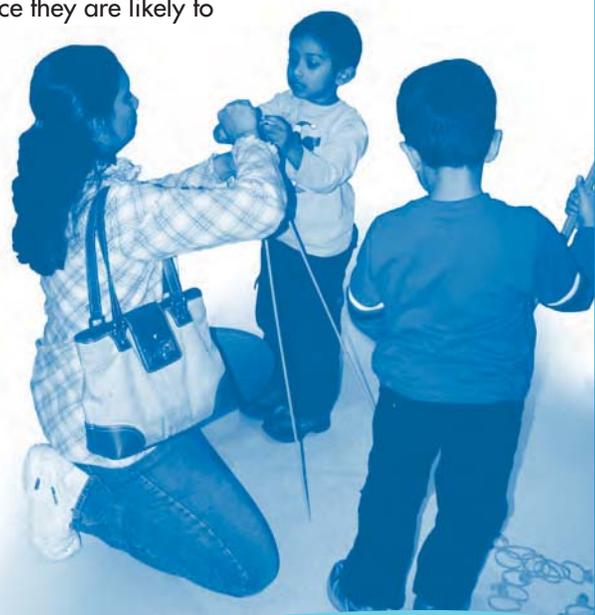
Many afterschool programs have strong relationships with school and home. If your program allows you to work with teachers, or even observe children in a school setting before they start an afterschool program, it's a great idea to take advantage of that opportunity. Other ways to learn more about your student and his needs include:

- **Ask for as much information as you can get from the school and parents.** If your program allows, request a summary or copy of the child's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). You can also ask for details about any behavioral plan that is in place, and for information about any special tools used for communication. Parents and teachers may also have tips and hints for: making the child with autism comfortable, encouraging involvement, supporting peer interaction, and avoiding undue stress.
- **Use a communication book.** Many children with special needs have a communication book that travels from home to school to afterschool. Parents, teachers and afterschool professionals all write in the book to share information about, for example, changes or difficulties that the child has experienced, health-related issues, new tools being implemented at home or in the classroom, etc.
- **Aides, charts, tokens, rewards.** If your student has a 1:1 aide in school, that person will be a wonderful source of information about what works (and what doesn't work) for that individual child. The aide (or if there is no aide, the teacher and/or parent) is also a great source of information about behavioral issues, any special system of rewards that is used in school or at home, and appropriate tokens (stickers, smiley faces, gold stars) and rewards (usually favorite activities, treats or small toys) for work well done.

Great Toys for Kids on the Autism Spectrum

Note: There is NO reason to buy products marked "sensory," since they are likely to cost much more than a similar product at a discount store.

- **Sensory-friendly toys** such as bubbles, slinkies, clay, squishy (stress relieving) balls, visually interesting toys (tubes filled with oil and sparkly beads, kaleidoscopes, View-Masters).
- **Non-competitive sports and game equipment** such as slides, swings, stretchy exercise bands, medicine balls, scooters, cones (for running games and obstacle courses), jungle gyms, climbing structures and climbing walls.
- **Building toys** for older children, such as Legos, K'nex, blocks, train tracks, marble mazes, etc.
- **Water toys** (in summer, as appropriate) such as Slip 'n' Slides, sprinklers, etc. (avoid squirt guns).



Great Games and Activities for Kids on the Spectrum

- **Non-competitive or group sports activities** such as chase games like tag or freeze tag, relay races, circle games, obstacle courses. You may want to avoid games that require very good reflexes, strong throwing/kicking skills, or reliable focus (soccer, baseball, dodge ball, etc.) unless you are playing non-competitively.
- **Arts and crafts, assuming that materials are modified.** For younger children, select scissors with large handles or precut materials; provide glue sticks to avoid sticky fingers; instead of papier mache or other goopy materials provide plasticine or clay.
- **Group activities that are non-competitive and/or collaborative.** Possibilities may include cup stacking, fort building, nature hikes, mural painting, building and experimenting with marble mazes, ball races, catapults, etc. Consider musical activities (making rhythm, singing, dancing, making and using simple musical instruments).
- **Board games and other activities** ranging from the card game War to Jenga, checkers, or even chess may be a good choice for some kids with autism. Be aware of how your particular students react, however, to losing a game or “bending the rules” – some children with higher functioning autism may have a tough time with these issues.
- **Technology.** Kids with autism are often attracted to and very good at video games and other computer-based activities. Not only can time on a computer or iPad serve as a reward for good behavior, but it can also be an opportunity for the child with autism to become a leader, teacher, or mentor.

Therapeutic Play

You may not be a therapist, but you do have the ability to help kids with autism build skills in communication, collaboration and symbolic play. Here are some time-proven ideas:

- **Take turns.** Many kids with autism prefer “parallel play,” meaning they play with trains next to another child who is playing with trains – but they don’t play together. By encouraging kids with autism to simply take turns (you run your train around the track, then wait for another child to take his turn doing the same) you can encourage social understanding. Turn taking is also a key part of many board games, sports and other activities.
- **Close “circles of communication.”** Floortime is an approach to therapeutic play that encourages back and forth communication between a child with autism and another person. Each back-and-forth is a “circle of communication.” Circles need not use words to be effective. Activities like a game of catch; pretend play in which children play out roles (“Hi, mommy. What’s for dinner?”); or even working together on a lego tower can all be therapeutic.
- **Play emotion-related games.** Children with autism often have a hard time recognizing and responding appropriately to facial expressions and emotions. By playing games that involve recognizing feelings, you can help children to build those skills. Possibilities include charades, skits and drama-related games. For example, one group of children might stand in a line while another becomes the audience. The leader calls out emotions (sad, excited, scared, hopeful, grouchy, etc.) for each child to show. After showing the emotion, the child runs to the back of the line for another turn.

WHAT PARENTS WANT YOU TO KNOW

We asked parents with children on the autism spectrum to share with us what they wanted afterschool programs to know about them and their children. There were three common themes that we heard over and over, which can serve as core messages in working with children with autism spectrum disorders: 1) Every child with autism is different; 2) Communication with parents is key to your success as well as the success of the child; and 3) Most children with autism want to be social and be involved, but they might need some guidance from you. Some of these messages mediate others. For example, while most children with autism want to be social, every child is different, and communication with their parents will help you learn how best to include them and provide positive, enriching experiences for them. Some other messages we heard from parents:

What parents want you to know about their children:

1. My child enjoys many of the same things other kids do. He just may need a little more guidance and more time to complete the activity.
2. Don't be afraid to challenge my child. It's the only way he will find out what he is capable of doing.
3. My child wants to interact with others – please don't segregate him from the other kids.
4. My child needs close supervision for safety but freedom to have fun! Visual supports really help him succeed.
5. My child is listening to you, but may require re-direction or a demonstration (visual) of what you are asking.
6. My child may not want to participate in some group activities.
7. Transitions take much longer for my child. Patience is key when caring for these children.
8. Every child with autism is unique – high functioning kids are not like low functioning kids.
9. My child is learning social skills so sometimes he does the right thing at the right time but please remember, this is a lot of work for him. It doesn't come naturally.
10. Autism is not a behavior problem even if it looks that way.
11. Please read my child's IEP to understand what support they are used to getting in school.
12. Talk to my child's teacher if you can, in addition to me (the parent).
13. My child can have a good day or a bad day – she can perform better in some places than others – just like you and me. If it's a difficult day, she may not even know what is bothering her or how to ask for help.
14. Most kids with autism do not lie.
15. Ask questions that are not open ended. "What do you want to do today?" is too hard! Instead, "Would you like to do a, b or c?" Give them a few choices ... this is not school. Then make a schedule. All kids benefit from a daily schedule.
16. Please be respectful of my child. If he can't do something there is a reason. It is not attitude or stubbornness.
17. Please don't talk about my child in the third person (he, she) even if it's to say something positive. Use his name, especially when giving him direct instruction.
18. If you feel frustrated ask for help. Don't shout or punish as my child will not learn from that.
19. If my child doesn't look at you in the eyes, please stop telling her to do so. She does need to be taught that skill but it's more complicated than "look at me". Let the social skills teachers work on that. And we (her parents) don't expect you to do it! We just want our child to enjoy some free time after school. After school should be fun!

20. Praise rather than scold. I'm not saying you can't correct him, it's just that you want to praise him way more often than you correct him.
21. My child needs to know what to expect... transitions and changes in routine are challenging.
22. It will be extremely helpful to you and to my child if you know her skill levels of speech and social communication...and you can find that out by talking to me.

What parents want you to know about communicating with them:

- Please talk to us as often as possible and/or needed. If you are too busy to talk at pickup times, you can call or e-mail us when you have more time.
- A direct, straight forward, open and proactive approach in communicating with us is needed.
- Please talk to me about your concerns or your ideas for making your program more beneficial for my child and the others who are also participating. I will do whatever I can to support you, but you have to let me know how I can help.
- I can tell you about my child's interests to keep him motivated. And ask me lots of questions about strategies for handling meltdowns, etc. I want him to make friends, have fun and learn!
- Please share with us all positive and negative experiences, no matter how insignificant you think they are.
- PLEASE give me feedback daily. If you can tell us what the program did, we can ask questions!



RESOURCES

Where to Turn for Help

- **The Aspergers Association of New England** (<http://aane.org/>) can provide consulting and assistance in managing programs that include kids with high functioning autism and Asperger syndrome.
- **The Autism Society** has a strong Massachusetts branch (<http://www.massautism.org/>). This organization works with parents, and helps link people and resources locally.
- The **SpedChild** website (<http://www.spedchildmass.com/>) is a compendium of information and resources for kids with special needs in the Bay State.
- **Kids Included Together (KIT)** (<http://www.kitonline.org/>) is a non-profit that offers information, trainings and resources to support inclusion of kids with all sorts of learning, developmental and behavioral challenges.

Tools, Resources and Books

There are a number of free books, picture cards, social stories, and other materials that are helpful in teaching, reaching, and working with kids on the autism spectrum:

- **The Autism Society of Indiana** has produced many excellent resources, including this very useful PowerPoint on autism in an afterschool setting: <http://bit.ly/K2jvgj>. They have also shared some examples of First/Then Boards, Visual Schedules, Social Stories and more. You can find these in a PDF on the download page for this guide at www.BostonChildrensMuseum.org/ASDGuide.
- **Autism Speaks** has a free online video glossary that may help you get a better understanding of what autistic symptoms look like and how therapists work with kids on the spectrum (<http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/video-glossary>).
- **Second Step** (<http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/ssp/overview/>) is an anti-bullying program that includes a curriculum and activities. Kits are not free, but funding is available.
- **Do To Learn** (<http://www.do2learn.com/>) is a treasure trove of printables and tools including picture cards, visual schedules, activity ideas and much more.
- **Positively Autism** (<http://www.positivelyautism.com/free/>) offers free, high quality social stories in PowerPoint format, as well as a variety of other useful, well-designed materials.
- **"Understanding Autism for Dummies"** by Stephen Shore, is a terrific and very readable introduction to autism. It's also a handy reference.
- **"Engaging Autism"** by Stanley Greenspan provides a usable set of guidelines for therapeutic play. This approach works well for children with autism, but is also useful for any child.
- **Model YMCA-Based Inclusive Afterschool Program** (http://www.autismcarolinas.org/files/Parent_Handbook_Final_Copy_1.pdf) – this YMCA-based program may provide a good starting point for your program. It describes just how the program works, what accommodations are in place, and provides information about rules and policies.
- The latest report from the **CDC** on autism rates has some good data: <http://bit.ly/HrXM1m>.

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Development Team

Tim Porter, Project Director, Boston Children's Museum
Lisa Jo Rudy, Writer and Consultant

Contributors and Collaborators

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- Sarah Guadalupe, YMCA White After School Program, Woburn, MA
- Nicole Horton, Department of Human Service Programs, Cambridge, MA
- Claire McNally, North Suburban YMCA of Greater Boston, Woburn, MA
- Mary Roth, Lead Ally, Autism Society of Indiana
- Katie Tufts, For Kids Only Afterschool Programs
- Deborah Sale Butler
- Meghan Chapman
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Photography

Clive Grainger

Karin Hansen