

## Help yourself help your student - especially for paras

- You have a right to be trained and supervised - don't be afraid to ask. If you don't ask, the district may not offer. But it is you who will be interacting with that student every day, so who ends up on the short end of the stick if you keep quiet? It is not an unreasonable request, it is your right and the child's right as well.
- Find out what the student's goals and objectives expect him/her to learn. Too often paras and other staff, other than the child's main teacher, do not know just what it is they are supposed to be working *toward*. Teaching skills in isolation simply does not work. If you are with the student and YOU are not working toward those goals, the child is likely to be missing out on some teaching opportunities.
- Understand what your individual role is to be. What is expected of you in each curriculum subject, and do you understand how to do it. What are your responsibilities if he/she bolts from the room? Are you expected to help socialization on the playground? How are you to do that? Be sure you have the same understanding as your supervisor about what you are to be engaged in each day.
- Be the model of organization. Let the child do as many organizing tasks as he/she can on their own, and supplement that with your own strategies when you need to. Share your strategies as you move through the steps, explain the 'why's' of what you are doing and how being organized affects the final product.
- Develop meltdown strategies *before* you need them. If you do NOT plan for them, you WILL need them. If you plan for them, you MAY not need them, but if you do, at least you can remain calm and in control and the process can move more quickly and smoothly for a student in order to help him/her regain control.
- Use lots of visuals. Show examples of what a project *should* look like, use pictures, lists, posted rules; anything you can to give him/her a visual picture of what he/she is expected to do. It makes things more concrete, and therefore easier to understand.
- Learn what motivates the student - and what doesn't. What works for most kids may not work for kids with ASD, because they may not consider the social (praise) or conceptual (stickers) rewards as having any meaning. Consider what the student LOVES to do, and be creative in how to make that into tangible rewards.
- There is no such thing as too much preparation. Kids with autism spectrum disorders need to know ahead of time what will happen, need cues as it is happening, and need to review afterwards what has been learned in order to retain it.
- You *need* to collect data - learn how to do it quickly and easily. It's in the IDEA law. No one wants a para or any other staff member to be unduly ticking off lists and writing pages of notes. But it is essential when working with students with ASD to be able to measure their progress, not just in academics but in all other skills as well. Most parents are willing to work with staff on what is reasonable in terms of time and detail, but it is not acceptable to measure progress by observation alone. If the load is too time consuming, ask your supervisor for help in finding a more time-efficient method.
- Learn to predict trouble. Most of the kids with ASD have triggers that will prompt behaviors, and most have subtle signs of when they are becoming overloaded. The parents and last year's teacher most likely know what they are: ask.
- Learn redirection strategies. Redirection takes time, and an infinite amount of patience. There are more than a few strategies available, talk to your supervisor and/or the parents for methods that often work for this child. Accept that nothing will work all the time, and that variety is the spice of life.

- Teach directly and pre-teach when necessary. Reviewing before a lesson what the topic will be, what the activity will be, what the expectations will be (i.e. a visual example of a finished project) along with any pre-reading, viewing a related movie, etc. will help 'set them up' for learning. Lessons that are more subjective in nature may need to be taught to this student one-to-one, or modified to make it more concrete.
- Watch the strategies the student uses - which work, which don't. If he/she uses inappropriate strategies to deal with stress, social interactions, difficult work, etc. give him/her another strategy to use in its place, and teach it directly. Reward the use of strategies that get the student through difficult times appropriately.
- Use their 'special interests' in the curriculum whenever you can. There are many ways to incorporate Thomas the Tank Engine, airplanes, or Wheel of Fortune into lessons if you give it some thought and are willing to do things a little differently. If other kids can count apples and oranges, there is no rule that says this kid can't count letters on the Wheel board, and he/she will be more engaged than the other kids ever will be.
- Paras should communicate what they observe to the teacher and to the team. Part of the job of a para is to notify team members of any emotional changes, things that worked but do not work any longer, attitude changes, exceptional or poor progress on a goal, etc. You are most likely the only one who sees the student throughout the day in many environments, and questions will arise (such as ability to generalize a skill across settings) that only you can answer.

### **Be prepared to be amazed and challenged**

- Talents and skills come in many guises - look for them and appreciate them. Kids with ASD are often as fascinating as they are challenging at times, and it helps to remember those positive or very clever things they say and do to keep a balanced perspective. Use their strengths to their advantage, and to help others see the balanced picture of the child as well. The child on the autism spectrum will value your expression of approval, probably more than many 'typical' kids will.
- *Always* keep your promises to this student. Things don't always go as planned, but truth, sincerity, and predictability go a long way in developing a relationship with a student who has difficulty guessing what will happen at any given time. If you say you will do something and DON'T do it, the trust will swiftly break down. However, it is also important to tell him what to do if things don't happen as planned, so that he is not left wondering what to do on his own.
- Other children can respect differences - if they are watching *you* respect them. Quite simply, staff that treat children with special needs with respect and even admiration will inspire others to do so as well. If kids get the impression from teachers or other staff members that a child is not wanted there, or is 'too much trouble' they will not develop a respect for that child or anyone else who is 'different'. Your example goes far beyond this one child, and far beyond this school year. Be mindful of the example you set.