



AUTISTIC CHILD AND TEACHER: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR HANDLING AN AUTISTIC CHILD

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Abstract

Paper is about tips to teacher for educating an autistic child. Paper starts with explaining concept of autism spectrum distinguishing autism from Asperger syndrome and PDD-NOS. autism has been explained in terms of lack of social, communication and imagination skills. Author elaborates help teacher can provide to the autistic child in the domains of pedagogy, information processing and behavioral management. Pedagogic help involves- Using concrete learning material, giving one task at a time, sequencing the learning tasks, using preferred sense for learning and allowing preferred mode of speech; information processing help involves- ensuring eye contact, using regression as tool of learning, and handling problems of visual processing; finally behavior management includes- reducing attention span, avoiding distractions and irritants, controlling hyperactivity, attending specific difficulty, attuning to technology help, handling issue of sameness in non academic routines. Paper ends the paper with very important aspect of 'Savant syndrome' and 'Savant skills'. Teacher is suggested to run two layered program including 'Individualized education program' (IEP) for compensating social, communication and cognitive deficit and a 'Spring board program' for boosting and giving expression to the savant skills of autistic or acquired savants. Author remained indecisive about whether these suggestions can work in inclusive classroom or are workable only in one to one situation.

Keywords: autism, teaching, autistic savants, savant skills.



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Introduction :

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by triad of symptoms includes-impaired social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and lack of capacity to imagine. It is one of the developmental disability which appears before age of three. Autism affects

information processing in the brain by altering how nerve cells and their synapses connect and organize; how this occurs is not well understood. Autism is one of the three recognized disorders, (which overlap in terms of origin, symptoms as well as rehabilitation) called triad technically termed as Autism spectrum (ASD's). Autism spectrum includes Autism, Asperger syndrome, which lacks delays in cognitive development and language, and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (commonly abbreviated as PDD-NOS), which is diagnosed when the full set of criteria for autism or Asperger syndrome are not met. Autism used to be considered a relatively rare disability, occurring in approximately 1 to 2 per 10,000 individuals. Today the incidence continues to grow at an alarming rate. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) described the current incidence as 1 in 150 (CDC, 2007) and more rigorous measures as 1 in 68. Regardless of the exact number, and reason why incidence is growing the reality is that more individuals receive this diagnosis and parents are concerned about the fate of such children. It is more cause of worry due to its non remission nature and virtually no medical rehabilitation yet available. Autism, although incurable in medical terms, is not a total failure in educational context. Cognitive scientists have proved autism involve huge range of problems and abilities. There can be an autistic child incapacitated in intellectual abilities and on the other hand an individual with exception abilities (Islets of ability Kanner, 1943; Idiot savant Rimland & Hill, 1984). A teacher should aim at progression however little it may be, thus avoiding complete absence of intellectual activities. In case of children exhibiting savant syndrome teacher's initiatives and support can work wonder as in case of many autistic/acquired savants reported in literature. Children with autism need to have a structured day, and teachers who know how to be firm but gentle can handle the child well. The basic idea of rehabilitation is nurturing, maturing, giving chances of expression and making child acceptable. Author is interested to put forward some suggestions in terms of educational and behavioral characteristics which can help a teacher in handling the autistic child. These suggestions can be broadly classified as Pedagogic help, Information processing help, Behavioral management help and handling Autistic/acquired savants.

1) Pedagogic help

1. Using concrete learning material: concrete material like normal children helps in learning for autistic children. Actually they learn when they feel which definitely happens with concrete

material, for instance for them it is often easier to teach by letting them feel plastic letters instead of written letters. They can learn their daily schedule by feeling objects a few minutes before a scheduled activity. For example, fifteen minutes before lunch give the person a spoon to hold. Let them hold a toy car a few minutes before going in the car. Number concepts should be taught with the help of VAKT (visual, audio, kinesthetic, and tactual). There are math toys and blocks available to enhance the variety and simultaneous evaluation as well. Even daily object could be used for mathematics and language, followed by exploration with increasing abstraction at each step.

2. **One task at a time:** many autistic children who are mono-channel in nature who can't process more than one stimuli at a time. For instance they cannot see and hear at the same time. They should not be asked to look and listen at the same time. They should be given either a visual task or an auditory task. They can't follow instruction which is multitasking as in case of practical work in science subjects. Their immature nervous system is not able to process simultaneous visual and auditory input simultaneously, which confuse them for task on hand; consequently they produce no action or faulty action. However if the same stimuli if repeated in more than one channels one followed by other can definitely be useful for fixing the subject matter in mind.

3. **Sequencing the learning tasks:** sequencing is essential for learning an academic task, which is missing with severe autism. Sometimes they do not understand when a task is presented as a series of steps. Dressing and undressing is a sequential task as is true for making tea. Child should be taught sequencing by some simple daily life activities and then copied the process to learning tasks. In case the teacher feels to change the order of lessons, content in a lesson or steps in a proposition s/he must do it for the sake of accepted sequence by autistic child even if it is not considered appropriate for a normal child.

4. **Using preferred sense for learning tasks:** For instance there may be a case child who thinks in visual sense and misses the information being given in audio mode. His channel of information processing may be in terms of diagrams, pictures, signs, symbols, sketches etc. All their thoughts are like videotapes running in their imagination. Pictures are their first language, probably due to lack of processing audio stimuli. Nouns are the easiest words to learn because they could make a picture in their mind of the word. The words like "go" and "come" should be demonstrated by actual activity. There are interesting examples of autistic savants who only

think in terms of numbers. They walk, play and dance by counting number of steps needed to do an activity. Some others are reported to have remarkable ability to hear, distinguish and express sounds thus had been extraordinary musicians and singers.

5. **Allowing preferred mode of speech:** some autistic individuals sing better than they can speak. They may respond better if words and sentences are sung to them. Some children with extreme sound sensitivity will respond better if the teacher talks to them in a low whisper. Although this may not be possible in classroom situation, but can be tried in one to one situation, may be created in school in vacant hours.

6. **Allowing language learning preferences:** there is variation in mode of learning of language among autistic children. Some autistic children will learn reading more easily with phonics, and others will learn best by memorizing whole words. Phonetics is more concerned with sounds where as memorizing the word is recognition by visual sense. Teacher should apply the preferred mode of the autistic child, where in case of normal children he could force otherwise also. Children with lots of echolalia will often learn best if flash cards and picture books are used so that the whole words are associated with pictures. It is important to have the picture and the printed word on the same side of the card. When teaching nouns the child must hear you speak the word and view the picture and printed word simultaneously.

7. **Substituting lack of motor control:** many autistic children may have problems with motor control in their hands; consequently neat handwriting becomes difficult which is essential for learning tasks. Autistic child may get frustrated with this inability, teacher must let him type on the computer and keep on working on formations and other aspect of writing. It is more of a matter of awareness of possibility of good handwriting. There is always possibility of performance followed by commitment rather than reverse which normally happens with normal children. Once autistic child make some achievement with substituted mode s/he will be motivated to learn the expected mode also.

2) Information processing help

1. **Ensuring eye contact:** eye contact and direct talk is necessary for keeping autistic child involved in learning tasks. More involvement of sense and avoiding unnecessary movements of teacher can help in better focus on learning tasks. If a child is properly attended rein forced on performance and encouraged to take part in social activities, there is quite a good chance that

learner will come forward to express oneself. Building good personal relation also help in improving eye contact between teacher and learner. Whole effort has to come from teacher which needs to be persistent and consistent.

2. Handling problems of visual processing: autistic individuals having problems with visual processing often find it easier to read if black print is printed on colored paper to reduce contrast. Try light tan, light blue, gray, or light green paper. Experiment with different colors. Avoid bright yellow--it may hurt the individual's eyes.

3. Using regression as tool of learning: In autistic children there is typical tendency of sameness, they may get stuck on one concept, topic or even dimension of the subject. It may be numbers, maps, drawing, an activity or even fixing to a time schedule or preferred time for being active. The best way to deal with fixation is to use this sameness as a tool to motivate accomplishing school work or completing intended task. If the child likes numbers, make him learn in terms of number of hours, teaching mathematics would be easy and find some correlation of other subjects in terms of number. Preferred time should be used for completing home work or any other task teacher or parents are interested in. If child sticks to toys, learning tasks could be designed around toys only.

4. Speech Practice: although autistic individuals can speak, but they are definitely socially withdrawal in nature. Social interaction requires speech and communication skills which can be taught and practiced. Autistic individuals are actually not aware of the utility of speech in communication; hence they remain isolated form the social environment where speech is the medium of expression. Speech practice can be initiated with concrete objects to relation between objects, subtly shifting to subjects and relation between them and finally involving abstract concepts. This should be evaluated consistently by responding to correct and incorrect stimuli.

3) Behavioral management help

1. Reducing attention span: autistic children have limited attention span which limit their capacity to absorb content being taught. Teacher needs to structure the instruction as string of short spans rather integrated long one, especially in case of verbal instruction. People with autism have problems with remembering the sequence, processing of information, assimilation and accommodation in their existing stock of knowledge. If instruction involves variety it becomes essential to make it rather short and with rest intervals. They have limited capacity to

connect the various parts of instruction for synthesis which may be too obvious for a normal child. Teacher need to plan the time and accordingly set objectives for an autistic child.

2. Avoiding distractions and irritants: children with autism need to be protected from irritating stimuli like odd sounds, sharp colors, sharp lights, slippery floors, noisy environment etc. If a child covers his ears, it is an indicator that a certain sound hurts his ears. The sounds that will cause the most problems are school bells, sound of chairs scraping on the floor, folding of polythene, sound of a particular tool and the like. In many cases the child will be able to tolerate the bell if it is muffled slightly by stuffing it with tissues or duct tape. Scraping chairs can be silenced by placing slit tennis balls on the ends of the legs or installing carpet. The fear of a dreaded sound can cause bad behavior. If a particular sound is so necessary like fire alarm, child can be desensitized by practicing to hear it on a tape recorder gradually increasing in volume. Some autistic people are bothered by visual distractions and fluorescent lights. To avoid this problem, place the child's desk near the window or try to avoid using fluorescent lights.

3. Controlling hyperactivity: Some hyperactive autistic children who fidget all the time will often be calmer if they are given a padded weighted vest to wear, or a heavy pen to write or a restricted furniture to sit. Keeping the child unknowingly involved somewhere else, can reduce the hyperactivity. Other techniques of controlling hyperactivity may be contracting, behavior modification involving positive and negative reinforcers and sensitizing or desensitizing to the cause and effect of hyperactivity.

4. Attending specific difficulty: Many autistic children face difficult with a particular type of object like form or type of pen, pencil, chair, book shape etc. teacher must suggest a modification for it. It is not reverse of sameness; rather it is uncomfortable by no reason. Try a roller ball (or tracking ball) pointing device that has a separate button for clicking. Autistics with motor control problems in their hands find it very difficult to hold the mouse still during clicking.

5. Attuning to technology help: In the age of technology we suggest some of the tasks could be substituted by equivalent technological means like writing be substituted by keypad. But it has been observed that many autistic children face difficulties with technological devices as they find difficulty in pairing our physical actions with technological substitute. For instance they do not understand that a computer mouse moves the arrow on the screen. They may learn more easily if a paper arrow that looks exactly like the arrow on the screen is taped to the mouse. Autistic

individuals with visual processing problems can see flicker on TV type computer monitors. They can sometimes see better on laptops and flat panel displays which have less flicker. It is observed that using the closed captions on the television help autistic child to learn to read. The child is able to read the captions and match the printed words with spoken speech. Recording a favorite program with captions on a tape would be helpful because the tape can be played over and over again and stopped. Some children and adults with autism will learn more easily if the computer key-board is paired with screen or even chalk board. This enables the individual to simultaneously see the keyboard and screen or letter on the chalk board. Their learning of words will be tied to key board rather than actual sequence of the letters in alphabets.

6. Handling issue of sameness in non academic routines: It has been observed commonly that an autistic child is able to use the toilet correctly at home but refuses to use it at school. This may be due to a failure to recognize the toilet, its importance and scheduling. Hilde de Clereq from Belgium discovered that an autistic child may use a small non-relevant detail to recognize an object such as a toilet. It takes detective work to find that detail. In one case a boy would only use the toilet at home that had a black seat. His parents and teacher were able to get him to use the toilet at school by covering its white seat with black tape. The tape was then gradually removed and toilets with white seats were now recognized as toilets. It also applies to learning when child is unable to recognized important elements of learning process. Theses elements may be memory, sequencing of learning tasks, monitoring, evaluation and error analysis. Teacher need to make the child aware of these as normal children could do it effortlessly. It is commonly observed problem that autistic children are fussy about eating food stuff or eating accessory in terms of color, size, shape or even label on it. Hilde de Clerq found that one child only ate Chiquita bananas because he fixated on the labels. Other fruit such as apples and oranges were readily accepted when Chiquita labels were put on them. Try putting different but similar foods in the cereal box or another package of a favorite food. Another mother had success by putting a homemade hamburger with a wheat free bun in a McDonald's package. This is true for learning tasks as well like teaching concepts of science when related to daily life objects and activities. Visual aids, color, animation, video, dramatization are also attempt to make learning content acceptable to the autistic child.

4) Handling autistic/acquired savants

Autism is a unique disability in its own right. Autistic savant is an individual characterized by remarkable exceptional characteristics in many ways in spite of being diagnosed as an autistic. "Autistic savant" refers to individuals with autism who have extraordinary skills not exhibited by most persons, so called normal. It is estimated that about 10% of autistic children are savants. Autistic skills may include extraordinary abilities in the field of art, cognition, calendar calculation and even language. There are number of past as well as living examples of savant individuals {Gottfried Mind (1768-1814), Mark (1956-), Stephen Wiltshire (1974-), Tim Baley (1952-), Alonzo Clemons (1959-), Kim Peek (1951-), Orlando Serrell (1969-), Daniel Tammet (1979-) Christopher Taylor (1962-)}. In the words of Dr. Treffert an autistic savant is "the juxtaposition of ability and inability in the same person." Teacher has big role to play in the education of such children. There need to be a two layered teaching strategy: an 'Individualized education program' (IEP) for helping on communication and social deficit and a 'Spring board program' for helping the child for nurturing, supported and providing chance for expression of his special ability or abilities.

Concluding remarks

These suggestions are crux of the available literature on the subject built from experiences of teachers, parents, field workers and researchers. Teachers need to use, verify and modify for their utility and observations otherwise. Teacher needs to theorize teaching for autistic children from his/her own context involving available suggestions and his experiences. This is rather necessary due to lack of clarity of definition and range of cognitive and behavioral characteristics documented for autism. Nevertheless these observations can help teacher in beginning teaching a child with autism.

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