

**Structured Teaching:  
Helping students with autism cope in a non-autistic world.**

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Autism, with its characteristic deficits in language and communication, reciprocal social interactions, and the presence of repetitive, restrictive or stereotyped behaviors, represents a different pathway of development, a different pattern of thinking and perspective and affects many aspects of development. It is important to realize that there is a qualitative difference in communication, socialization and the behavioral repertoire of children with autism. In addition to these problems, children with autism often have other associated characteristics, such as different sensory perceptions, physical mannerisms, and unusual skills. There is a great deal of variability in the range of severity of symptom presentation within the spectrum of autism disorders. In order to establish a diagnosis of autism, there must be underlying impairments in the connectedness to the world and in the ability to relate appropriately to the environment, which in turn greatly influence learning. Thus, children with autism are particularly challenged with learning to function in a non-autistic world.

Educating children with autism must incorporate an understanding of the different “culture” in which people with autism live. Such a philosophical understanding of autism involves overlapping disciplines (e.g., medicine, education, speech and occupational therapies) and necessitates a multidisciplinary approach. The challenge is to devise and maintain comprehensive, coordinated, appropriate programs dedicated to improving our understanding of autism and developing and implementing relevant services. Although no single educational or treatment approach has been shown to be uniquely successful with all students with autism, there are some principles, developed through the years, which have been proven particularly helpful in educational programming for students with autism. This presentation will focus on structured teaching, as practiced in the TEACCH program in North Carolina, as a basis for establishing successful, quality educational programming for students with autism.

The guiding principles in structured teaching involve recognizing patterns of relative strengths in autism and not simply focusing on areas of deficit. Some of the cognitive strengths which have been associated with autism include special interests, rote memory and visual processing. Since children with autism seem to be relatively competent in processing information visually, this can be used educationally. The use of areas of relative well functioning helps insure the feeling of success both for the professionals and the student. By reinforcing areas of relative strength, each individual’s level of adaptation can improve.

It is possible to achieve this success through the use of two complementary educational interventions. The first approach involves improving and expanding the individual’s skill repertoire. Specific training of communication, academic and social skills is an essential component in educating students with autism. The second component of educational intervention consists of modifying the environment to accommodate the world as experienced by individuals with autism. These two basic intervention strategies are applicable across ages as long as appropriate modifications

are made to meet the individualized needs of the students and the classroom setting, which may or may not include typically developing peers. Although these techniques could easily be modified for the home setting, this presentation will focus on the creation of the optimal learning environments for children with autism in a non-autistic world. In order to distinguish between skills which should be taught directly and the use of possible appropriate environmental accommodations, stringent assessment of individual developmental and behavioral abilities is necessary. This assessment of the individual student should involve the use of diagnostic instruments, which will help identify his or hers specific profile of autistic symptomatology, and involve the use of developmental evaluations focusing on sociocognitive skills inherent in learning. Structured teaching is individualized according to the particular pattern of developing skills and relative deficits of each student as revealed in their assessment. At its base, structured teaching is developmentally driven and sensitive to differences intrinsic in the world of autism. The structure can help to clarify expectations, to provide predictability and meaning to events, and to offer a framework that facilitates learning and participation in activities.

The first part of attaining the goal of increasing the level of adaptation in each student with autism is based on directly improving each student's skill level. These techniques are culled from various theories of instruction and include the principles of learning theory, the techniques of task analysis and results from outcome research regarding general teaching, addressing methods for providing directions for task execution, for offering prompts and for delivering reinforcement. Environmental accommodations are crucial for maximizing the student's adaptation. The major components of structure are visual physical organization, non-visual physical organization, schedules, work systems, task organization. They are an attempt to make a non-autistic world comprehensible to the student with autism and to assist the student function in a non-autistic world. At the same time they help to promote independent functioning. By reviewing the characteristics of autism and addressing some of their special needs while accepting that the person with autism experiences the world differently than non-autistic people do, it may be possible to specify some viable and enduring guiding principles in learning and in teaching successfully. Structured teaching is a system for organizing space, for relating to the duration, the sequencing and the changing of activities, for establishing work-study systems to facilitate learning the task process, and for the organization of the materials themselves to promote independence in execution of tasks. The use of structure should also include incorporating predictable routines throughout the day. Such structure can provide continuity of intervention by remaining constant while the student moves to another class or has a substitute teacher. Structure also organizes the environment to minimize behavioral difficulties.

In order to incorporate these principles into an overall philosophy of best practice, it is important to remember to include parental involvement in all stages of planning and implementation of the program. Interventions should be "data-driven" including ongoing assessment of effectiveness. At the same time, the programs must be individualized, based on appropriate, activity-based interventions that address students' unique needs. Transitions are particularly difficult and must be addressed for each student throughout the day. Structure can help provide a practical answer to the question of what is the best educational environment for each student with autism. The answer seems to consist of establishing multi-methodology classrooms which utilize communicative, academic, social and environmental supports, thus finding ways of translating our world into comprehensible segments for students with autism.