



Tips on Behavior and Life Skills

Use a Positive Approach

Stay positive at all times. Pay attention to and look for appropriate behaviors. When you see them, comment on them and reinforce them with specific verbal praise (e.g., "Carey, I like how you are sitting quietly."). To establish new behaviors, present other reinforcers along with the verbal praise, e.g., physical praise (a pat on the head, a "high five", etc.), a primary reinforcer (a bit of food or candy), or activity reinforcers (access to toys, time to play, etc.). Note: It is very important to find strong reinforcers (a reinforcer is anything that, when given after a behavior, strengthens the behavior). To find a **strong reinforcer**, talk to the parents, other teachers who work with the child, watch for those things the child chooses on his or her own, and try a million different things to see what is motivating for the child. Once you find a strong reinforcer, keep it under your control and do not allow the child access to it until the child has performed the behavior you are looking to strengthen. Unlimited access to reinforcers devalues them.

Teach Flexibility

Children with Autism often have rituals or routines that they feel compelled to perform. Often, the child will demand that others comply with his or her routines as well. For example, I know a young child who must count ten steps as he walks up the steps. If he miscounts or the steps do not add up, the child insists that Mom and he start all over

Have High Expectations

Do not assume the person cannot do something just because the person has Autism. Expect the person to behave, to answer you when you ask a question, to come when you call, and to complete a task you assign. The person with Autism may need more time than others to do these things and may need your help, but continue to expect good things from them

Require a Response- Do Not Drop Demands

Never ask a person with Autism to do anything! Always tell them. And never tell a person with Autism to do something that you cannot make happen with your hands-on assistance. When you tell a person with Autism to do something, give them a little more time to respond (about ten seconds). Many persons with Autism have difficulty processing auditory information and/or visual cues and may need more time to decode what you have said and to decide upon a response. If after ten seconds, the person does not respond, prompt the answer.

For example, if you have asked, "Kayla, are you happy today?" And got no response, prompt Kayla by saying, "I am -----." She may fill in the blank. If still no response, prompt again with "I am h-----." (assuming she looks happy). If still no response, prompt a "Yes" or

again at the bottom. This is probably similar to OCD. It's as if the child believes something bad will happen if the correct number of steps is not counted or some other routine or ritual is not followed. This actually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Once the routine is completed, there is a sense of relief and the "bad thing" doesn't happen. Stopping the child from performing the routine (or ritual) may result in a severe tantrum. Giving in to the routine (or ritual) after this, reinforces the routine (or ritual) and the tantrum - not a good thing! Don't go out of your way to stop all routines and rituals. The ones that are harmless and do not infringe on other's rights (e.g., lining up cars in the toy room), you can simply ignore and not play along. But do not allow the child to demand that others comply with their routine or ritual and do not allow it to take over the entire school.

Tantrums are sure to come, but tantrums are always ignored (unless the child is in physical danger). When ignoring a behavior that previously received a lot of attention, the behavior will probably get worse before it gets better. Be patient and ignore consistently for at least three weeks (the time it takes to develop a new habit). If the behavior has not decreased, another strategy may be required (perhaps attention is not the motivation for this behavior).

Follow Through With All Demands

If you give the child an instruction and the child has a tantrum, ignores you, engages in

"No" verbal or gestural response. Whatever response comes (even if you have to shake her head up and down for her) make sure you praise her for "Good answering" or "Good talking." Never allow a question to remain unanswered or an instruction to remain uncompleted. Do not drop it and move on to the next child. If you do this, the child with Autism will learn that no response is ever required of them and that what they may have to say is unimportant. Make sure you get a response. Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

Do Not Raise Your Voice or Use Threatening Words

Raising your voice seems like the natural thing to do to get compliance. (It works at home, right?). However, many children with Autism may be sound-sensitive due to sensory. They may just avoid you. Also, when we raise our voice to a child, we have probably already gave the command four or five times. What we have taught the child is that the only time we really mean business is when we raise our voice.

The child with Autism knows we don't really expect them to obey us until we are shouting. To get around this, tell the child to do something once or twice, if the child does not comply, assist them in the least intrusive method needed to get the child to comply. For example, if you have calmly told the child to sit down twice and the child is still standing, place your hand on the child's shoulder and guide the child into the seat. Once the child is seated, say, "Good sitting. I

self-stimulatory behavior, walks away, or refuses to comply with your instruction, you must continue to insist that the instruction is completed. Wait the child out, when he or she is calm, make sure the task is completed. Use a contingency statement to improve the child's motivation. For example, "I know you do not like making the bed, but when you are finished, it will be time to ride your bike (or something else pleasant to the child)." This results in a win-win situation, which is what we are always seeking with our children. Allowing a child to escape demands is a very powerful reinforcer for their escape behavior (tantrum, etc.) and this will be a very difficult habit to break once it is established.

Use schedules

Use a schedule and other methods to predict upcoming events and changes for the child with Autism. Most children with Autism resist change and prefer sameness. Rather than just a stubborn habit, this is probably due to the child's inability to fully comprehend and pay attention to all the cues from their environment that announce a change is upcoming.

Many children with Autism focus on only a small part of the situation rather than the whole. For example, most of us can look around the room and see people getting ready to go home, we hear the rustling papers, see the clock moving, hear the teacher say the "end of the day phrases," etc. Children with Autism may miss all of this and only be focused on the puzzle he or she is

like how you follow directions." The child learns from this encounter that you mean business.

Rather than chase after or grab a child who is running away from you (unless the child is facing obvious danger), tell the child what he or she should be doing ("You need to come back here.") and offer the child a contingency for returning on their own. For example, "As soon as you come back and finish the activity, it will be time for snack (etc.)." Do not threaten negative consequences (e.g., "If you don't get back here you can't go outside all day!"). This will lead to a power struggle and/or more avoidance. Stay calm and keep it positive. Teach the child to ask or tell where he or she is going by anticipating their escape behavior and saying, "It looks like you want to go outside. Use your words." And then reward this appropriate behavior with a trip outside (if possible - if not, tell the child when going outside is an option.).

Use Clear and Specific Language

Students with Autism may have difficulty processing what you say. At first, speak slowly and clearly so the child receives all to most of your verbal cues. (Later you will want to make your speech as normal as possible so the child will understand anyone, not just you.). Make sure the child is looking at your face (more on this later) to assure he or she also picks up on your nonverbal cues.

Be specific in your language. Until you know the child understands colloquialisms or abstractions, do not use them. For example,

completing. Children with Autism need to know what activity is first, next, and last.

Children with Autism should be warned when an activity is about to change (e.g., "In five minutes it will be time to put the puzzle away.") and another is about to start (e.g., "When you are finished with the puzzle, it will be time for math worksheets."). Children with Autism should be warned about visitors coming into the classroom and home. They need to be warned about odd or scary things that are about to happen (e.g., "Kayla, in five minutes the school bell/fire alarm will ring. It will be loud!"). [Social stories](#) are stories that explain the reason for things to children with Autism, explain the perspective of others, and talk about expected behaviors from others and the child with Autism. Social stories can be a great way to prepare children for changes and new situations.

Ignore Inappropriate Behavior

Destructive, abusive, or dangerous behaviors may require a consequence, but for most behaviors: start with ignoring. Commenting on, looking at, or paying attention to inappropriate behaviors in any way can be very reinforcing for many children with Autism.

When you explain rules to the person, make sure they are stated in positive terms. That is, say, "Sit on the chair," rather than "Don't stand up." Tell the person what to do, rather than what not to do. If the person makes a

rather than say, "Take a seat," say, "Sit on the chair." Many children with Autism are very literal and may misunderstand your nonliteral phrases - no matter how common they seem to be. For example, a parent once told me that she was puzzled when her child kept holding his worksheets up to his face, until she realized that she had told him, "Keep your eyes on the paper." Watch your nonliteral speech - it can have unforeseen consequences!

Use nouns as nouns, verbs as verbs, and adjectives as adjectives. For example, if you are teaching colors by showing different color blocks, do not say, "This is blue," rather say, "This is a blue block." Do not say, "This is a cow," if showing a picture of a cow. Instead, say, "This is a picture of a cow."

Also avoid inadvertently asking questions when you intend to give a command. We all do this when we tell a child to do something but add the polite phrase, "Okay?" This changes the command to a request and the child can say, "No." And, since we want to always reinforce appropriate communication, we would have to honor their "no" and stop the activity. Also avoid outright questions, like: "Will you do this?" or "Are you ready to work?"

Other statements to avoid: "Do this for me." (School work is not done for someone else, it is the child's duty). "Let's put on our coat." (Unless that is a very big coat, avoid this "we" talk). Also avoid "Please" and "Thank you" when giving commands or instructions,

mistake, say, "Good try," and have him or her try again. Also, never talk about the person's behavior problems or deficiencies in front of the person. It's rude to do with anyone; and may give the person with Autism a list of things to do to get your attention! Be careful!

these are polite words but not needed for expected behavior.
