

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH TIME PROBLEMS

Assisting your child coping with time difficulties involves a combination of planning, allowing more time, and alerting your child to upcoming changes in activities. In addition, speaking more slowly and calmly and avoiding overestimating how much speech your child can understand can head off problems before they happen.

Plan Ahead

Anticipating upcoming events can make a world of difference in helping a child with an ASD deal with time. Adults who procrastinate and tend to do things at the last moment when a deadline looms are destined to have problems with their child or student with an ASD. The adult feels rushed and finds it necessary to improvise in order to get there on time or complete a task before a deadline. Children with ASDs cannot be rushed, and have little tolerance for improvisation. The secret in helping them avoid crises is to plan ahead well in advance of activities. Many parents of children with ASDs create a daily schedule, much as classroom teachers write the day's activities on a chalkboard each morning before the students arrive. That helps keep everyone on track and reminds them of upcoming events. If a visual schedule is used, as discussed in Chapter 2, it will also help the child anticipate forthcoming events.

Allow More Time

If you think it should take 10 minutes for an activity, allow 20 minutes. It is better for a child to complete an activity ahead of schedule than to be hurried to complete it. Any activity that involves multiple steps, such as brushing teeth, will take longer because the child is called upon to repeatedly stop one activity and begin the next. The child first must wet the toothbrush under the running water, then squeeze the toothpaste on the toothbrush, then close the toothpaste tube, then brush his or her teeth, then rinse out his or her mouth and spit in the sink, rinse off the toothbrush and hang it up, and finally wipe his or her face on a towel and hang up the towel. This sequence may seem simple to an adult or typical child but is precisely the kind of activity that creates problems for a child with an ASD. It takes longer because making switches between activities takes longer.

Alert the Child to Upcoming Changes

Changing from one strategy or activity to another is challenging for youngsters with ASDs. Adults can facilitate transitions by providing an alert several seconds before a change will occur, which gives a child's brain time to process the forthcoming change. It is a mistake to provide a warning too far in advance because a child may either forget the alert or begin to ruminate about the upcoming change, especially if the upcoming activity is one he or she prefers less. Five minutes before going to physical education, a teacher may say, "Bronco, we're going to gym in a few minutes." Bronco remembers being knocked down by another child during physical education and is afraid of falling from the monkey bars. As the minutes elapse, he becomes increasingly fearful and begins to cry. It usually is more effective to provide the alert between 30 seconds and 1 minute before the change, and within a few seconds after the initial signal, engage the child in a transition activity that occupies him or her, preventing him or her from thinking about what he or she dislikes about the upcoming activity. A statement such as, "Bronco, it's almost time for gym (pause and silently count to 5). Let's begin putting away our crayons" provides Bronco with a concrete transition activity (putting away the crayons) that will prevent him from thinking about and resisting the change. Another strategy involves handing a child a transition item that he or she can give to the adult in the next task situation who will reward him or her for doing so. "Isabel, it's time for Music. Give this (hand her a card with a picture of a piano) to Mrs. Jones and she will give you a treat."

Use Fewer Words and Speak Slowly

Areas of the brain involved in interpreting speech are not well coordinated for many children with ASDs, so it takes them longer to process spoken instructions or respond to questions. By definition, speech sounds usually come in rapid succession. If there are too many words and the words are spoken rapidly, it is very likely that the child will not understand what has been said. For many children with ASDs, speaking and interpreting speech is like dealing with a tongue twister: "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." We can all say the words slowly but we have difficulty when

we try to say the words rapidly. For children with ASDs, that also applies to interpreting the spoken words of others. A parent may say, "Would you like some butter on your potatoes?" That seems simple enough, but for a young child with autistic disorder who is just learning to speak it would be more effective to say, "Emily, butter on potatoes." This accomplishes two things: It indicates that you are talking to Emily, and it eliminates unnecessary words. Such telegraphic speech that omits articles and pronouns is often effective early in communication intervention. As a child begins to understand and use speech, it is appropriate to begin adding articles and pronouns.

If one listens carefully to typical spoken exchanges, it becomes apparent that a speaker expects a verbal response from the listener within a few seconds. If the listener fails to respond, the speaker assumes something is wrong. Perhaps the person wasn't paying attention, or he or she may be upset by what was said and is deciding how to respond. If a father reads the story *The Three Little Pigs* to his 5-year-old son, Shou, who has Asperger syndrome, and asks why the third pig made his house out of bricks, it is likely he may receive either no reply or one he doesn't expect, such as, "So he can live in it." When we attempt to correct such a miscommunication, linguists refer to that as a *repair*. Shou's father may try to give a hint (a repair) by asking what happened to the other little pigs' houses. At this point, Shou's father has spoken 18 words in about 15 seconds. If he is like many of us, Shou's father's second question might be stated more loudly to make certain the child has heard the question. Such lengthy utterances are very difficult for children with ASDs to understand, especially if they are spoken rapidly. If Shou's father wanted to ask a question about the story, it would better to ask "what happened" questions rather than "why" questions that require an understanding of a character's motives. It might be more effective to ask what the wolf did to the straw house. Spoken instructions or questions should be enunciated clearly and slowly. For example, to a child with an ASD, hearing "going to" may not mean the same as the informal contraction "gonna." If a caregiver asks, "D'ya wanna M&M?" to a child with an ASD, it is likely all the child may hear is "M&M." If a child appears not to understand, try to restate the instruction or question as clearly as possible with fewer words, avoid contractions, and speak more slowly.

Don't Overestimate What a Child Understands

It is common for children with Asperger syndrome to exhibit spoken vocabularies and reading abilities at or above grade level. The depth of their understanding of the words they use or read, however, may be more limited. This is particularly true of abstract concepts and language that pertains to the reasons for people's actions. An elementary school child with Asperger syndrome may know all of the *Star Wars* characters but is unlikely to understand what "May the force be with you" means. I have known children with Asperger syndrome who knew the names of all of the states in the United States and their capitals but wouldn't be able to explain why people seldom drive from New York to California but often drive from Maryland to Virginia. It is very easy for adults to mistake a child's "knowing that" for "understanding that." A child with an ASD may know many facts but not understand their relationships with one another. Pragmatic language may be more limited than syntactically correct speech. Speaking to a child with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome on the assumption that he or she thinks like typical children his or her age and can perform comparable inferential reasoning can create problems. Such a child still requires more time to process the meaning of speech than typical peers.

Keep Calm and Don't Raise Your Voice

When a teacher has a classroom full of children to attend, or a parent is in the midst of daily family responsibilities, it can be very frustrating to speak to a child on the autism spectrum and receive no response or an echolalic response, such as repeating an advertisement from television. If an adult raises his or her voice, speaks harshly (e.g., "What's wrong with you? Aren't you listening?"), or, worse yet, yells at a child, the youngster will hear nothing that is said subsequently. Children with autism tend to be overly fearful, and a harsh tone of voice sets off alarms in their brain that interferes with their ability to think and listen. Responding harshly or loudly teaches a child that interactions with adults are unpleasant and frightening.

It is best to take a deep breath, stay calm, and repeat the instruction or question more slowly in an even tone of voice. If the

child refuses to stop what he or she is doing (e.g., a preferred activity) in order to move on to a necessary new activity, try to look at the situation from his or her vantage point. Think of your job as being like that of a customer service representative dealing with frustrating customers. They usually have a reason for being upset, though their response is often exaggerated. Raising your voice, being more forceful, or physically forcing a child to do as you say will only make matters worse. By remaining calm, you will have an easier time soliciting the child's cooperation next time. Say the child's name, wait until he or she orients toward you, and then make your request.

Dangerous Situations: An Exception to the Rule

The one exception to this general rule is when a child with an ASD is about to do something that is potentially dangerous to him- or herself or others. If Ariel is about to insert a paper clip into an electrical outlet or Ashley appears to be poised to poke another child in the face with a pencil, it is appropriate to call them by name and firmly and loudly say, "stop" (e.g., "Ariel, stop!"). The child should be frightened by the situation in which he or she finds him- or herself (about to do something dangerous), which startles him or her long enough to keep from harming him- or herself or others and is reasonable and responsible.

SUMMARY

Nearly everything you do with a child with an ASD requires more time than with a typical sibling or student peer. Parents who prefer to go with the flow have far more difficulty communicating with and enlisting the cooperation of their child with an ASD. Classroom teachers who are frequently harried, rushed, and a bit muddled will find themselves having repeated problems with their student with an ASD, even a high-functioning student. A combination of planning, using alerts before changes in activities, slowing down spoken communication, and avoiding complex language can prevent problems.

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