

Top 10 Tips for Teachers*

Supporting Students with Autism in the Inclusive Classroom

by Paula Kluth

While most educators agree that no single "recipe" exists for teaching any individual student or group of students, there are certainly guidelines that can be helpful in supporting students with autism in the inclusive classroom. These 10 simple ideas will aid teachers in addressing some of the unique learning, social, and communication needs of students with autism while bringing out the best in all learners in their classroom at the same time.

(1) Learn *about* the learner *from* the learner

Educational records and assessment reports serve an important role, but to gather the most useful and concrete information about how a student learns, ask the student herself. Invite her to take a short survey or sit for an interview, or ask her family for input. One teacher asked his student to create a list of teaching tips that might help kids with learning differences; the teacher then published the guide and passed it out to all the educators in the school. Be sure to ask parents for tips on approaches they have found most useful at home and see if they can provide videotapes of the student engaged in different family and community activities.

(2) Teach to fascinations

Whenever possible, use interests, strengths, and areas of expertise as tools for teaching. Some students who find conversation and "typical" ways of socializing a challenge, for instance, are amazingly adept at connecting with others when the interaction occurs in relation to a favorite activity or interest.

One of my former students, Patrick, had few friendships and seldom spoke to others until a new student came into the classroom wearing a *Star Wars* T-shirt. Patrick's face lit up upon seeing the shirt and he began bombarding the newcomer with questions and trivia about his favorite film. The new student, eager to make a friend, began bringing memorabilia to class. The two struck up a friendship and eventually formed a lunch club where students gathered to play trivia board games related to science fiction films.

(3) Get Them Talking

It is not uncommon for a handful of students to dominate classroom discussions. While it is important for these verbal and outgoing students to have a voice, it is equally important for others—including shy students, English language learners, and those with disabilities—to have opportunities to share and challenge ideas, ask and answer questions, and exchange thoughts. Arrange for activities that give all students the chance to communicate and interact.

One high school history teacher invited his students to “turn and talk” to each other at various points in class. After giving a short lecture on the Presidency, for example, he would ask his students to turn to a partner and discuss *What qualities do Americans seem to want in a President?* or to re-explain a concept he had taught. He used this strategy to break up his lectures and give students time to teach the material to each other. These low-risk exchanges provided one of his students with Asperger syndrome daily practice with such key skills as “staying on topic” and “turn taking.”

(4) Give Choices

As much as possible, build choices into the students’ day. Choice not only gives students a feeling of control but also an opportunity to understand their learning preferences—which is especially helpful for students who have special needs when it comes to learning environment, lesson materials, and communication.

Students can choose which assessments to complete, which role to take in a cooperative group, which topics to study, or how they wish to receive personal assistance and supports. You can also embed choices throughout the day by giving the option of, for example:

- selecting five of 10 assigned problems to solve
- working alone or with a small group
- reading quietly or with a friend
- using a pencil, pen, or the computer
- conducting research in the library or in the resource room
- taking notes using either words or pictures

(5) Consider Handwriting Alternatives

Writing can be a major source of tension and struggle for students with autism. Some may not be able to write at all and those who do may struggle with it. Give students gentle encouragement when they attempt to do *some* writing—a word, a sentence, or a few lines.

Allow the student to use a computer, word processor, or even an old typewriter for some or all lessons. For some learners, being able to use a word processor when writing helps them focus on the task at hand (content) instead of on their motor skills (process).

(6) Help with Organizing

While some students with autism are ultra-organized, others need support to find materials, keep their locker and desk areas neat, and remember to bring their assignments home at the end of the day. Consider implementing support strategies that all students might find useful.

For instance, teachers can have students copy down assignments, pack book bags, put materials away, and clean work spaces together. Structuring this time daily will give all students the opportunity to be organized and thoughtful about how they prepare to transition from school to home. Provide checklists around the classroom, especially in key activity areas, such as the classroom assignment in-box (e.g., *Is your name on the paper? Did you complete both sides of the sheet?*).

(7) Support Transitions

Students with autism often struggle with transitions from environment to environment or activity to activity. Individuals with autism report that these changes can be extremely difficult, causing stress and feelings of disorientation. Minimize the discomfort students feel by

- giving 5- and 1-minute reminders to the whole class before any transition
- providing the student or class with a transitional activity such as writing in a homework notebook or singing a short song about “cleaning up”
- engaging peers’ help during transition; in elementary school, ask students to move from place to place with a partner; in middle and high school, have students with autism choose a peer to walk with
- encourage students to carry a familiar toy, object, picture, or other transition aid to facilitate movement from one place to the next

(8) Create a Comfortable Classroom

Sometimes students cannot be successful because they are uncomfortable or feel unsafe or even afraid in their educational environment. A comfortable learning environment can be as central to a student’s success as any

teaching strategy or educational tool. Students with autism will be most prepared to learn in places where they can relax and feel secure.

Create a comfortable learning environment by

- providing seating options (beanbag chairs, rocking chairs)
- reducing direct light when possible (using upward-projecting light, providing a visor to a student who is especially sensitive)
- minimizing distracting noises (providing earplugs or headphones during certain activities)

(9) Take a Break

Offer “instructional pauses” to allow students to take a break of some kind (walk around, stretch, or simply stop working). Some will need walking breaks that can last anywhere from a few seconds to 15 or 20 minutes; some will need to walk up and down a hallway; and others will be fine wandering around the classroom.

Similar to the teacher who encouraged his students to “turn and talk,” one teacher offered a lesson-related question (*What do you know about probability?*) and had students “talk and walk” with a partner. After 10 minutes of movement, he brought the students back together and asked them to discuss their conversations as a large group.

(10) Include

If students are to learn appropriate behaviors, they need to be in an inclusive environment where they can see and hear how their peers talk and act. If they are to learn social skills, they need to be where they can listen to and learn from others who are socializing. If they need specialized supports to succeed academically, teachers need to see them functioning in the inclusive classroom to know what types of supports they will need.

If it is true that we learn by doing, the best way to learn about supporting students with autism in the inclusive classroom is to *include them*.

* *The tips in this guide were drawn from “A Land We Can Share”: Teaching Literacy to Students with Autism by Paula Kluth and Kelly Chandler-Olcott; “Just Give Him the Whale!” 20 Ways to Use Fascinations, Areas of Expertise, and Strengths to Support Students with Autism by Paula Kluth and Patrick Schwarz; and, “You’re Going to Love this Kid!” Teaching Students with Autism in the Inclusive Classroom by Paula Kluth. All are available at www.brookespublishing.com. To learn more about the author, go to www.PaulaKluth.com.*