SUGGESTIONS FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASD)

Provided for Information and sharing only

1. *I have attached an informational handout about autism spectrum disorders and the implications of ASD for teaching and learning.*

2. Use social exchange *scripts* to teach students with ASD a short social interaction to have with others. Write and practice the script in advance and give it to the students with ASD and their communication partners such as the lunchroom women, office staff or other children. You can include the student with ASD in writing the script if possible.

   A social script for greeting people in the office might say
   Student: Good Morning
   Mrs. Wilson: Good Morning, Hillary.
   Student: How are you today?
   Mrs. Wilson: Fine. Thanks for asking. How are you doing?
   Student: Just fine. Nice to see you.
   Mrs. Wilson: Nice to see you too. Have a good day.
   Student: You too. Bye!

   Although scripted exchanges sound, well, "scripted" (!) they teach the student with autism spectrum disorders the idea of a social, verbal exchange. When the script is learned and used successfully with several different communicative partners, new scripts can be developed, practiced and used. This is part of what is called "systematic" social skills instruction. New scripts can be made and used with other students that include less formal language and more "student-like" exchanges.

   You may have students who do not have ASD but who may benefit from social scripts to help them have appropriate exchanges with staff and children.

3. Consider giving students a visual cue to take with them to places in the school, using a different one for each destination. The front of each card could name the destination (lunchroom, library, music, art, etc.) The back of each card could indicate where the child is to go next. (Mrs. Welch's room, the bathroom, outside, etc.) Vary the presentation of the destination cards so the students have to learn to pay attention to the visual cue rather than just follow a verbal cue.
   To help students initially understand the use of the destination cards, an exact duplicate of the card can be placed at the destination ahead of time. The student then comes in and places their card next to the duplicate card, "matching" the two cards. If the student went to the wrong destination, the duplicate card would provide feedback that something is wrong because

there would be no "match." Matching is often a high skill area for people with ASD.

When leaving the environment, the student could remove the card and turn it over to look on the back to see where they need to go next. Alternatively, the student could remove the card and take it with them to the next location, which would be written on their daily schedule list. (See #9 below)

4. When supporting students with ASD in "specials" or in general education settings, adults can be sure to give verbal cues to the students *very quietly* so that the teacher and the other children cannot hear the cues or corrections. General education students and staff tell us that hearing two voices at once (the classroom teacher and the individual assistant) is very distracting. In addition, the other students do not need to know every time the student with ASD makes a mistake or needs a prompt.

5. Autism in its essence is a disorder of communication or socialization. All students with autism need augmentative communication whether or not they have some speech. Augmentation "adds" to a student's ability to communicate.

Augmentative communication increases speech output for students with ASD. There is no research that indicates that augmentative devices decrease speech production. In addition, being able to clearly express one's wants and needs is a quality of life factor for us all. Each child in the autism spectrum should be evaluated for augmentative communication devices. Ideally, each student with ASD will have an "array" of methods to use, customized to environments and communicative partners. These methods can include speech, voice output devices, cards with words on them, pictures, and objects.

Sometimes students can talk to the degree that very familiar people can understand and expand the limited speech of the child. For example, the child might say "dog" and an adult knows that the child means that they would like staff to read them their favorite book about a dog. Although this can be successful with a very familiar person, it limits the student with special needs to only communicate with a very small number of already-known people. This can severely limit child-to-child interactions and interactions with other adults.

A voice output device can be programmed for students with limited speech whose intent is not always obvious. In the above example, when the student says, "Dog," staff would teach the student to press the button on the voice output device that would say, "Let's read the book about the dog named Sammy." In this way the student's communication is *expanded* and

clarified and made *more available* to more communicative partners, especially other children.

6. If you want a student to learn to use pictures or word cards for communication, or to use a voice output device, then do NOT have the child simply identify or name the cards or pictures, or repeatedly press the button to make the voice output device "talk" at your request. Repetitive identification of communication symbols is called "massed practice." Unfortunately, children who learn to "identify" their communicative symbols have a much harder time understanding that these symbols can be used to "make something happen" with other people and might have more difficulty spontaneously using the communicative symbols in real life communication settings. This can be the underlying problem when people say, "He has a communication system but refuses to use it."

    Instead of identification, set up situations so that when the child looks at or picks up, touches, gives or uses the symbol (depending on the targeted response) something happens immediately and clearly that is related to that particular symbol. So, for example, in initial training, if the child gives you the "swing" picture, respond by swinging. If the child points to the word card that has "orange," written on it, have an orange available to cut and eat it. Make the pictures, word cards and voice output devices in your augmentative system have the power to MAKE SOMETHING HAPPEN, especially in the earliest time of training. Later, students will learn that the activity associated with the picture or word card happens sometimes when requested and sometimes when it is on their daily schedule list. (see #9 below.)

7. Remember to **always** use your voice and encourage the students to **use their voices** when using any augmentative devices. If the student cannot speak or cannot speak clearly, staff can say the words indicated by the student. There are two goals for using augmentative devices: one is to develop and improve speech and language and the other is to give the children an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings, and understand ours, even if they do not (yet) have sufficient voice to do so.

8. When working with students with ASD who are more than four or five years old, consider teaching them to respond to print instead of pictures. In my opinion and experience, it is a "myth" to think that all students with ASD can understand pictures or line drawings better than printed words. Pictures require more interpretation than printed words. Printed words are easier to memorize. Staff and families can produce print at any time. Other students who can write can use print to communicate with students with ASD. Pictures become more stigmatizing or "babyish" as students get older. A high priority educational outcome for all students is to be able to understand what they *read.*

9. Make daily schedule lists of what is going to happen a child's life each day. Parents can start one in the morning that describes the events of the day, including what is likely to happen when s/he comes home from school and in the evening. At school, a list can be created that shows the student the events of the school day. As each event on the list is completed, the student or staff can cross if off and look to see what the next event or activity will be. Breaks, recess, etc. should be listed as well as any "specials" that might be happening. If a change occurs during the school or home day, get the list, cross off what will not happen and write in what will happen instead. If there is a block of time during which you are unsure what will happen, indicate by writing in "I don't know yet" or "Not sure".

   Initially, students do not have to "perform" anything with these lists. Staff and family simply create them, refer to them, show the value of the schedule, and keep the schedule list available where the student can easily reference it. During the time that the schedule list is being made for a particular day, staff and family can insert several opportunities for "free choice time" and the student can indicate what s/he would like to add to the schedule at that point.

   One idea of the daily schedule list is to help students anticipate and be ready for changes from day to day. Therefore, do not make copies and give the student the same list every day. Instead, make the schedule reflect the small or subtle changes that occur from day to day such as indoor or outdoor play, a substitute teacher, a visitor coming to the room, etc.

   Another benefit to the schedule list is that it helps begin to teach the important lifetime skill of "read and do." As each item on the list is "read", we "do" it. In this way, students can gain more independence and competence in moving through their school day. A printed schedule is not stigmatizing and can be put into a form similar to that used by same-aged peers.

10. Sometimes students with ASD need more physical and visual structure that defines expectations for them. For example, sometimes students come into the gym or music class and choose anywhere to sit on the floor. This may be too unstructured to support a child with ASD, at least initially. Staff may want to define a place, using tape on the floor, a carpet square or a chair to show students with ASD what to do when they arrive in the class. The student with ASD can then move to another location once they have entered the room in an organized and predictable way. Do not expect children with ASD to automatically organize themselves when joining a group of children. Provide visual cues and create a routine.

11. Teach children to follow carefully designed lists that indicate the steps to

use to complete a task. For example, a girl or boy could follow a list to use to pick up materials and put them away, to start working in study hall, to participate in a science project, to complete an activity of daily living such as cooking, toileting, washing hands or brushing teeth, or to follow the steps needed to get ready to go home or to lunch.

It is important to present information about what you want students to do as a list for at least these reasons:

> When the list is carefully made, it tells students what steps to use to complete the task.
> The list is visual and concrete: visual/spatial processing is often a strength for students with ASD.
> Using the list works with the rote memory portion of the student's brain. Rote memory is often a strength for students with ASD.
> Using the list causes the adults in the environment to teach the task the same way every time, creating a rote learning situation that can be more easily memorized.
> When the steps on the list are learned and memorized, the student may internalize the steps and no longer need the actual list.
> Using a list helps teach students the same way across environments with a variety of support staff.
> Using a task list can become a life long self-monitoring device for students.
> When students learn to complete the steps on a list, they gain greater independence and satisfaction. They appear more competent to peers.
> Students require less continuous support if they have learned to follow the steps of a task by using a task list.
> The risk of verbal prompt dependence is decreased when students learn to follow the steps on a task list.
> Using a task list helps students prepare to receive the reinforcement or reward when the list is completed.
> Lists do not draw attention to what students cannot do.
> Task lists can include information about what is to be done when the task is completed. This can assist students in making smoother transitions.
> Most students and adults use lists. They are not stigmatizing or degrading. They are considered a helpful part of daily life. They are a lifelong support strategy for most people.

12. A peer group is a group of people who think that they have something in common. A peer group is a group of people with whom you feel you belong and who recognizes you as belonging to them. Members of a peer group recognize and highlight what is similar about the members of the group while acknowledging differences among the individuals in the group.

Typical students may not know WHY special needs students are different or what they have in common with them. Providing additional information to the students that helps them *understand* each other will promote the development of a true peer group.

The typical children should be talked to (when the special education children are not present) in order for them to gain a greater understanding about special children, their disabilities and needs. This is true if the typical students spend five minutes or five hours with a special needs student. With parents' permission, staff can explain why each special child does the things s/he does, why social interaction may be difficult for them and how the peers can help. Students should be taught what to do when a special child is not appropriate or when they need help in their interactions. Emphasis should be placed on helping the students understand that special needs children WANTS to have friends, that they CARE very much about what the other students think of them, that they are doing the best they can and are working to learn new skills. Opportunities for the typical students to talk about special students and their relationships should be provided periodically, always when the special students are not present.

Children with special needs may be particularly vulnerable to bullying and being taken advantage of by other children. It is imperative that classmates understand this so that they can be vigilant in informing staff if someone is trying to intimidate or hurt a child in any way. Without understanding this, children may stand by and allow special needs children to be hurt or victimized.

We cannot expect general education teachers and other school staff to automatically understand students with special needs or to be automatically able to answer sensitive and important questions that students may raise. With parents' permission, a presentation can be made to staff in an all staff meeting, such as those that normally occur before or after school. Staff need to have their questions answered and to learn to use appropriate language and explanations with the general education students if they ask questions. Staff can encourage students to continue their friendly overtures and guide students in ways to interact with and understand each other so that social relationships can develop.

13. www.teacch.com it the website for the North Caroline TEACCH program for people with autism. The use of the "baskets" to teach independent work skills is part of the TEACCH method. You may want to take a look at this website. It will provide you with many helpful ideas to expand the work on what you are already doing.

14. When working with students with ASD, try to make work as functional and relevant from the point of view of the student as you can. Look for opportunities for students to complete "real" tasks in the school environment, such as preparing materials, counting numbers of items to be given out, collating, distributing, sharing, etc. It is not very helpful in life to count to 100 if you cannot count the number of people and napkins needed to have lunch!

15. Students with ASD may not automatically learn to greet others in the natural context. I like the way you have some students matching pictures of students to the students themselves first thing in the morning. You may want to have a written cue card to teach the student with ASD to say "Hi" or "Good morning" to them.

16. Use timers to teach the children how long to work before changing activities. For example set a timer when break time begins. When the timer goes off, prompt the children to put away their things. Be careful not to talk about the timer. Instead teach them how to RESPOND to it. What I mean is this: when the timer sound is made, do not ask them if they heard it. Do not talk about it. Model and prompt the RESPONSE to it. For some children, you may want to Introduce timers with tangible reinforcers.

    Do not *introduce* the use of timers to try to make a child with ASD or other special needs STOP doing a liked activity. If you do, the child will learn to not like or want to respond to the timer. Instead, initially use timers to indicate the end of a less-preferred activity and time to start a highly liked activity. Once the child has learned to respond to the timer signal, you can begin to use the timer to help the child know when it is time to stop a highly preferred activity and move on to something else.
    If you are using a timer to introduce or expand *waiting* skills, first take baseline data to determine how long the child can wait at present. Then use the timer initially for only the amount of time the child can already wait. When the child is responding to the timer calmly and consistently, *gradually* begin to increase the amount of time to wait indicated by the timer.

    Remember that there are all kinds of timers. Select the timer based on where it will be used. Consider whether or not it will be bothersome to others if an auditory timer is used. If so, consider the use of a quiet timer such as a sand timer. A wonderful visual timer is called the Time Timer. It is inexpensive and available from Generaction, Inc. 1-877-771-TIME or fax 513-561-4699

17. In individual sessions, be sure to teach needed skills that require a compliance response. Then, take the skill training away from the table and the individual session and teach the generalization of the skills in multiple environments.

Some of those skills are:
    Stop.
    Come here.
    Give that to me.
    Get the X.
    Give the X to Y.
    Show me where it hurts.
    Stand up.
    Sit down.
    Move the X.
    Move yourself to X.
    Put the X here.
    Put the X there.
    Do what she is doing. (imitate)
    Go outside.
    Come inside.

18. Consider creating a volunteer Buddy System for each student with ASD. In this system, one or two children are "Buddies" for each child with special needs for the day. Each school or classroom can design their own way of having a Buddy System. Here is an example of one way to do it:

    The system is explained to the typical classroom of children when the special needs students are not present. The typical peers are given an opportunity to volunteer to be a Buddy (or Friend or Mentor of Helper) by writing their name on a paper and putting it in a box or envelop.

    Each morning, two names are drawn and those two students become companions to one special needs child for that day. They may help the child follow directions or complete work, read together, be a team mate in PE, sit with the special needs child at lunch and play with the child on the playground.

This system teaches the typical children HOW to be helpful, an important life skill for them. It prevents an adult from needing to prompt the special needs students at all times. It teaches the special needs students to watch and take the lead from their peers. It may help prevent the loneliness that special needs students may sometimes feel by being "alone in a crowd." The system is voluntary and so no child is expected or required to participate.

The Buddy System is *not* a substitute for adult intervention or supervision nor are the Buddies responsible for the compliance, safety or performance of the special needs students.

19. Research indicates that children and adults think that others like them when others give them compliments. Age-appropriate compliments can be written on cards. The student with ASD can be prompted to give those compliments to others throughout the school day.

20. Students with ASD who are receiving individualized support from one primary person can become very attached to that person, and vice versa! Although the development of relationship is great and important, we do not want to limit the student with ASD to being successful and competent only in the presence of one staff person. Be sure to rotate staff who support students with ASD so that students learns to work with a variety of people.

   Individual support staff need to record information about what is effective, how the individual communicates, and medical or medication information. Everyone in the program can become familiar with this information. Staff can rotate in their responsibilities so that everyone learns to work successfully with everyone else. If this is not done, students with ASD can have a negative response when the ONE person with whom they work is absent, ill, quits, or moves.

   I have attached a Communication Dictionary so that staff can record what they have learned about how a child with ASD communicates. I have attached a form for staff to use to write down what they have learned about working successfully with a student.

   These forms can be updated from time to time. They are subjective in content and cannot be used as the sole basis of making important decisions. Staff should use sensitive and accurate descriptions that are objective as possible when completing these forms.