

Autism Spectrum Disorders: Simple Strategies That Work!



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Samara Pulver Tetenbaum, Ph.D. is one of the newer psychologists in the field of Autism Spectrum Disorders, and one we are so fortunate to have on Long Island. We first met her when our offices were together at the Center for Autism and have continued our relationship as she moved on to the ASPIRE Center for Teaching and Learning in Melville. Along with its director, the talented Shana Nichols, Ph.D. and Gina Moravcik, CCC-SLP they wrote one of the best books on girls on the autism spectrum, *Girls Growing Up on the Autism Spectrum: What Parents and Professionals Should Know About the Pre-Teen and Teenage Years*. This month's column is a double treat. Samara is writing about a presentation that AHA had from an advisory board member of ours, Brenda Smith Myles, a leader in the field. Enjoy!

Simple Strategies That Work! Review of a Presentation by Brenda Smith Myles at AHA 20th Annual Fall Conference by Samara P. Tetenbaum, Ph.D.

Through combining her extensive knowledge of behavioral principles with her creativity (and even a bit of humor), Brenda Smith Myles led an interesting and accessible presentation of *Simple Strategies that Work!* at AHA's 20th Annual Fall Conference. The presentation provided essential information for both behavior intervention newbies, in addition to well-seasoned professionals, through her use of jargon free language and extensive relatable examples. Overall, seventeen strategies were identified that parents and educators can add to their toolbox to help youth with ASDs reach their "limitless potential."

1. **Operate on Asperger Time** - Youth with ASDs often cannot adjust to time constraints. Consequently, the amount of time allowed for tasks needs to be adjusted. To compensate for "Asperger Time" demands may need to be reduced or changed and transition reminders can be helpful.
2. **Create a Balanced Agenda That Conserves Energy** - It may take great effort for a child with ASD to just get through the day. By scheduling low-stress, high pleasure activities into the day, we can prevent youth from feeling overwhelmed. It is important to remember that activities that may seem stress free for us, such as a birthday party, may be high stress activities for youth with ASDs.
3. **Offer Structured Flexibility** - Planning can help a child with ASD to understand and cope with the environment. However, as planners, we have to be ready to change the plan as necessary, depending on the child and his or her moment-to-moment needs.
4. **Manage the Environment** - Children with ASDs may lack organization and planning skills which they need to navigate their day. By establishing and directly teaching clear routines, parents and teachers can reduce stress and anxiety. Children should also be specifically taught how to wait and what they should do during "down time."
5. **Use Humor** - Brenda highlighted that "our children are wonderful and do unexpected things that should make us smile and sometimes even laugh."

6. ***Incorporate Priming*** - Previewing materials and preparing a student for upcoming activities is a small step that can make a big difference for children with ASDs.
7. ***Motivate and Reinforce*** - Children (with and without ASDs) respond to extrinsic motivation. For children with ASDs the most powerful reinforcers are related to special interest areas. Special interests can be incorporated into reinforcement systems as well as directly into academics. Importantly, the use of special interests to motivate and teach does not change the intensity of that interest.
8. ***Set the Tone*** - It is important to model the acceptance of individual differences and the concept of fairness. An important life lesson for all children is that fair does not mean everyone receiving the same thing, but everyone receiving what he or she needs.
9. ***Simplify the Language*** - An understanding of individual words is not equivalent to a comprehension of those words in a sentence. It is essential to communicate clearly and use visual supports liberally. Directions will frequently need to be broken into concrete steps.
10. ***Share the Agenda*** - Children with ASDs have challenges predicting what will happen next and any change can cause them to experience an increased level of stress. It is important to let youth know the schedule ahead of time and prepare them for any possible changes in their routine.
11. ***Teach the Hidden Curriculum*** - School is not only for learning reading, writing, and arithmetic. The Hidden Curriculum is a set of unwritten rules which are not usually directly taught but that most people learn socially. Youth with ASDs must be explicitly taught these rules and these skills are as important, if not more so, than those traditionally taught in the classroom.
12. ***Provide Reassurance*** - Children with ASDs often experience uncertainty, which can lead to stress, which prevents learning. By providing reassurance, stress can be prevented.
13. ***Be Generous with Praise*** - Youth with ASDs are at risk for low self esteem and many lack confidence. Offering specific praise allows youth to know when they have done something “right.”
14. ***Recognize Teachable Moments*** - Teaching in the moment increases generalization and provides an additional instructional opportunity. Youth with ASDs may be more motivated to learn in the actual setting, when the material is highly relevant.
15. ***Teach Self-Regulation*** - Individuals with ASDs have difficulty recognizing that they are becoming upset and often cannot self-calm. Self-regulation difficulties can be a major obstacle for youth on the spectrum.
16. ***Embed Intervention and Supports using the Comprehensive Autism Planning System*** - Intervention and supports should be integrated throughout the day and a mixture of strategies is likely to be most effective.
17. ***Have Fun!***

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