



Chapter Four

The Learning Environment: Adjusting the Classroom and the Curriculum

Once you know the child, the IEP goals, and the available resources, you can plan a classroom that acts as a “home base”—a safe, predictable place from which the child with ASD can integrate into the larger school environment. It is not practical or desirable to implement every idea in this chapter; however, great effort should be made to create a workable environment for the child.

The Classroom

First, look at your classroom. Some environmental aspects can interfere with the child’s learning and contribute to undesirable behavior, a topic dealt with extensively in subsequent chapters. Accommodating this child requires rethinking your classroom according to the IEP goals and objectives. Make some changes before the school year begins and other changes as you become familiar with the child.

Noise

Noise can effect concentration for all children. “Normal” sound to you may be too loud or quiet for the child with ASD who has sensory integration issues (difficulty monitoring sensory input). See the chapter titled “Available to Learn: Providing Appropriate Sensory Input” (page 32) for more about sensory integration dysfunction.

- Avoid hallway noise and high-traffic areas (bathroom, water fountain, pencil sharpener) when choosing a seat for the child.
- Let the child use earmuffs or earplugs to block sounds.
- Some children benefit from background noise to filter out intrusive sounds. If the child likes music, place a CD player nearby so it does not bother others or let the child use an MP3 player with white noise or soothing music.
- Try playing classical music to signal the appropriate noise level. When noise drowns out the music, say, “Boys and girls, I cannot hear our music!” to prompt them to lower their voices. They will learn to regulate their own noise levels.
- For some activities, increased volume will enhance learning. Use louder music and perhaps movement: marching, movement games that incorporate academics, or acting out stories and poetry.
- Change the music or the noise level to make transitions more definable and predictable for the child with ASD.
- It may be difficult to maintain quiet. If the classroom gets too loud for the child with ASD, have her leave to take a break.

Smells

Certain odors can cause a child to display inappropriate behaviors. Avoid wearing heavy perfume or using strong air fresheners. Make sure any area where children use paint or markers is well ventilated. Keep the air circulating and the classroom clean.





Transitions

Transitions can be difficult for children with ASD. Show the child how to transition from one activity or location to another. As you get to know the child and understand his processing abilities, plan ahead for the time needed before and during transitions and have a consistent protocol in place to avoid escalating behaviors. Consider using some of these ideas to make changing from one activity to another less traumatic.

- Deliver instruction in short segments. Alternate with free time and movement.
- Collaborate with other teachers when routines are going to change for the students.
- Use peers as role models during transitions like going to recess or lunch.
- Use visual, auditory, and verbal cues to signal transitions.
- Move the child to another desk or table as activities change.
- A picture schedule or other visuals can assist the child during transition times.
- If the child is uncomfortable with transitions, consider using a timer to assist her. A ringing bell is somehow less subjective than a person saying, "OK, time is up."



Timing and Introduction

How you first introduce the child to the classroom is important. Children who feel prepared for the start of the new school year will be more comfortable and are less likely to act out through stress. If possible, meet the child on "his turf" before he visits the classroom. Arrange to meet him at his home or in another familiar environment.

Next, arrange to have him tour the classroom without others in the room. Identify important places, like where supplies go and where different activities take place. Show the materials or the pictures of them that you have put in the area (visual learners) and let them touch the materials or even use them (kinesthetic learners). If you allow the child to select his desk, do this without other children in the classroom to get the clearest picture of where he is comfortable. Reevaluate this choice after other children are in the room and place peers who are good role models near the child with ASD. (For more about peer relationships, see "Facilitating Socialization and Communication" on page 43.)

Teaching Style

If your style of teaching matches the learning styles of all of the children in your classroom, you have hit a home run. However, if your teaching style does not match all children's abilities, including the child with ASD, be open to meeting their needs. Differentiating instruction is critical, and so is differentiating how you deal with each child to make his learning experience excellent.

