ACCOMMODATIONS AND SUPPORTS FOR PRESCHOOL STUDENTS WITH ASD

Accommodations and supports are designed to minimize obstacles to learning or participating in the educational environment. The accommodations and supports your child receives will depend on your child’s needs and the goals set in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan. The list below contains some common ones used with preschool children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Many of the supports listed are visual. Often children with ASD are visual learners, meaning they process information better when it is shown to them. Visual supports can also help children with ASD express themselves better.

Make sure to include specifics in your child’s IEP about when and how all accommodations and supports are to be used. And make sure you learn how to use strategies that are used at school at home. Many of the tools used at school will also be helpful at home when used in a consistent manner.

Social Stories™: Social Stories™ describe an event or situation with the intent of explaining the circumstances, perspectives, and expected behaviors that occur during the event or situation. To be effective, Social Stories™ should be highly individualized. Frequently, they may include pictures or photos of the individuals involved. They can be particularly helpful when preparing for an out of the ordinary situation, such as school picture day or a fire alarm, or when preparing for a new or difficult activity, for example, going to a restaurant, on a field trip, to a party, or to the dentist. Once created, a Social Story™ should be read to the individual many times until the expectations conveyed in the story are well understood.

Picture Schedules: One of the common features of many individuals with ASD is the need for routine and structure. Picture schedules provide a visual representation of what is going to happen during the day or within a certain part of the day (for example, the details of a certain activity). They are helpful in reducing worry over “what comes next” and in helping smooth transitions. To be most effective, teachers and caregivers should check off or otherwise indicate when an
activity has been completed (or have the child do it).

**Choice Boards:** Choice boards display a limited number of options for activities. Sometimes children with ASD have difficulty figuring out what to do next. A choice board can help simplify the decision making process and promote independence.

**Visual Communication Systems:** Every child with ASD has difficulty with communication, whether or not they are able to speak. A visual communication system uses picture symbols in place of words and can be useful to some degree with all preschool children with ASD, regardless of verbal language ability. Two common visual communication systems are the Picture Exchange Communication System™ (PECS) and sign language.

**Behavior Charts/Reward Systems:** Behavior charts and reward systems are a good way to positively reinforce desired behaviors. They target only a few behaviors to influence at a time and then keep track of how many times the behavior is achieved by using tokens, stickers, smiley faces, or another visual reminder of accomplishment. When a certain number of tokens are earned, they can be turned in for a larger incentive. Incentives and goals should be constantly monitored to make sure they remain appropriate and encouraging.

**Timers:** Depending on the child, timers can be a good way to remind a child it is time to end one activity and begin another. Finding a timer that provides a warning before time expires is ideal. Otherwise, the timer may be anxiety provoking and more of a problem than a benefit.

**Communication Book:** Children make the most progress when there is good communication between home and school. One way to ensure this is to set up a regular method of corresponding. Communication books are notebooks that travel back and forth from home and school and include short notes by the teacher and parents. Sometimes they include checklists or rating scales to let parents know how the child is doing in school with respect to particular areas being monitored. Teachers can let parents know about the child’s day and provide ways to reinforce learning at home. There should be a place for parents to write about difficulties they are having at home or comment on new strategies or therapies that are working. Everyone is busy, so don’t expect pages of detailed information. The purpose of the communication book is not to provide daily progress on IEP goals. It is to promote an open dialogue between parents and educators.
Fidgets: A fidget is an item that your child can hold that may help with attention, calming, and focus – or, depending on the fidget and the child, it can be a distraction. Examples include a stress ball, string, or a small car with wheels to turn. Fidgets should be saved for situations in which attention is important and should be taken away after the situation ends. Otherwise, they may become common place and lose their desired effect. Also, it is important to constantly reevaluate the need for and effectiveness of fidgets, and to have more than one option ready should a beneficial fidget lose its usefulness.

Frequent Breaks: Even in preschool, some children with ASD are not capable of staying engaged in activities as long as their peers. These children may benefit from breaks outside of the energy of the classroom. Sometimes having a quiet place to go is enough to prepare the student to reengage in the classroom environment. For others, it is the movement – the walk to another part of the school – that is beneficial.

Many of the accommodations listed above are referred to as “Assistive Technology.” Assistive Technology is any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Assistive Technology can be low-tech, including laminated picture schedules, or high-tech, such as the use of an iPad® to create Social Stories™ or otherwise help a child transition between activities.

Related Articles:

- IEP Basics for Families of Preschool Students
- 504 Basics
- Speech, Language and Communication
- Picture Exchange Communication System
- American Sign Language
- Behavior Intervention Plan

Additional Resources:

- Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Assistive Technology for Children with Autism
- Assistive Technology for Children with Disabilities
The Center for Autism Research and The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia do not endorse or recommend any specific person or organization or form of treatment. The information included within the CAR Autism Roadmap & trade; and CAR Resource Directory & trade; should not be considered medical advice and should serve only as a guide to resources publicly and privately available. Choosing a treatment, course of action, and/or a resource is a personal decision, which should take into account each individual's and family's particular circumstances.