

Tips to Enhance Interactions with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder

TIP #1	"Give Me Some Space"	Sensory sensitivities can cause extreme stress and anxiety. Touch sensitivities or needs can become overwhelming. <u>IDEAS:</u> • Provide a special area where the person can feel safe and ready himself for interaction. • Attempt to stay back (more than an arm's length away). Move slowly into a person's personal space. • Ask for permission to touch; don't assume it is OK to even touch lightly. • Let the person choose where she wants to sit, stand, or pace.
TIP #2	"Turn Down the Noise and the Lights"	Sensory sensitivities can extend to how people hear the sounds in their environment and how lights or colors affect them. It can be so overwhelming that a person cannot move or so painful that he may do everything he can to escape. <u>IDEAS:</u> • Try to eliminate multiple sounds within an environment. • Allow the use of headphones at school, work, or in the community. • Change lighting by turning off lights or only use lamps. Sometimes reducing even just one stressor can help reduce anxiety and stress.
TIP #3	"Listen or Look for the Message Behind the Behavior"	"Behavior is Communication!" When you see someone acting differently or in a way that is confusing, try to understand that he may be communicating messages such as fear, anxiety, pain, confusion, happiness, anger, hunger, or many other messages. <u>IDEAS:</u> • Consider the possible "hidden message" in the behavior before you respond. • Respond with a comforting word, a choice between several options, or change what you are doing (see Tip 6).
TIP #4	"Say What You Mean: Communicate Your Message Clearly"	Making a situation predictable can go a long way toward helping someone feel calm and allowing someone to successfully participate. Some people need specific and detailed information about what will happen, when it will happen, or why it will happen. <u>IDEAS:</u> • Communicate clearly and concisely. Evaluate your communication system to ensure your message is accurate and understood. • Be concrete and "to the point." • Use words or phrases that have meaning to the individual. For example, someone may not have been exposed to or understand words/phrases like "get it together," "vital signs," "cool it," "what's up dog?," or "personal items." Think about clear descriptive language and check for understanding before moving on.
TIP #5	"When in Doubt, Write it Out (or use pictures)"	Sometimes talk is useless. The spoken word is very transient. It lingers for a short time and then, unless the listener can hold it in memory, it is gone. <u>IDEAS:</u> • Supplement your message or information in writing. • Use checklists, provide directions, post schedules, or offer rules in writing. • If a person uses pictures or symbols, use these items as well. A picture IS worth a thousand words! • Designate a "change" card to signal when things in the schedule will change.

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TIP #6	"Change Your Approach"	Look inwardly. Look at yourself. How can you change your actions or reactions? How can you change your voice or words? <u>IDEAS:</u> • Consider whispering or slowing your words. • Try singing the message. • Perhaps stop talking for a period of time. • Stop moving and keep your hands still. • Breathe slowly. Demonstrate calmness. Smile. Wait. Change what you do and observe how this can change what others do.
TIP #7	"Don't Ask Me Why"	Why, why, why? What if a person does not know why? Or what if she cannot communicate the "why"? Continually asking questions, especially "why" questions, can cause anxiety and distress. <u>IDEAS:</u> • Provide information about the situation instead of asking for information (remember to use pictures and written words to help). • Given background information, ask questions that offer a choice instead of being open-ended. This pulls someone gently into the interaction rather than putting him in the position of having to develop and uniquely articulate an answer. • Example: Instead of, "Why are you here?," ask, "Are you here because you have pain or are you sick?" If the response is "yes" or "pain," the follow up can be, "Point to where you hurt," "Tell me where you hurt," or "Show me where you hurt."
TIP #8	"Give Me Choices"	Having choices offers control. Having control can reduce anxiety and stress. <u>IDEAS:</u> • Consider giving choices such as the following: what a person can do, in what order they do things, who can participate, when to take a break, what to eat, or what to wear. These are just a few examples of ways to add choice in any activity. • Start making the "choice option" a part of your typical interaction, and you will be surprised at how easily and naturally it happens.
TIP #9	"Be Patient"	Patience communicates respect and caring. You are telling someone they are worth your time and attention. Give people time to be ready and time to respond. <u>IDEAS:</u> • Make a statement or ask a question and wait. • Count in your head and wait 5-10 seconds. Allow time to process. • Accept when someone attempts to follow your directions or offers any response. An attempt is not a refusal. Treat it as a success. • Remember that refusal may mean that the person is not ready. • Avoid rushing and give time. Successfully sharing a quiet, calm moment with someone is a place to begin.

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TIP #10	"Honor Special Interests"	Use a special interest, knowledge, areas of expertise, and talents as tools for teaching. This can improve motivation and reinforcement for the individual with ASD. <u>IDEAS:</u> • Build lessons around special interest topics so peers can see the student as an expert in something. • Don't worry about making an "obsession" worse by allowing time to discuss a special interest. Everyone has special interests, and we participate in them because of the enjoyment they bring us. • Use special interests to help a learner through a challenging moment (ex: during a fire drill, allow the child to hold a comforting object or special interest). • Incorporate special interests into the curriculum (ex: if a student is struggling in language arts, allow him to write a story about his interest).
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For more information on autism spectrum disorders, visit the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI) website at www.ocali.org