Supporting Children with Autism

Predictable Routines

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Predictable Routines

Creating predictable routines for a preschool child with autism is essential for supporting emotional regulation, learning, and independence. A sense of predictability helps young children know what to expect, which can lead to feeling less anxious and more secure while they are at school.

First-Then and picture choice boards support communication by clarifying expectations and preferences.

Individual picture schedules use clear, personalized visuals to help children understand and navigate their day.

Consistent routines with visual aids like picture schedules, first-then boards, and transition cues help children understand their day, anticipate changes, and feel more prepared.

Using an app to display a visual schedule on the TV helps children follow routines with clarity and confidence.

Predictable routines ease transitions and reduce behavioral challenges by helping children feel in control. Over time, this consistency builds self regulation, independence and confidence.

Sensory Support

Sensory needs vary widely in preschoolers with autism. Some may be hypersensitive to noise, light, or textures, while others seek sensory input through movement and touch. Observing signs like covering their ears, avoiding eye contact, or withdrawal helps identify sensory overload.

Calming tools like a calm-down container and sensory bottles, support emotional regulation for children with autism and benefit all children in the classroom.

A visual timer helps children understand time, easing transitions and reducing anxiety.

Sensory Supports:

Fidget toys – Support focus and calming during seated or group activities.

Noise-reducing headphones – Prevent sensory overload during loud times (e.g., group music, transitions, assemblies).

Weighted lap pads – Provide calming pressure to help children feel grounded and regulated during sitting tasks.

Calm-down area - Include soft lighting, cozy seating (pillows or beanbags), and calming objects (e.g., sensory bins, squishy toys, textured fabrics).

Visual timers – Help children anticipate transitions and understand how long an activity will last.

Transition songs – Familiar tunes help signal upcoming changes and make transitions more predictable.

Gentle verbal cues – Simple warnings (e.g., "Two more minutes, then snack") to help children prepare for what's next.

A cozy area with soft materials and visuals provides children a safe space to take a break, regulate emotions, and feel supported.
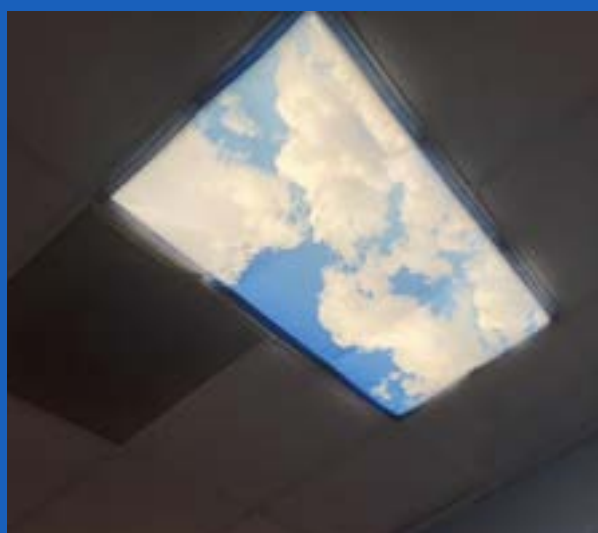
Adding covers to lighting helps soften the brightness and creates a calmer, more soothing classroom environment.
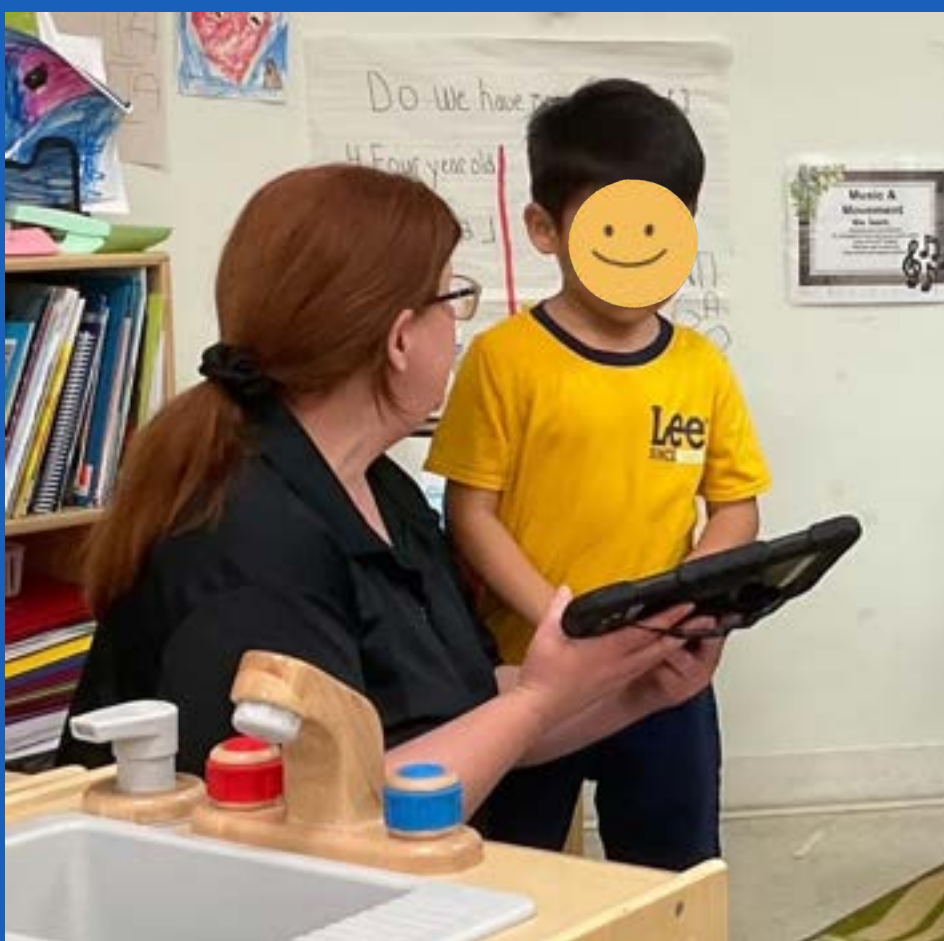
Communication Support

Children with autism may have limited or emerging verbal language, so it's important to recognize and respond to all forms of communication. Supporting communication in preschool children with autism is essential for reducing frustration, fostering connection, and building confidence.

AAC stands for Augmentative and Alternative Communication. It includes various methods and tools used to support or replace spoken language for individuals who have difficulty with verbal communication. AAC helps children with autism (and others) express their needs, thoughts, and feelings in ways that work best for them.

AAC can be temporary or long-term and should always be used alongside spoken language when possible. The goal is to give children multiple ways to communicate, build independence, and reduce frustration.

Communication Support

Types of AAC include:
Low-tech options:
*PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) – children hand over pictures to communicate.
*Core vocabulary boards – boards or books with common words (like "more", "stop", "go") that children can point to.

High-tech options:
*Speech-generating devices (SGDs) – tablets or devices that produce spoken words when a child selects a symbol or button.
*Apps – like Proloquo2Go or TouchChat, which turn tablets into customizable communication tools.

Keeping these tools accessible and modeling their use throughout the day—without forcing them—empowers children to express themselves in their own way. Consistent collaboration with families and therapists ensures classroom supports align with each child's communication goals and preferences.

Social Skills Support

Supporting social interaction for preschool children with autism involves creating intentional, structured opportunities to practice and develop social skills in a safe and manageable way. Children on the autism spectrum may find peer interaction overwhelming or confusing due to difficulties with communication, understanding social cues, or sensory processing.

Strategies:

Model and scaffold social interactions.
Example: "Let's say hi to our friend together."
Use visual supports and verbal cues to guide turn-taking and sharing.

Teach through social stories and role-play
Model and practice asking for help, joining play, or handling conflict.
Practice these skills in a safe, structured way.

Create small group opportunities
Lower-pressure environments with fewer distractions.
Allow for more focused interaction and peer observation.

Pair children with positive peer models
Choose calm, socially confident peers to encourage natural connection and imitation.

Gently support and reinforce positive interactions
Offer praise like, "Nice job waiting your turn."
Use subtle prompts or visual cues to guide children back on track if needed.

Celebrate small steps in social development
Acknowledge efforts, not just outcomes, to build confidence and motivation.

Promote inclusion and belonging
Ensure all children feel valued and part of the group through consistent support and encouragement.

Supporting behavior in children with autism starts with understanding the reasons behind it. Challenging behavior is often a sign that a child feels overwhelmed, is trying to communicate, or is having trouble coping. Instead of just trying to stop the behavior, teachers should look for triggers, like too much sensory input, unclear expectations, difficult transitions, or unmet communication needs.
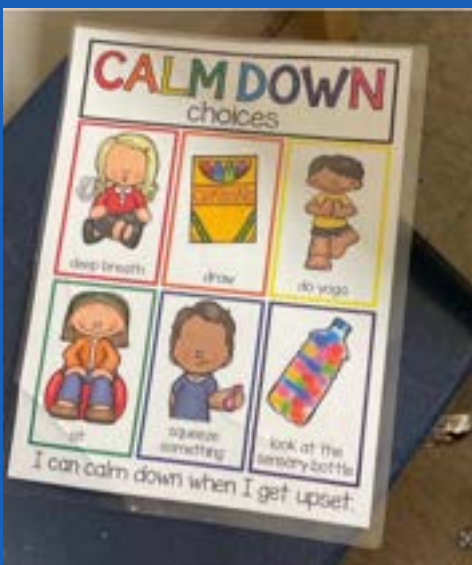
Strategies:

Identify Triggers-Observe and document patterns to understand what might be causing the behavior (e.g., noise, transitions, demands).

Use Predictable Routines-A consistent daily schedule helps reduce anxiety. Visual schedules, timers, and verbal reminders support transitions.

Teach and Model Coping Skills-Show children what to do when upset (e.g., taking deep breaths, using a calm-down space, asking for help).

Provide Choices- Offer limited choices (e.g., "Red crayon or blue?") to reduce power struggles and promote autonomy.

Use Positive Reinforcement-Praise efforts and positive behaviors immediately and specifically (e.g., "Great job using your words!").

Stay Calm and Consistent-Respond to behaviors with a calm tone and predictable consequences to build trust and security.

Collaborate with Families and Therapists-Share observations and strategies to create a unified support system across environments.

Coaching Corner

- How well do I understand each child's individual needs, strengths, and interests?
  - Am I taking time to learn what motivates and supports each child?
- Am I providing consistent visual supports and clear routines throughout the day?
  - Do children know what to expect, and do they have access to visuals when needed?
- How do I respond when a child displays challenging behavior?
  - Am I seeking to understand the cause, or reacting to the behavior alone?
- What strategies am I using to support communication, including non-verbal or AAC methods?
  - Do I model and encourage communication in multiple forms?
- Am I creating sensory-friendly spaces and responding flexibly to sensory needs?
  - How do I notice and support a child who is overstimulated or seeking sensory input?
- In what ways am I facilitating meaningful peer interactions and friendships?
  - Do I intentionally plan for social learning and scaffold peer play?
- How do I collaborate with families and therapists to provide consistent support across settings?
  - Am I open, respectful, and proactive in my communication with families?
- Do I give children enough time to process language and respond during interactions?
  - Am I rushing or allowing adequate wait time?
- How do I celebrate and reinforce small steps in progress and self-regulation?
  - Am I noticing and acknowledging effort and growth, not just outcomes?
- What can I do differently to ensure that my classroom is inclusive, respectful, and supportive for all learners?
  - How am I growing in my own understanding of the diverse ways children think and learn, and how does that shape my inclusive practice?

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