

WORKING WITH ADULTS WITH AUTISM: USING LEARNING STRENGTHS AND INCREASING INDEPENDENCE

We can assist the person with autism to be as successful and independent as possible by making sure that the way we teach capitalises on the learning strengths in autism and takes into account learning difficulties that occur. **Learning strengths of people with autism include:**

- Taking in whole chunks of information quickly
- Remembering information for a long time
- Using visual information meaningfully
- Learning and repeating long routines
- Understanding and using concrete, context-free information and rules
- Concentrating on narrow topics of interest

1. Use VISUAL teaching methods.

Use **visual supports** such as written words, photos, templates and timetables and **non-verbal communication** such as gestures, pointing and facial expression.



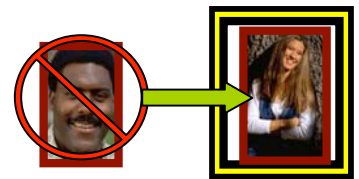
2. Establish routines and predictable environments.

People with autism quickly learn routines and are naturally motivated to repeat them. If the steps in a routine are presented with a clear beginning and end, the total routine is often learned quickly. Since people with autism are naturally motivated to repeat routines, the completion of the routine is in itself reinforcing. This includes daily, weekly, monthly and annual routines, as well as structuring tasks as consistent routines.

- Certain tasks and activities to be done the same way by all staff
- Daily and weekly events should follow a predictable sequence

3. Inform people with autism what is about to happen before it occurs.

People with autism have difficulty anticipating what is about to happen before it happens and coping with transitions and changes to routines. **It is critical that they are informed about what is about to happen before it occurs.** This means using visual supports. Verbal instructions are not enough.



4. Encourage the generalisation of skills to different situations.

Set up ways for skills to be practiced in **different places**, e.g. making a snack of three-minute noodles at the day program as well as at home. Have **different people** train the person with autism but make sure **all trainers use consistent routines and teaching methods**.

5. Be prepared.

People with autism take in chunks of information quickly and remember things for a long time. This means the **first time** you teach something, you need to provide **relevant cues** for the person to attend to. Make sure you:

- Have all the equipment you need before commencing the task
- Have visual supports prepared
- Work out concise, verbal cues at an appropriate level
- Make all staff follow the same sequence and use the same cues — consistency is vital

Equipment ready



Visual support — template



Verbal cues

"Cut open"
"Put noodles in"
"2 cups of water"
"Put in"
"Timer on 2"...

6. Teach the whole task.

Practising small parts of a task without going through the whole task loses the meaning for people with autism. Make sure the person at least **observes the whole task from beginning to end**. If the person will tolerate being **guided through the whole task** then this is recommended.

- Use visual support to show the end product before commencing
- Use visual support to show how the steps fit together.



7. Adapt your verbal language

- **Simplify your language** — use key words and simple phrases (*remember politeness and respect is communicated by your tone of voice, body posture and facial expression much more than the words you use*)
- **Express one thing at a time and say things in the order that they happen**
- **Use direct and specific language**
- **Don't use questions to give instructions**
- **Use pauses and plenty of silences**
- **Talk at a normal volume and with varied intonation**
- **Augment with nonverbal supports such as gestures where possible**

8. Use positive statements.

Overuse of words like “no”, “don't”, “stop”, “wait” and “not now” **MAY TRIGGER CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS**. **Use positive words**, don't focus on negatives. If the person needs redirecting, **explain what to do**, not what not to do. Don't say: “No reading” or “Stop that” — say: “It's time to..... now... (pause) ...let's go”.

9. Allow plenty of time for the person to respond.

Many people with autism are likely to have a long response time, taking longer than usual to comprehend and respond to what is said to them. Sometimes as much as 30 to 45 seconds. Allow sufficient processing time for the person with autism to respond; don't expect them to react immediately to what is said, as this will place them under unnecessary stress. Repeating a message within seconds of the original message makes it even more stressful. **Wait at least 20 seconds for the person to respond before repeating or using other support.**

10. Give specific choices.

People with autism will respond to questions better if given a clear choice.

Don't ask: “What do you want to eat?” — say: “Do you want chips or biscuit?”

The client does not need to be able to speak to make a choice. They may simply reach toward their choice or push the non-preferred item away. **To assist understanding, show the items or a visual representation of the items involved in the choice.**

For more detailed information, see the Aspect information kit

“Working with Adults with Autism: Using Learning Strengths and Increasing Independence”.