

**Notes from**  
**Tools from the Autism Spectrum Disorders Survival Kit**  
**presented by Susan L. McDowell, M.S.**

Susan's goal was to provide proactive strategies that would lead to successful encounters with students having autism spectrum disorders.

**Profile of the Student**

- Likes/Dislikes: When you know the child can do something, stand your ground, be firm, and don't back down. Just keep repeating what to do to and go to the next step. Distractions in the classroom may include fluorescent lighting and computer screen glares.
  
- Sensory Issues
  - May include touch (tactile defensive), since they cannot tolerate it very well. Firm pressure on the forearm works better than light touching. Intermittent hand-over-hand direction rather than constant touch helps desensitize the student. Once you take away the hand-over-hand touch and encourage the student to do the activity on his or her own, they will begin to realize that the intrusive touching will stop when they do the activity on their own. Get them to the point where they are in control.
  
  - May include smell, such as soaps, crèmes, and perfumes. These scents can be offensive to them. Even though you may like these aromas, be aware that the student you're working with may not.
  
  - May include texture, including things such as bubbles because they can be sticky and clothing tags which can be scratchy. Allow the student to choose between two textures—realizing that he or she may not like either one originally. The choice gives the student ownership of the situation.
  
  - Positive or aversive categories will be found through careful trial and error.
  
  - Rule of thumb: do not touch unless the student says it is all right.
  
  - Get information on how to interact with each autistic student.
  
- Means of Communication: How does the student communicate with others?
  - Verbal
  - Pictures
  - Gestures, sign language, pointing

- What Triggers Undesired Behaviors? A *trigger* is something that causes behavior that is viewed as disruptive. It usually is a particular phrase, touch, smell, or action that happens either purposely or consequentially.
  - Can the trigger be prevented or can a coping skill be put into place?
  - Be aware of obsessive/compulsive behaviors.
  - Redirect—handshake vs. hug (when a hug is not appropriate).
  - Replace—smile rather than give a handshake or hug.
  - Set up an appropriate time to hug the student if there is a need to do so.
- Medications: Find out what medications the student is taking and the possible side effects that may occur.

### Functional Behavioral Assessment

- There is ALWAYS a reason for the student's behavior. Here are some motives for challenging behaviors:
  - Student wants attention.
  - Student is trying to escape or avoid the task or request.
  - Student is trying to get something.
  - Sensory issues may play a part.
  - Student has a need for control.
  - Student wants to play.
- Assume NOTHING; if the desired behavior is not happening, it may be that the student:
  - doesn't know *how* to do it;
  - doesn't know *when* to do it; or
  - doesn't know *where* to do it.

Appropriate behavior needs to be taught and reinforced. Think of the A, B, C model: A is antecedent, B is behavior, and C is consequence.

- We need to be DETECTIVES and find out what happens in conjunction with challenging behaviors.
  - What happens?
  - When does it happen?
  - Where does it happen?
  - How does it happen?
  - With whom does it happen?
  - Look for PATTERNS!

Analyze the behaviors from the student's point of view. Consider this example: the student hits the teacher. It is not because the student dislikes the teacher, but because the teacher has asked the student to do a task the student doesn't understand how to do. Keys words to remember

are COMMUNICATION and INFORMATION. Once behaviors are assessed, strategies can be formulated to change the behavior.

- *“If you don’t have a good idea as to the why of the behavior, then your strategies will not change the individual’s behavior, because you have not addressed the purpose for which the individual engages in the challenging behavior. If strategies do not work, reassess the situation and change the strategies.”*
  - Modify the environment or schedule antecedent controls.
  - Teach alternative behavior that serves the same purpose as the targeted behavior.

### **Functional Means of Communication**

- Verbal
- Nonverbal
  - Picture exchange (Frost & Bondy)
  - Communication boards
  - Gesturing and pointing are not as effective as pictures for a student
- Teach an appropriate way to protest and honor it when used. This means that we teach the student ways to chill out.
  - Break
  - Stop

Your priority is to eliminate the aggression. Manifest appropriate ways to protest so the student can be reinforced positively. The goal is to get the student to have closure on an undesired activity.

- Follow-up
  - Return to the interrupted activity.
  - Establish successful closure.
  - Positively reinforce.
  - Move on to something else.

### **Positive Reinforcers**

- Primary—given when the student accomplishes the goal.
- Secondary—given when the student is on the way to accomplishing the goal.
- Immediate—given in recognition of the student being on the way to accomplishing the goal.
- Have a huge repertoire of positive reinforcers. The primary and secondary ones that worked yesterday may not work today, but may work again tomorrow and so on.

### **Predictability**

- Schedule. It is vital that the student is aware of what the day will be like and what things are coming ahead.
- Social Stories (Carol Gray). These short stories describe social situations that have cues and guidelines for the student to behave appropriately.
- Scripting. Actually write down what can be said to handle the situation.
- Role Playing. It is helpful for students to experience situations that may require “going with the flow” or thinking of alternatives on the spot.
- Preparation for a single event. This is helpful in situations such as testing or surgery. Be sure also to prepare those working with the student during this one-time event.
- Timing is everything!

### **Visual Schedule**

- Pictorial/Written—may include color coding the classroom, using a picture chart, or visually displaying getting through a series of activities during the day.
- Balance of Activities—dangle the carrot. For example, if you do \_\_\_\_ (the non-preferred activity), then you be able to do \_\_\_\_ (the preferred activity). Initially, you may want to spend less time on non-preferred activities and reinforce often for a job well done. Be sure to have both sedentary and mobile activities throughout the day.
- Inclusion of Proactive Strategies—be able to recognize early signs of frustration and aggression and offer things from a sensory diet such as listening to music.

### **Structure/Organization**

Be sure that there is fluency across settings and within settings, including

- home;
- school; and
- community

### **Routine**

Having a routine fosters learning and develops independence within the student.

### **Consistency across Settings**

- Communication Notebook
  - Try to capture the most positive thing and one issue that needs to be addressed immediately.
  - Have the teacher aide fill out the log (it should be filled out by the person who has spent the most time with the student during the day).
  - Include positive comments!
  - Forms work well, but remember that each needs to be child specific.
- Functional Means of Communication

- PECS = Picture Exchange Communication System
- Strategies from home should be shared with the teacher.
- Behavioral Supports
  - Be sure that everyone who interacts with the student is on the same page and consistent in their communication.

### Choices

Set them up, but allow the student to decide what to do.

- Gives control to the student.
- Gives the individual a sense of ownership.
- Builds confidence and raises self-esteem.

### Closure

Meltdowns usually occur during times of transition and can often be traced back to not having closure on an activity before moving to the next thing. Here are some ways to help combat this:

- Prepare for transitions by having a visual timer that is similar to a regular timer in that it shows increments of time from 0–55. The difference is that it should have a red disk which covers the time you want to count down. As time ticks away, the red disappears, providing the student with the opportunity to actually see “time disappearing.” Visual timers are available through: [www.autismshop.com](http://www.autismshop.com) or [www.timetimer.com](http://www.timetimer.com).
- 2-minute warning. Orally tell the student that two minutes are left for the activity.
- Close the door, open the window. This strategy is very useful, but hinges on your commitment to do what you say. “You won’t be able to finish the activity now, because we need to \_\_\_\_\_. However, you will be able to finish working on it when \_\_\_\_\_.” Or, “You can’t do \_\_\_\_ (the inappropriate behavior) here, but if you really need to do that, then you can do it \_\_\_\_ (in a more appropriate setting).”

### Chill-Out Area and Time-Out Area

- Redirection should be the first strategy before sending children to either of these areas. When the red flag goes up, try to get successful closure on the activity and move on to something else. Red flags include frustration, anxiety, agitation, and sensory overload. Be aware that some students have figured out that if they start to display these behaviors, they will be redirected instead of having to finish the activity.
- Chill-Out is proactive. It’s a spot where the student goes before a full-blown meltdown occurs. It is an area that has been set up to be a pleasing environment (beanbag chair, music, colorful pictures, etc.). The student should have completed enough of the activity to get closure. Positively

reinforce the student's compliant behavior, allow them 5 minutes maximum in the chill-out area, and then move on to the next activity.

- Time-Out is reactive. It's a sterile spot where the student goes after a meltdown has occurred. It is an area that has no warm fuzzies. It is a safe place to be when the student may not be safe to others. He or she remains there until calm. Once calm, bring the child back to the activity which caused the meltdown, get successful closure, positively reinforce him or her, and then move on to the next activity.
- **Caution: Set Guidelines!** Be cognizant of allowing students to get away with bad manners. If you have not already set guidelines and try to teach proper behaviors, you will see resistance before compliance, but it needs to be done! You cannot allow the student having autism to become an excuse for not disciplining the student. Bad manners are not a characteristic of autism.

### **Engagement**

Plan several activities with shorter work times, rather than fewer activities with longer work times.

- Minimal unstructured time. Things should be scheduled so that there is very little downtime or free time.
- Guidance of unstructured time through choices. When these times occur, help the student choose an appropriate self-directed activity.
- Picture schedule. Represent the day's activities in picture form that you can remove as it is completed. This allows the student to see closure of individual activities, as well as see the day pass before his or her eyes.

### **Parting Thoughts**

- Patience is a virtue.
- A calm demeanor is critical.
- Avoid direct commands.
  - How about this?
  - Let's do this . . .
  - My turn/your turn
- Help the individual meet the demand you have placed on him or her.
- Remember: Our job as educators is to not mold individuals with autism into something they fundamentally are not. Our job is to:
  - be knowledgeable of the disability or disabilities they present;
  - reach out with understanding and compassion;
  - serve them so that together we can help them realize the potential within and guide them in meeting their personal goals on life's journey.



The McDowell family: husband Kevin and Susan (above); son Gavin and daughter Liesl (right).



Susan was kind enough to stay on the line for approximately 20 minutes to answer a few burning questions from the evening's participants.

Q. Do you have a suggestion for quick communication notebook formats?

- Have the teacher aide fill out the log (whoever has spent the most time with the child).
- Include positive comments.
- Capture the most prominent positive thing and one issue that needs to be immediately addressed.
- A form works well (Kellie will attach something to the newsletter), but it needs to be child specific.

Q. What is a sensory diet?

- use it as an example
- start with a preferred activity
- stations for rotating
- include a non-preferred activity
- sensory diet (chill-out area, listen to music)
- back to schedule
- can use music again or maybe "kush" ball (to have something quiet to fidget with)
- a little time to do something without teacher input
- time to get out of the chair (water plants in the room)
- the secret is to plan time for these things

Q. How do you desensitize holding a pencil and writing?

- pencil grips (rubber cushion that slides up the pencil)
- fat pencil or marker
- have students use a computer to do the writing process; typing is easier
- write in a shallow tray with salt, sand, or cocoa mix (be aware of texture issues)
- use a SmartBoard®
- write in clay or play dough with a pencil (be aware of sensory issues)
- handwriting without tears ([www.hwtears.com](http://www.hwtears.com))

Q. Do you have tips for working with high-functioning students?

- students with Asperger's Syndrome will be able to do academics
- harder to get speech services (pragmatic language) for these students, but they need these basics
- give directions one at a time (don't give multiple steps)
- organizational issues need to be dealt with appropriately and helpfully
- social skills groups are beneficial
- find students in school, and build a circle of friends outside of teachers

There were several other questions posted in the chat box that Susan agreed to answer under separate cover. The attachment with this newsletter addresses those questions. Two of the questions were posted on KDP's Discussion Board where Susan answered them. To see these items, click this link:

[www.kdp.org/mb/list.php?1](http://www.kdp.org/mb/list.php?1).

Susan extends special thanks to Erin McNerney, an exceptionally dedicated teacher who serves as support staff for Susan's daughter Liesl. Erin taught Susan how to do PowerPoint and helped Susan develop slides for this presentation.

In addition to the document entitled "Susan's Answers," there are other attachments with useful information that Susan wanted everyone to have.

- 20 Classroom Modifications for Students with Autism
- Differential Reinforcement
- Language Pragmatics—Ginny Hart

Dr. Barbara Lapetina provided another attachment that is worth having.

- Communication Log