ASD Students - How can classroom teaching staff help?

What you can do to support language comprehension in the classroom:

1. **Visual back-up for all auditory information**
- written text or pictures matching information in oral presentation
- small task instructions (pictures and/or words) at student's desk
- in a discussion, there should be some visual way to identify whose turn it is to speak (watch the pace when the child must switch attention from speaker to speaker)
- visual schedules (cue card "reminders")

2. **Preferential seating**
- clear "line of sight" to teacher and any large visual supports
- minimize visual and auditory distractions
- close to teacher to maximize ability to hear teacher's voice
- consider seating in various school situations (classroom desk, group learning area, assemblies, library, etc)

3. **Teach "repair" strategies**
- use modified direct teaching programs like "Question the Direction"
- child must identify that they missed something, formulate a "repair" question, and then decide who to ask for help
- need on-going support in a classroom situation to monitor for signs of incomprehension, to check child's comprehension of classroom instructions, and to help child to directly "repair" the situation by asking a question

4. **Use of Social Stories**
- once disruptive behaviour is established, you will have to use direct teaching to show the child a better way to cope with stressful listening situations
- social stories and social problem-solving sheets can help the child to understand why the situation was difficult, and what they can do to fix it (that won't get them into trouble)

How to strengthen vocabulary skills:

- should always have a dictionary (of appropriate level) beside student as s/he does school work - another useful tool is a junior thesaurus
- a personal dictionary is also be a good idea - record specific new vocabulary words (eg. from new school topics), along with their meanings - you can use a binder or index card box, to allow new words to be filed in alphabetical order
- play various vocabulary-building games (Pictionary Jr., Outburst Jr., Balderdash Jr., Tribond Jr.) - you can also play games like "guess what's in my secret bag?", where people take turns hiding a mystery object, and then giving other players clues about what's in the bag - you can add "clues" to the commercial vocabulary games as well, with the leader giving clues to help the others guess a word - this type of activity builds a more complex web of meaning around a specific vocabulary word, improving the chances that the ASD student will be able to find the word when they need it

Sheila Bell - 2003

Supporting academic learning:

ASD individuals are very good at "surface learning". The problem is that they can often get the right answer for the wrong reason. As academic tasks demand more sophisticated thinking, gaps at the early levels of knowledge become apparent.

1. Functional Reading Comprehension
- include a variety of fiction and non-fiction books in the reading program
- reading for factual information may be easier than reading a story
- to improve story comprehension, you need to work on cause/effect in a visual form (also emotion, thoughts/perceptions of others) - generally, concepts that are not understood in fiction reflect concepts that are not well understood in real-life situations

2. Writing Skills
- support fine motor - use letter stamps, computer keyboard, having an adult "scribe" for the child (write down what they say) - don't hold development of written language back to level of poor fine motor skills
- allow child to formulate using drawing/pictures, then write text to match

3. Math
- computation skills tend to be learned easily - the challenge is to connect the written equations to what they represent in real life situations
- word problems - difficult because of the language piece - use drawing and concrete objects to "picture" the problem, then find the equation to solve it

4. Science
- teach in an "experiment-based" model
- use science experiments to improve reading for meaning (use written/picture instructions)

5. Social Studies
- use pictures and movies to give background information
- some ASD students may enjoy maps, and you can use this as a basis for discussing events that are remote in time (history) or place (geography)
- connect remote events to familiar events (eg. medieval history - visual comparison of castle to your own house)

How to use favourite topics to enhance interest in classroom learning:

- it takes a little imagination, but it is well worth brainstorming around teaching new concepts using favourite topics
- Here are some examples:
    - Superheroes take a tour of the world
    - How the life of pioneers was shaped by natural disasters
    - Beatles math (eg. figuring out how many people are at a concert)
- the advantage of teaching through favourite topics is that you exploit the high focused interest that the child gives to that topic
- you will have to use your judgement re: when a topic is too favourite, and using it in a classroom takes the child's attention away from the learning concept (eg. the child becomes overwhelmed by emotion, or is very rigid about the topic and won't allow anyone else to add information)

How to encourage development of abstract thinking:

- children with Autism Spectrum Disorders are capable of understanding abstract concepts, but you have to work through their strong thinking skills
- use visual channel to clarify verbal information
- math - connect to "real world", teach children to convert language information to visual diagrams (eg. word problems)
- language - can use simple "cartoon" drawings to represent situations (from stories or "real life") - fill in "thought bubbles" to teach perceptions of others; highlight facial expressions and body language to teach emotions in context - look for visual ways to represent abstract concepts like "honest" and "dishonest" (eg. Buzz Lightyear's face might represent honesty, while Sneaky Pete might represent dishonesty) - use concrete examples from student's experience to support meaningful comprehension

How to teach social skills and emotions:

- lack of understanding of social situations and interactions with other children causes extreme anxiety
- anxiety causes skills to "bottom out" and undesirable behaviour to rise
- poor categorizing and comprehension of emotions causes "odd" reactions to everyday social situations
- behaviour may be displayed at home, when source of stress is school (home is a safer place to act out)

Here are some common facial expressions. Notice that most of the emotional information is carried in the shape of the mouth and the eyebrows:


happy

sad

mad

Surprised scared Confused
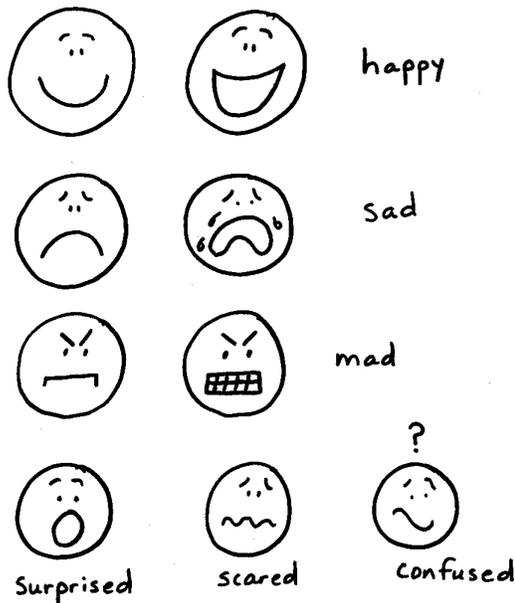
Here are generic figures that I use in teaching emotion, and in representing a variety of social situations. I've also included the simple ways that you can make these people move. Notice how some of the small figures easily suggest a certain emotion by their posture and movement:
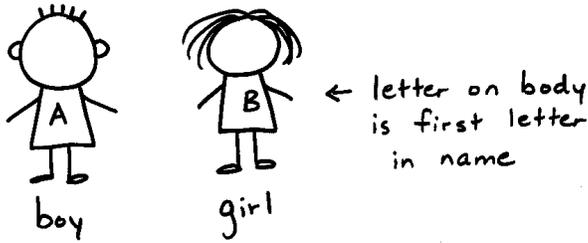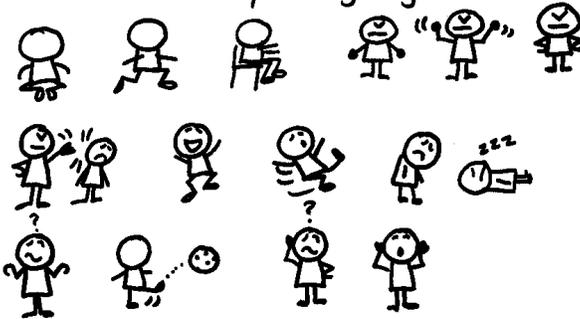
Use "social vignettes" to put key information about problem social situations on one page - allow the student to fill in missing pieces (eg. facial expression, thought and speech bubbles) - then work on multiple solutions and their consequences - afterwards, you can mark preferred solutions with a green circle, and less useful solutions with a red circle with a line through it
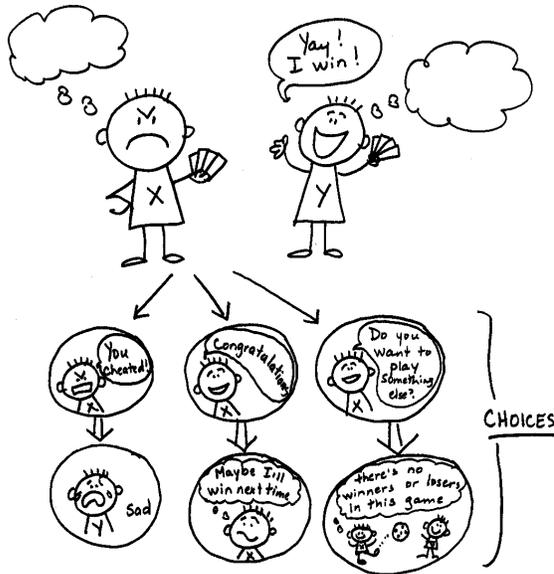
Good resources for understanding and dealing with social/emotional difficulties are Tony Attwood's book, "Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals", as well as tapes of his lectures (particularly the lecture that he gave at the Geneva Center Conference in November 2000); and Carol Gray's books and workbooks on "Social Stories"

4

Sheila Bell - 2003