

Framework: Structure

A person may experience one or more of the features of autism to a greater or lesser degree. An altered developmental trajectory may result. The unique cognitive, linguistic, and social skills that come about can often obstruct learning and social interaction. These features of autism may require management in order to lessen the negative impact they may have in daily activities and treatment. Providing structure in a person's surroundings, personal actions, and learning approaches is often a successful strategy.

Surroundings, Personal Actions, and Learning Approaches:

Surroundings:

- Structure in the places that we live, work, shop, and play allows us to navigate these environments with ease and efficiency.
- Organization in each room of a house can assist a person with features of autism to view places and objects in a meaningful context. A kitchen contains appliances, food, and dishes. A bedroom contains furniture and clothing. Within each area items can be found in a specific location. Forks are in the silverware drawer and shirts are hanging in the closet. A home in which this structure is maintained allows a person to avoid continuous orientation and searching.
- A school and the workplace can have the same structure with places and objects in a meaningful and consistent context.
- Stores can use the same structure strategy to offer goods for sale. Items can be grouped and displayed in ways that make shopping fast and efficient. A chain of stores can benefit from having the same structure in every location.
- Restaurants, theaters, and ball parks can use the same structure strategy to enhance the experience they provide. A chain of venues can benefit from having the same structure in every location.
- Maintaining consistent organizational structure in the home and choosing places in the community that do the same may assist a person with features of autism to construct views of their world as scenes that provide context for the items, people, and activities located within each. It may reduce the need to orient and search within a location for an object or place.

Personal Actions:

- For most of us, our days are governed by the clock. We rise with the sun and end our day in darkness when the moon is high in the sky.
- We use time to coordinate our activities with others.
- Within a culture and geographic location, we agree to eat, work, play, and sleep at certain times.
- As individuals we schedule our activities within this common structure whenever possible.
- Clocks and calendars mark the passage of time. They allow us to look back to what has occurred in the past, manage our activities in the present, and plan what we will do in the future. We learn to speak the language of days, weeks, months, and years.
- We learn to make decisions about current actions based on a review our past experiences and what we anticipate in the future.
- We mark the passage of time with special celebrations for holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries.
- This structure encourages us to think about the sequence of events in our lives and the stories that they tell.
- We identify a sequence of events in almost all that we do. Even the smallest daily activity can be seen as a series of tasks to be accomplished in a specific order. We use language to identify this order and apply it to activities involving hygiene, household chores, cooking, and many building and maintenance chores.
- A person with the features of autism may not easily come by these notions of time. They may exist in the current moment, struggling to anticipate or plan, anxiously awaiting what will come next.
- It may be helpful to a person with the features of autism to be shown images of the steps in a daily activity. The images can be posted as a picture schedule to use as a prompt to complete the steps in order.
- A checklist can be created to gather materials/supplies/equipment for specific activities that occur often.
- In the same manner images of the order of activities throughout the day can be posted. These pictures display throughout the day, what has happened, what is going on currently, and what will be next.

- Assistance can be given to maintain a calendar with holidays, special days and personal events.
- Assistance can be given to maintain an agenda for the coming day.
- Assistance can be given to write a journal entry each day of events that occurred.

Learning Approaches:

- Learning activities may be a struggle for a person with features of autism. Structure added to the surroundings, the materials, and the lesson steps may be helpful.
- A person with features of autism may be able to focus and complete a task if work is done in a cubicle in which no one else and nothing else of interest can be seen.
- Only materials needed for the task should be seen or available for use.
- A task can be structured with task boxes, task folders, and start/finish boxes.
- If a person with features of autism will participate in a lesson with peers it may help to always sit in the same place surrounded by the same students with the instructor and information displays in full view in the same areas.
- Printed materials can have uncluttered format, large print, color images, and line drawings of basic objects that are clear and iconic.
- Dialogue in text can be presented cartoon style with text and thought bubbles.
- Graphic organizers can be used whenever possible.
- Color coded folders that separate materials according to subject can be helpful.
- Markers and highlighters can be used to emphasize critical information.
- Velcro can be used with manipulatives to reduce movement.
- An image schedule can be used showing activities as they will occur during the day. A lesson might have a written schedule of tasks to check off. A picture review may be helpful at the end of a day.
- An agenda can be used to plan activities for the coming day and week.
- Assistance can be given to breakdown and schedule large long term projects into a series of small tasks completed at short intervals.
- Structured lessons on a computer or tablet may be helpful.
- In computer/tablet lessons, drag and drop with a mouse and touch with a tablet can make the lesson interactive.
- In computer/tablet lessons, graphics/lesson design/response methods can be kept the same for a series of lessons with controlled changes for topic and targeted skill.
- In computer/tablet lessons, as the user advances through screens, changes can be controlled and important aspects can be emphasized.
- In computer/tablet lessons, audio and text can be kept to a minimum or not used at all. Sequences and stories can be depicted and the images can be manipulated in a variety of ways.
- In computer/tablet lessons, sequences and stories can be depicted and the images can be manipulated in a variety of ways.
- In computer/tablet lessons, subtle pairing of images and text can enhance meaning.

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