

Introducing Reading to Children with Autism

A few months ago, a new boy joined my daughter's pre-school class. To the casual observer, Jacob seemed to be a perfectly normal four-year-old: sandy brown hair, disarming freckles, Nike gym shoes. A little quiet, perhaps, hovering at the edge of the circle when the other kids gathered for show and tell. While my daughter passed around the shoebox of seashells she'd brought in to share, Jacob seemed oblivious, fixated instead on the pages of a Sesame Street book.

"Looks like you've got a reader," I whispered to the teacher.

She looked up and smiled, then delivered two facts as casually as if they were related, as if they didn't seem to completely contradict one another. "Oh, Jacob has autism. He loves books."

Since then, I've learned a great deal about autism. As it turns out, the disorder doesn't always match up with the long-standing stereotypes instilled by the "Rain Man" movie and the rocking, keening kids we've all seen in movies and TV shows. A child with autism can often function and communicate at a level close to what's considered "normal", playing and talking and, yes, even reading. That said, there are indeed more severe cases resulting in the classic symptoms we've all come to recognize: inability to communicate verbally or nonverbally, a sense of detachment or oblivion to the outside world, and repetitive or obsessive movements.

Some Autism Facts

With up to six out of every 1,000 children diagnosed with autism in today's society, the frequency of the disorder—especially among males—has increased to an alarming extent in recent years. Although there's been much debate among doctors, parents, and teachers, the only thing that's certain is this: no-one is sure of the cause, and the sudden spike in occurrences is even more mystifying.

Most cases of autism are diagnosed right around two or three years of age, when the afflicted child fails to reach certain developmental milestones, struggles to communicate with other kids, does not indulge in play, and displays highly repetitive or restrictive behaviors. The good news is, with such a wide range of levels of autism, it is possible that early and aggressive therapies can help mildly to moderately affected

children enjoy an active and participatory role in the world around them. One of these beneficial therapies is reading.

Tips for Teaching Reading to Children with Autism

While it's true that some children with autism will never master the skill of reading, there are plenty that will eventually read at the same level (or sometimes even higher) as those who do not suffer from the disorder. Reading to a child with autism and encouraging him to interact with and respond to the images and words being presented is a great way to promote his involvement with the world around him.

Teachers and parents who are teaching a child with autism to read are faced with a daunting—although not insurmountable—task. In addition to having trouble focusing, sufferers of the disorder often struggle to master even the most basic spelling and grammar rules. Above all, the process requires a great deal of patience and persistence on the part of the instructor. Below, we've compiled some tips for effectively introducing reading as a therapeutic tool for children with autism:

Incorporate music. Children with autism are notoriously drawn to sounds, especially music. Often, a child will seem oblivious to the spoken word, but will suddenly become engaged by the resonance of instruments or a voice lifted in song. Choose books that include audio features, such as buttons that play melodies, animal sounds, or kids' voices, as a way of capturing and holding the child's attention.

Choose reality-based books. Kids with autism are soothed and grounded by the familiarity of the world around them. Many are only truly comfortable at home, surrounded by the objects and routines to which they're exposed every day. By choosing fanciful, whimsical stories that cater to colorful imaginations, you run the risk of reaching the end of the child's attention span or causing confusion and frustration. Instead, opt for practical narrations of regular everyday activities, such as waking up, eating breakfast, and getting ready for school.

Use visual stimulation. Children with autism who are learning to read absorb more information by viewing it than by hearing it. Present letter cut-outs to encourage them to learn and sound out the alphabet, then begin to slowly arrange and rearrange the letters into words. When choosing books, opt for those that

include bright and contrasting colors, varying textures, large block lettering, and boldly outlined images.

Encourage reading groups. It's important to give children with autism a feeling of inclusion with other kids. Often, mildly affected children are well aware of—and often embarrassed by—the differences between themselves and others their age. Joining a reading group is a great way for kids with autism to interact with their peers while being exposed to educational stories and abstract concepts.

Remember, every child with autism is unique, diagnosed with their own specific level of the disorder. When teaching reading to a child who has been diagnosed the condition, go slowly, remain patient, and adjust your expectations to allow for slow but steady progress. There may be weeks when you'll notice marked improvement, but then will suddenly find yourself stymied by a frustrating plateau or a disappointing backslide. Again, the key is to stick with it and allow the child as much time as he or she needs to process the concepts being presented.

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