Speaking Their Language: Teaching the Child with Autism

Hannah Creviston
Victoria Jacobs
Heather Wheeler

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Autism

• Incidence Rate: 1 in 88 children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 30, 2012)
  • Huge increase since the 1980’s
Autism

• Spectrum Disorder
• Exhibit Deficits in:
  • Communication Skills
  • Social Interactions
  • Behavioral Skills
Teaching the Individual

• “If a child cannot learn in the way we teach...we must teach in a way the child can learn.”
  
  - Dr. O. Ivar Lovaas
Tips

• See the child, not the diagnosis.
• Each child is different.
• Teach visually.
• Be aware of environmental distractions.
• Avoid multiple terms for the same concept.
• Be structured, but flexible.
• Tackle one issue at a time.
• Be patient, with yourself and your student.
This is What Life is Like for Me...

- **Social** – I don’t know the unspoken social rules: what to do, what not to do, or what gestures mean. I may laugh during a funeral and talk loudly during a concert. People are often angry with me and I don’t know why.

- **Executive Function** – I’m always focusing on what others consider needless and unrelated details. I live in the present. Planning ahead never occurs to me. I have to be shown how to problem solve.

- **Sensory** – I may like a firm grip or I may not want any touches at all. Certain sounds will really hurt my ears. I may be extremely sensitive on the palms of my hands and fingers.

- **Language and Communication** – I learn English like you learn Greek. When someone talks to me I have to think about many things: looking at your face and trying to “read” your mood, listening to all your words and figuring out what you mean, thinking of what to say when you ask me a question and trying to make sure I put the words to my answer in the right order so you understand.

- **Behavior** – I don’t know what “behave” means...you’ll have to teach me that with rewards and praise.
What Autism has Done to my Powers of Processing

- I have a fantastic photographic memory. I can remember what happened on July 4, 1992, can you?
- I can recite any and all of my favorite videos to you, but I’m not sure what it all means.
- I can only focus on one thing at a time.
- I don’t understand most of what’s said to me.
- I can learn a ton of facts, but I do not know how they relate to one another.
- I need routine and consistency to understand the world.
I Love Facts and am very Literal.

• Use a few words at first, add more as I understand more.
• Since I’m so literal, I don’t get jokes or puns. I use clichés incorrectly.
• Explain subjective/abstract things to me in an objective way.
• To make sure I’ve understood, ask me to show you.
I love Rules...Especially Ones that don’t Change.

- Begin with absolutes.
- Use musical vocabulary that I will use as an adult.
- Teach one concept at a time with lots of repetition and practice.
- Keep the lesson routine the same every time.
I learn Best with Pictures.

- I memorize what I see, so pictures, posters and charts help me learn more than spoken words.
- Pictures help me know what to expect or how long the lesson or practice will take.
- Pictures can show me what I will do in a lesson or practice, then can serve as “menu options” for me to design my own practice session.
- Since most concepts have to be broken down for me into smaller “steps” that I can do, pictures help chain the individual steps back together into a task.
I will “file” as you Teach.

• Teach me in a structured, systematic way.
• Make sure that what I do today will be built on at next week’s lesson.
• I need to know how all the “parts” that you teach me fit into the” whole”, and how the pieces relate to one another.
• Once I understand how the parts relate, what always stays the same and what can change, then I can learn to build in flexibility.
Don’t be Afraid of my Fits....

- When I tantrum, run away, or hide, I am not hurt or upset, I’m just frustrated and I don’t know what else to do.
- Teach me what I should do.
- Make sure I do it.
- When I do what’s expected, praise me or reward me so I can memorize the rule. Then I’ll know what to do next time.
What People Need to Know about Me:

• I am always learning, always growing in my cognitive skills, but it just takes a little longer for me.
• I am limited in learning only by lack of opportunity, not ability.
• I am aware of my feelings and can express them appropriately if I am taught.
• I need task analysis: it may surprise you how much you have to break things down for me.
• Once I learn a skill, I will have to know that the same concept applies to other pianos, other music, etc.
• Meet me where I am, but don’t leave me there….help me become successful in the real world.
Tyler

Tyler: Low functioning, great ear

- Setting up the studio
  - Minimizing distractions
- Behavior
  - Parental involvement
- Lesson planning
  - Lesson board: routine and predictability
  - “Free play”
Tyler

Teaching by rote

- Providing opportunities for success without the pressure of reading
- Shadowing of hands allows time to correct his hand position while he focuses on reproducing the sounds
- Technique exercises: reinforcing good fingering and hand position
- Recognizable children’s songs: encouraging him to play single line RH melodies which reinforces good fingering and hand position
Tyler

- Teaching reading
  - Being specific when naming and attaching only one name to items
  - Preparing music and minimizing visual distractions
Tyler

• Performances: opportunities for success
  - Preparing for the distractions of an audience
Josh

Josh: High functioning, great ear

- Setting up the studio
- Behavioral modification
  - Social skills, following instructions, change and fixation
- Predictability, schedule
- Being clear with feedback
  - Detailed notes for home practice
Josh

- Teaching musicality
  - Phrasing: being specific with dynamics
  - Monotone speech and musical inflection

- Performances: opportunities for success
• Hannah Creviston
  hannah.creviston@asu.edu
• Victoria Jacobs
  jacobsvs192@potsdam.edu
• Heather Wheeler
  wheelehl@potsdam.edu