

How the High/Scope Approach Supports Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders: Visual Strategies

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Jasmine, Karina, Andrew, and Maddy are playing with play dough during work time. Jasmine and Karina are making miniature chairs for their dolls, Andrew is pounding his wad with a hammer, and Maddy alternates between exploring the scent of her dough and poking it with her finger. When the teacher, Kate, announces cleanup time, Jasmine and Karina start to fold up their play-dough chairs and put them away. Kate comes over to Andrew and Maddy, showing them a folder with pictures of the daily routine segments. She points to the picture indicating cleanup time and repeats, "It's cleanup time. Let's put away the play dough now." Slowly the two children start to put their play dough into the container.

Andrew and Maddy have autism, a form of autism spectrum disorder. Children with these disorders are typically characterized by a lack of social connectedness, difficulties with communication, and unusual, repetitive behaviors. These children also generally process visual information more effectively than auditory information. While this may be true of the population at large, it is especially true for individuals with autism. For instance, most adults prefer having written directions to a new restaurant rather than directions given over the phone, but they are usually able to manage with verbal directions. However, an individual with autism might not be able to find that restaurant at all without written directions and/or a map. And while most children are able to follow verbal directions or requests, such as "Let's put the toys away," children with autism may need a visual cue that it is time to clean up, such as a flick of the lights or a photo of cleanup time—thus Kate's use of the pictures in the folder for Andrew and Maddy.

Because of this difficulty with auditory processing, children with autism are at a disadvantage in a verbal- and auditory-oriented world—which includes most early childhood classrooms. Their behavior is often misinterpreted as noncompliance or manipulation, when in fact children may simply be struggling to understand and process verbal directions. The key to classroom success for these children is similar to

that for typical children—a developmentally appropriate framework that allows for individual support. Providing this framework in a general education environment offers many children their greatest chance for success. The High/Scope approach offers a framework that provides support for children with autism in many ways (see chart on p. 2). One of these ways is by providing a variety of visual cues to help children interpret information more effectively. This article discusses a few of the ways High/Scope provides visual support for children with autism.

A visual representation of the daily routine.

Difficulty with organization and sequencing can interfere with smooth transitions from one activity to another and may lead to behavioral problems (Mesibov, 2001). Therefore, knowing what comes next in the daily routine is critical for an individual

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a broad group of disabilities sharing several core characteristics, such as gaps in communication, disparate social skills, and difficulty with change. In addition to "classic" autism, ASD includes the following:

- *Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)*: a collection of characteristics resembling autism but not as severe or extensive
- *Rett syndrome*: a genetic disorder affecting girls, with observable neurological signs (including seizures) that become more apparent with age
- *Asperger syndrome*: a disorder in which individuals display autistic characteristics but have relatively intact language abilities
- *Childhood Disintegrative Disorder*: a condition in which children develop normally for the first few years, then regress in speech and other skills until the characteristics of autism are observable

Although the classic form of autism is readily distinguished from other forms of ASD, the terms autism and ASD are often used interchangeably. Individuals with autism and ASD vary widely in ability and personality. ■




with autism. In a High/Scope classroom, each segment of the daily routine is depicted through pictures, photographs, or a combination of these. This representation is located at children's physical level, allowing them to refer to it as the schedule unfolds. As each major part of the daily routine is completed, children can indicate this in some way: by putting the picture in a pocket, covering it, checking it off, or using some other creative method. This strategy helps the child with autism understand what is currently happening and what is about to happen, lessening the anxiety that comes from the many transitions during the day.

The High/Scope daily routine includes several other visual strategies that help children process information. The morning message board, feelings board, and student and area symbols are all concrete tools that provide structure and clarity for all children, especially those with autism spectrum disorders. These visual strategies can be effective at home as well. One child was having difficulty transitioning from school days to nonschool days; on days when there was no school, the child was very upset when the bus did not arrive as it did on most other days, and he would go to the driveway and tantrum. To help the child anticipate what each day would hold, his mother made a calendar wheel that indicated which days were school days (depicted by a picture of a school bus) and which were nonschool days (depicted by a picture of a house). This strategy proved effective in helping the transition go more smoothly.

Planning and review strategies using pictures and objects. The planning and review processes support the child with autism by organizing an essential and open-ended component of the daily routine: work time. The High/Scope approach encourages teachers to use

props and visual tools to support children as they make decisions about where and how they intend to work and play. For example, a child might be shown several objects from the interest areas and asked to indicate which ones he or she would like to work with that day. Similar strategies are used to facilitate language development as children recall their learning experiences after work time. These aspects of the daily routine help a child with autism anticipate upcoming events and transition to the next activity by putting a tangible beginning and closing to play at centers.

Clear physical boundaries and labels throughout the environment. The classroom environment sets the stage for child success. Teachers using the High/Scope approach use shelving, low furniture, and carpets to create distinct centers that promote interaction and extended play. "Mini-learning envi-

Supporting Students With Autism Using the High/Scope Approach		
Challenges facing students with Autism Spectrum Disorder	High/Scope strategies that support the needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder	Assessment & High Expectations
Communication 	Adult-child interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Extending ■ Commenting ■ Asking open-ended questions ■ Interactive matching & turn-taking ■ Labeling and describing actions ■ Acknowledging what children say 	
Organization 	Learning environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Providing physical boundaries ■ Labeling the environment Visual schedule/daily routine Fluid transitions	
Socialization 	Active learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Materials ■ Manipulation ■ Choice ■ Language from children ■ Support from adults Music and movement Large-group time Small-group time Work time	

ronments inherently promote hands-on, spontaneous learning. Each environment should include a range of learning materials that children and teachers can explore together at a variety of levels” (Greenspan, 1998). Additional visual information is provided through labels on interest areas and storage containers, allowing children to independently access and replace materials and understand where certain activities take place. The child with autism has a greater likelihood for success in an environment that provides information to give meaning to locations, activities, and materials that might otherwise seem foreign and confusing.

Adult-child interaction: imitation and modeling.

Children with autism often have great difficulty with receptive and expressive communication. Therefore, interaction and socialization are generally stressful for them. Adults in a High/Scope classroom often support children by using visual cues—action, imitation, modeling—instead of or in conjunction with words as they interact. For instance, they might join in a child’s play by imitating what the child is doing. If a child is running a car up and down a wall by

himself, the adult might sit next to the child and run a car up and down the wall too. She might then add another action and watch how the child responds. If the child seems comfortable with the adult’s presence, the adult might add some simple words to describe what the child is doing: “You’re making the car go up and down.” This approach is similar to Floor Time, a program developed by Dr. Stanley Greenspan (1998) that advocates joining a child in his or her play and expanding on the child’s expression through gestures, comments on the child’s actions, open-ended questions, and extension of language. These methods of interaction invite children to socialize in a nonthreatening, supportive manner.

The most powerful visual strategy: peers. Many children with autism spend most of their time with other children who have similar challenges. This may mean many hours in an environment with limited language models, few peer interactions, and a higher frequency of repetitive and possibly self-injurious behaviors. While these settings may be appropriate for some children, for others they may serve to exacerbate existing areas of deficit. Since children with

Children With Autism in a High/Scope General Education Setting

Here are two examples of how young children with autism have benefitted from experiencing the High/Scope approach.

Seth

As Seth entered the inclusive Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD), his mother and teacher both noted his difficult adjustment. His mother remarked, “Seth could not separate himself from me. He would scream and cry for quite a while.” The teacher added, “He did not communicate with us and he did not play with toys. It was very difficult for him to separate from his mother.”

With the High/Scope approach as the foundation in this inclusive setting, the teacher provided additional structure via an individual schedule (similar to a daily routine but tailored for a particular child and displayed on the wall or in a folder with icons symbolizing the next activity; a corresponding icon might be placed at the location of the

activity) and other visual strategies. After two weeks the teacher reported that Seth followed his own schedule, naming parts of the routine. She also noted that he no longer cried during transitions. By the third week of school Seth was able to control his screaming more often when reminded by the teacher.

Over the first nine weeks of school Seth showed growth in social skills, communication, and behavior. His mother reported that he no longer screamed when she dropped him off; he was able to say “Good-bye” and “See you later.” Additionally, he started to walk to the cafeteria independently, following the example of his peers. He also engaged in more activities, such as playing with toys, singing songs, and moving to music. Seth’s mother was also very happy with the changes she saw in Seth at home. She noted that he tried to verbalize his wants and needs and used words more often instead of yelling. His teacher

reported that Seth made a great deal of progress in school in a short time.

Bobby

Bobby often cried and screamed during the initial days of school, and he showed little interest in materials or activities. The teacher reported that “he only wanted to scribble with markers and would get upset if he could not do that.” After a year in an inclusive setting implementing the High/Scope approach, Bobby developed a broader set of interests and participated in more experiences. He started to make eye contact, followed the routine with minimal support, and interacted in a variety of activities. Bobby also learned to write his first and last name and assist with the toileting process. The seemingly small successes of following the other children to the classroom and to the playground and following the greeting circle routine were great cause for celebration. Bobby’s future is quite promising! ■

autism seem to process information better through visual means, they do learn from watching the behaviors of others, whether positive or negative. In a High/Scope classroom with typical peers, with an emphasis on social interaction and child initiative, children with autism have many opportunities to experience and benefit from typical language and behavior as well as high expectations.

These strategies and others support the development of both typical children and children with autism. Because the High/Scope framework is open and flexible, teachers can also incorporate specialized strategies to help children, such as individual schedules (see Seth's example on the previous page), social stories (see the box on the right), sensory activities, and communication instruction through assistive technology. This combination of a developmentally appropriate framework and individualized support offers children the greatest possible opportunity for future success.

References

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Social Stories: Supporting Children During Transitions or Times of Stress

Social stories (Gray, 2002) are developed by teachers and children to address a classroom situation that a particular child is dealing with. These stories reflect the way the child might feel under certain circumstances and also how he or she might learn to deal with those feelings and respond to the situation more constructively. Social stories (with accompanying pictures) are rehearsed and reviewed during nonstressful times of the day to help children feel in control when the event occurs.

The following is an example of a social story for a child who becomes confused or agitated during fire drills:

Sometimes the bell rings three times and everyone is supposed to go outside the building to be safe. This fire drill lasts for a little while and then we can return to our classroom. I might feel upset when the bell rings, but I can hold my friend's hand and look at pictures of the fire drill steps so I can know when we will come back. ■