

# What's the Difference?

Building on Autism Strengths, Skills, and Talents in Your Classroom

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# Introduction

He did not come into my music classroom the whole year. Even when we had an electric campfire, complete with marshmallows, this little autistic boy in Grade 3 wandered the halls with his educational assistant. The following year I taught physical education. He would come into the gym; however, he would often run away. His homeroom teacher and I discussed it with him and decided that I would offer him a small amount of chips to eat if he would stay in the gym the whole period. The very next class, he stayed in the gym the whole period and I offered him some Pringles chips. He took one look at them, said, “Those aren’t Lays,” and walked away. Apparently, I still had a lot more to learn about teaching this little boy.

What’s the difference between teaching our students and teaching our autistic students? Not much. This book offers strategies to be used to teach all students that are designed to specifically help our autistic students. Many of our autistic students have strengths, skills, talents, and interests that lend themselves to aid in learning. Some common ones are attention to detail, detailed memory, and skills with math and computers. For example, some autistic students will remember exactly what was said and will be able to repeat it for the whole class—whether I said it under my breath or not! As we explore each student’s strengths, we can help all our students to learn, and—more than that—to have fun learning.

Every child can learn. When we say an autistic child cannot learn, what has really happened is that we, ourselves, have learned the limits of our patience and imagination. I believe that once we can figure out how someone learns and their strengths, everyone will be revealed to be quite intelligent. We have simply not been taught how to see everyone as smart. My father failed two grades and dropped out of high school at age 18, still in Grade 10. Later in life, he finished high school and went on to college; he became a mechanic and eventually an engine builder with the Toronto Transit Commission. He also got his private pilot’s licence and flew planes as a hobby. He had severe dyslexia, which had never been diagnosed. He grew up believing he was dumb. Thankfully, he grew to understand that he was, in fact, smart. One time in college, he got 85% on a

If you are reading this and you are autistic, I would like to apologize on behalf of all those who might have treated you badly, called you names, abused you, and caused others to treat you like you are nothing. I recognize you as an intelligent, loving person who has much not only to contribute to society, but also to teach me. I look forward to learning from you.

chemistry test. He accused the teacher of marking the tests with more lenience for the students in night school, because he simply couldn't believe he could receive such a good mark on his own. The teacher was offended and told him in no uncertain terms that he had in fact, earned that mark. So you see, he was learning that he was, in reality, smart.

Are we, as a society, willing to get rid of labels that call people dumb, stupid, slow, etc.? Are we willing to accept that everyone is intelligent if we can simply unlock their abilities? This will not take anything away from those who have been traditionally labeled intelligent. In fact, it will allow us to finally see, understand, and recognize the contributions of those who learn differently. It is time to end discrimination against those who learn in atypical ways. It is time for real and drastic changes in behaviors and attitudes. It is time to accept autistic people as an important, necessary, and beneficial part of our society, who make contributions we would not otherwise have.

The purpose of this book is to describe how to teach autistic students integrated into mainstream classrooms, especially when the teacher has little or no special education training. There has been an increase in the number of autistic students in mainstream classrooms and this number will continue to rise. This would be okay if there was enough support offered to students and teachers to help these students learn; however, there is often very little support offered to the teacher. Each autistic student is unique, so this book offers many different strategies, tips, and tools in an effort to provide at least a few that will work with each student. It goes through the ways you can prepare to have autistic students in your class.

It's two weeks before school starts and the principal tells you that you will have an autistic student in your class this year. What do you do, besides feel very anxious because this is a new experience for you? Well, there are many ways you can **prepare yourself, your classroom, and your students**. The first thing might be to talk with the student's parents and see what they have to say—they are the experts, of course. Your goal is to work with them, to be partners with them. You will want to prepare your classroom environment—both the physical aspects and the atmosphere. One way to do this is to use the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This means that, if one student needs a modification, that modification is used in the classroom for everyone. For example, if a student is sensitive to loud noises, instead of giving them noise-cancelling headphones, we keep the classroom atmosphere calm and quiet. You can also prepare a lesson plan for the first day that makes sure everyone feels welcomed into your classroom, introduces autism, and sets out how you, as a class, will treat everyone.

“When you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person” is a common phrase in the autistic community, first coined by Dr. Stephen Shore. It indicates that everyone is different. Everyone is unique. Therefore, it will take some time to **get to know your autistic student** and how they learn. It might help if you learn some common patterns of thinking in autistic people. Of course, it's impossible to know all the many different patterns of thinking, but common patterns are presented by Dr. Temple Grandin, an autistic scientist and professor who has researched autistic learning patterns for many years. For example, picture thinkers easily remember pictures of places they have been. I am not a picture thinker. I can hardly remember where I parked my car! It might also be useful to understand common sensory issues experienced by autistic children. As you get to know your autistic students, you can adapt the classroom atmosphere to make the experience more pleasurable for them and for the rest of your students.

As a teacher, your main focus is to **help your students learn**. One year we had a worm terrarium in my Kindergarten classroom because the students were really interested in worms. I was thankful that the worms were still alive the day we released them back into the wild! Everything we did in class those two weeks had something to do with worms. When we are asking autistic children to do schoolwork we can use a similar strategy. They often have areas of deep and sustained interest. Incorporating those interests into everyday classroom activities can help these students enjoy learning. Sometimes these interests are a part of these students' autistic genius. I taught one student who knew the birthday of everybody in the school and could tell you what day of the week you were born on (assuming you told the truth about how old you were). He really enjoyed when we used this strength in our lessons.

**Emotional regulation** is difficult for many children to learn, and it is no different for autistic children. It's important to learn what it is that triggers them to lose their ability to regulate their emotions. For that matter, it's important to learn your own triggers, the things that make it difficult to regulate your emotions. For example, you might be triggered when you've already said yes when they called your name but they continue to call your name five more times before telling you what it is they want. It has been traditionally thought that when students are not doing what the teacher is asking, it is because they are rebellious or don't want to do what we have asked of them. For many autistic students, this is just not the case. The truth is they would love to do what we are asking, but their anxiety prevents them from doing so. Help your students by having a calm classroom atmosphere and by teaching them many ways they can stay calm. More than just staying calm, we want them to build self-esteem. It is not simply the presence of emotional regulation, but also the presence of self-esteem that is the mark of emotionally healthy students.

The term "minimally verbal" is preferred to "nonverbal," which is often not accurate. Even if our students do not use words to communicate, most still use sounds, which are verbal. Also, many autistic students become more and more verbal as they get older.

Simply because you have a minimally verbal student in the classroom does not mean that they are minimally communicative. I'm sure you can think of many instances when students communicated without the use of words and made a fairly big impression. Many students may already have other ways of communicating; for example, they might know a bit of sign language and you may need to learn a bit of sign language as well. Or students may have high-tech aids; for example, they use Google Voice Typing, as I am doing right now. Other times, we, as teachers, need to find aids to help communication. I find that once we **help students communicate**, there is a decrease in challenging behaviors.

One of the defining aspects of autism is that it hinders the development of relationships. Therefore, we need to **help students learn social skills**. It can be beneficial to use social stories that demonstrate how to act in a certain social situation. Another way to help students make friends is by having peer groups. Social skills include living skills. This means that we take the things we learn in school and apply them to our everyday lives. Students enjoy trips to the grocery store to learn how to make change, how to budget, and how to choose healthy food. I remember teaching a Kindergarten student how to pull up his pants that were too tight. We used the pull, wiggle, and repeat method. Ultimately, we want to help prepare students for college, university, a job, or whatever comes after school. Grandin (2020) encourages us to teach our autistic students to use the back door to get a job. A young autistic man I know ended up getting a job in computers out of a platform he created.

Of course, we also want to **help our autistic students stay safe** in school. What do we do when they run away? When they run down the street? When they

run home? The answer? RUN!!! Okay, that's only part of the answer—the first part! It's important to find strategies that work for each individual student to keep them and others safe when they feel they want to run, or when they harm themselves or others. It's important to find the root of the problem. Perhaps it is bullying. Many autistic students are bullied. Sometimes they are bullied because of inappropriate behavior they are displaying; for example, sexual touching. I'm pretty sure they didn't teach me what to do about that in teachers college! As with all students, autistic students might be bullied because they are different from other students. Many autistic children try to fit in by masking their autism. But when autistic people ignore who they are for too long and try to appear neurotypical, it can lead to autistic burnout. It is important for us to teach not only our autistic students, but all of our students, that it is okay to be different and unique—to be themselves!

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