



AFIRM
for Paraeducators



RESOURCE PACKET: INTRODUCTION TO AUTISM

UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute
Autism Focused Intervention Resources & Modules for Paraeducators
Steinbrenner, J., Sam, A., Chin, J., Morgan, W., & AFIRM for Paras Team,
Updated 2024



**The National Professional
Development Center** on Autism



**FRANK PORTER GRAHAM
CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE**

OVERVIEW OF CONTENT

<u>What is Autism?:</u> A quick summary of salient features of autism.	3
<u>Evidence-Based Practices to Consider:</u> Consider learning more about EBPs to support learners on the spectrum with these AFIRM modules.	4
<u>Reflection Worksheet:</u> Use this sheet to think about your student(s) on the spectrum.	5
<u>Glossary:</u> This glossary contains key terms that apply specifically to autism.	6

INTRODUCTION TO AUTISM

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a lifelong developmental difference that primarily affects social communication. This introduction describes characteristics of autism, including social communication, repetitive behaviors, thinking and learning, and how to support learners on the spectrum.

Social communication is one of the core deficit areas in autism, social communication is a complex set of verbal and non-verbal communication skills used to engage in social interactions during daily activities.

Restricted repetitive behaviors/interests (RRBs) are one of the core deficit areas in autism, restricted repetitive behaviors and interests include any intense interests or behaviors. Some examples include stimming (like rocking back and forth or hand flapping), special interest in extremely specific or narrow topics, or rigid routines or patterns of behavior.

Executive functioning is a set of skills that help set the stage for learning. The term gets used in many ways, but it often includes planning and organizing, starting, and sticking with tasks, keeping information in your mind to be able to complete a task, or monitoring your own progress or emotions.

Suggested Citation:

Steinbrenner, J., Sam, A., Chin, J., Morgan, W., & AFIRM for Paras Team. (2019). *Introduction to Autism*. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules for Paraeducators. <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/>

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

REINFORCEMENT:

Reinforcement can be used to address many different skills and target behaviors for elementary students. Research supports the use of reinforcement for target skills and behaviors in the following domains: social, communication, joint attention, behavior, school readiness, play, cognitive, adaptive, vocational, and academic.



PROMPTING:

Prompting can be used to address many different skills and target behaviors for elementary students. Research supports the use of prompting for target skills and behaviors in the following domains: social, communication, joint attention, behavior, school readiness, play, motor, adaptive, and academic.



TIME DELAY:

Time delay can be used to address many different skills and target behaviors for elementary students. Research supports the use of time delay for target skills and behaviors in the following domains: social, communication, joint attention, behavior, school readiness, play, cognitive, motor, adaptive, and academic.



VISUAL CUES:

Visual cues can be used to address many different skills and target behaviors for elementary students. Research supports the use of visual cues for target skills and behaviors in the following domains: social, communication, behavior, school readiness, play, cognitive, motor, adaptive, and academic.



PEER-BASED INSTRUCTION & INTERVENTION AND SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING:

Peer-based instruction and intervention and social skills training can be used to supporting peer interactions for elementary students. Research supports the use of these practices for supporting peer interactions such as (not exhaustive list): giving compliments to peers, asking for help from peers, taking turns with peers during activities, initiating and/or respond to peer greetings, and engaging in 'small talk' with peers.



REFLECTION WORKSHEET

Learner's Name:

Interfering Behavior:

Behavior Area:

- ☐ Social/Communication: Social Skills
- ☐ Social/Communication: Communication
- ☐ Restrictive or Repetitive Behaviors
- ☐ Thinking & Learning

What I Can Do To Support This Learner:

Learner's Name:

Interfering Behavior:

Behavior Area:

- ☐ Social/Communication: Social Skills
- ☐ Social/Communication: Communication
- ☐ Restrictive or Repetitive Behaviors
- ☐ Thinking & Learning

What I Can Do To Support This Learner:

Learner's Name:

Interfering Behavior:

Behavior Area:

- ☐ Social/Communication: Social Skills
- ☐ Social/Communication: Communication
- ☐ Restrictive or Repetitive Behaviors
- ☐ Thinking & Learning

What I Can Do To Support This Learner:

GLOSSARY

Abstract/Figurative language: any vocabulary or phrases with meanings that are not clearly stated. Examples include idioms like, “it’s raining cats and dogs” or “break a leg” where the intended meaning does not match the literal meaning. There are also many examples of this in books and poetry where the author may describe something using abstract language like “it felt like a weight on my chest.”

Adaptive skills: skills that people have to complete tasks of daily life. These are sometimes called life skills. For school-age children, it may include areas such as self-care (like toileting, hand washing, or dressing), motor skills (like climbing stairs and eating with utensils), or home activities (like simple chores or helping cook).

Anxiety: having worry or fear that is the feeling of worry or fear in anticipation of or response to a situation.

Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA): a collection of different techniques and changes in the environment to change a person’s behavior. ABA is comprised of practices such as reinforcement and prompting. Discrete trial training is another example of a specific intervention that is included within the umbrella of strategies used in ABA.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): a neurodevelopmental disorder that includes challenges with attention and interfering overly active behavior or impulsivity. Some symptoms you may see include being easily distracted, often losing things, or seeming forgetful during activities, fidgeting or restlessness during activities, and blurting out or interrupting.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC): any system of communication that is not verbal can be called AAC. It includes no-technology communication systems (like sign language), low-technology systems (like exchanging or pointing to pictures to communicate, pressing a switch that produces one word or phrase), and high-technology systems (like iPads or other electronic devices that produce speech with activated).

Autism: a neurodevelopmental disorder that includes deficits in social communication and restricted repetitive behaviors. It is often referred to as a “spectrum” disorder because of the wide range of abilities and needs an individual with this diagnosis may have.

Body language: a form of non-verbal communication that is an important part of social communication. It includes things like gestures (head nodding or shaking), personal space, facial expressions, and eye contact.

Developmental disability: a developmental disability is one that is identified early in life but affects an individual across their lifetime. These disabilities can affect physical development (like blindness or deafness) or mental development (like intellectual disability or language disorder) or a combination of both (like Down syndrome).

Echolalia: Repeating previously heard language. It includes echoing (immediately repeating after hearing someone) or repeating language later in the day or week. It can be echoed from a person (like a teacher or parent) or something from a TV show, movie or commercial or even some other form (like echoing the weather service announcements).

Evidence-based practice (EBP): a teaching strategy or practice that has been proven through research studies to improve skills or behaviors for a certain population.

Executive functioning: a set of skills that help set the stage for learning. The term gets used in many ways, but it often includes planning and organizing, starting, and sticking with tasks, keeping information in your mind to be able to complete a task, or monitoring your own progress or emotions.

Facial expressions: communicating thoughts, feelings, and emotions during conversation through actions of your face like smiling, raising eyebrows, or opening your mouth when surprised, crying when sad, etc.

Fading: gradually reducing the number of prompts or types of prompts to encourage more independence for the learner.

Fidelity: used to describe how well people use an evidence-based practice or strategy. When you use a practice or strategy with fidelity, it means that you are following the steps and using the practice the right way. Using a practice with fidelity is connected to more positive learner outcomes.

Gastrointestinal problems: gastrointestinal problems include a wide range of issues including indigestion, acid reflux, nausea, and vomiting, bloating and gas, or stomach pain. In autism, some of the more common issues are constipation, diarrhea, and heartburn (also called gastroesophageal reflux)

Generalization: the ability to use a target skill or behavior across the intervention timespan or timeframe, setting, and individuals (e.g. teachers, peers, parents). For example, when teaching a child to greet others, a teacher may initially implement the intervention when the student first enters classroom. Although the child may begin to independently greet others in the context of entering the classroom, she may not be able to do so when coming home from or entering a different room in the school. If she can greet others across settings and individuals, then she has engaged in generalization of the skill.

Gestures: body and hand movements used to communicate. Examples include pointing, waving, opening arms to demonstrate something is "big," banging a fist on a table to emphasize a point or show anger, etc.

Hypersensitivity: overly intense or exaggerated response to sensation. It may include defensive responses (like covering ears in anticipation of a sound, pulling away quickly when touched lightly) or disliking or avoiding of certain situations that involve an undesirable sensory experience (like avoiding public restrooms because the toilet flushing is aversive).

Hyposensitivity: under exaggerated response to sensation. May include lack of response entirely or a reduced or slower response than expected. A child with hyposensitivity may not stop working and turn around when their name is called, may not seem to notice that another child ran into them, may smile, or laugh several seconds after you tickle them, may cry several seconds after getting hurt or not at all, etc.

Idiosyncratic language/vocabulary: using language in unusual ways that may not be obvious to the communication partner. This includes using scripts from previous conversations or media applied to different contexts like saying "C is for cookie" to express that they like something. Or "Dora loves waterfall!" to request to take a bath/shower.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): a written document from a public school system that is developed by a team including educators and parents for all students eligible for special education. It has the child's learning goals, how the child's team will address and monitor progress toward those goals, and when the goals will be considered met. It also has information about modifications and accommodations used for testing, and the educational placement for the child (or what settings they will be in for what portion of the school day).

Intellectual disability: a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by delays, impairments, or differences in both cognitive ability (reasoning, problem solving) and adaptive skills. Individuals with an intellectual disability learn some skills at a slower rate than people without an intellectual disability.

Joint attention: a set of early social communication skills used to show and/or share interest about an outside object or event with a communication partner. They include initiating joint attention where the child shifts their gaze and/or gestures toward an object with the goal of getting another person to notice it. They also include responding to gaze shifts and gestures from other people so that they can learn what others find interesting.

Language delay: a disorder in which a learner's ability to understand and/or use language is behind what would be expected based on their age.

Prompting: any help given to a learner to assist in using a specific skill or behavior. Prompts can come in many different forms including visual, verbal, gestural, models, and partial or full physical.

Reinforcement: Feedback provided to the learner in response to the appropriate demonstration of the target skill/behavior to encourage continued use of the target skill/behavior.

Restricted repetitive behaviors/interests (RRBs): one of the core deficit areas in autism, restricted repetitive behaviors and interests include any intense interests or behaviors. Some examples include stimming (like rocking back and forth or hand flapping), special interest in extremely specific or narrow topics, or rigid routines or patterns of behavior.

Seizure disorder: A seizure disorder, which can also be called epilepsy, is a disorder in which brain activity is disturbed and causes seizures. There are many types of seizures. Some involve uncontrollable jerking movements or losing awareness, but some can just look like a staring spell.

Sensory seeking behaviors: trying to experience a certain sensation, sometimes in a repeated or intense way. May include things like smelling, licking, rubbing, running into, or pressing their body against objects.

Sleep disturbances: sleep disturbances can include a variety of issues including difficulties falling asleep or staying asleep, being on different sleep rhythms (e.g., awake at night), or needing increased amounts of sleep.

Social communication: one of the core deficit areas in autism, social communication is a complex set of verbal and non-verbal communication skills used to engage in social interactions during daily activities.

Social reciprocity: the back-and-forth nature of interactions. It can include early skills, like the exchange of one-word phrases and gestures in simple conversations, later developing skills like staying on topic, or even higher-level skills like noticing non-verbal communication cues (like looking at the clock might mean the person needs to leave soon).

Time delay: a prompting procedure that fades prompts during activities by having longer delays before a prompt is provided

Visual cues: An image or symbol presented to the learner that either prompts him to complete the target behavior/skill or assists in supporting the understanding of a particular activity, instruction, or direction. Visual cues can be used as prompts or supports.

Visual schedules: a display that shows the activities of a day or steps of an activity to support the learner in moving between activities or through activities. The displays can be made from objects, pictures, photos, or written text, and may be created for a full day, part of a day, or just the next two activities.