

Tips for P.E. Teachers On Working with Students on the Autism Spectrum

The environment of the gym can be very overwhelming for students on the Autism Spectrum due to their hypersensitivity. These students become over-stimulated by sights, sounds, touch, movement, smells, temperature, and/or size of the class. Below are some tips that may help the autistic student better manage in the gym environment:

1. Allow use of head phones or ear plugs to decrease the noise level
2. Reduce any unnecessary distractions –i.e. limit any additional noise-such as loud music, whistles etc.
3. Have these students sit at the end of the squad to give them more space
4. You may need to define the student’s personal space with tape, foot prints, or chalk lines
5. Have a designated calm down area/space that students can go to when needed
6. Have a visual agenda of your class activities and review it with all students
7. Pre warn students of the ending of an activity and forewarn of any known upcoming changes
8. Have a predicable routine if possible
9. Give them extra “wait time” for processing directions
10. Allow the students to have a reasonable amount of movement during class even when listening to directions
11. Remember many of these students do not act like they are paying attention but they are
12. Do not force eye contact
13. Limit your verbalizations when talking directly to these students-use visual or gestural cues when possible
14. Try not to say too much too fast
15. Be direct, calm, and clear with directions
16. Avoid using abstract phrases like “save your breathe”
17. Pair these students with good role models and facilitate social interaction when possible
18. Provide breaks when needed—like going in the quiet hall to get a drink
19. If students change clothes for gym, have these students change 5 mins. prior to other students to avoid locker room difficulties
20. Use a calming, reassuring voice for directives
21. Visually demonstrate a task that the student is to do
22. Refrain from joining in their argument
23. Recognize that students may be responding from a developmental age rather than their chronological age
24. Watch for signs of escalating stress level and intervene with a preventative step such as break, down time, safe spot
25. These students may often times be clumsy
26. Make sure these students know the expectations that we feel are common sense—such as what to do when the bell rings, what will happen if the student is tardy etc.

Remember some of the basic characteristics of a person on the Autism Spectrum:

- These students have difficulty putting themselves in another student’s place and seeing other person’s perspective
- Have difficulty reading the intentions and behaviors of others
- Have much difficulty with peer interaction
- Have much difficulty with any type of social skills
- Have much difficulty with communication
- May have specific and intense interests
- May have poor organizational skills
- Do not understand abstract language, puns, or innuendos
- Have difficulty with problem solving—when and how to ask for help
- Have a difficult time multi tasking
- These students do not understand “The Hidden Curriculum” which is a set of rules of guidelines that are often not directly taught but are assumed to be known...such as how to dress, how to greet people, the daily schedule, which teachers will tolerate tardiness, if you need to pick your nose—do it in the bathroom and use a tissue etc.

