

RAISING the **Bar**

New Thought on Teaching
the More Challenged Child with Autism

By James Ball, Ed.D., BCBA



“We awaken in others the same attitude of mind we hold toward them.”

– Elbert Hubbard

Ten years ago, it was common thought among professionals in the autism community that 80% of individuals with autism had accompanying mental retardation and 50% would never gain functional speech. Today, that picture is much brighter, thanks to persistent parents who *believed* their children could accomplish more, and the internet as a communication tool for their stories. We hear of kids on the spectrum who can't talk, but have taught themselves to read - some in more than one language! We hear of the child who has never spoken a word and at age 9 verbalizes not just his first word, but speaks in full sentences. We also hear of the child who is extremely aggressive yet once the behaviors are under control, begins to read and do math at grade level. Clearly these kids are surpassing our preconceived notions of ability/disability, and it's a great thing! We no longer hold fast to the idea that 50% won't speak. Actually, the more we learn about this population and understand their communication needs, the lower that percentage goes.

Yet, change comes slowly and the one thing I consistently see when I am traveling around the country consulting to classrooms of more challenged students with ASD is the lack of high expectations. “Low functioning” are usually those students we classify as having no or little speech, behavioral issues, and the inability to learn complex information. It is assumed these students cannot achieve at a high academic level. It is further assumed that any attempt at

teaching higher academic work is just a waste of time. Because we don't believe the child is capable, we compensate by adopting the often-expressed sentiment, “We need to be functional.” It's not that I disagree with this statement; teaching a child to be functional is a worthy goal. But there needs to be balance between functional curriculum and teaching the three “r's”, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Keeping a positive, proactive perspective towards these kids is important at all ages. The trouble is, when we emphasize functional and downplay academics at the early ages, we set the stage for a lifetime of ineffective programming. It may require a little more thought and a bit more curriculum modification to teach the more challenged child, but not even trying because the assumption exists that the child is “too low” or “not able” to learn is, to be blunt, unacceptable teaching practice.

I have seen far too many Individual Education Plans (IEPs) just loaded with matching and sorting programs, starting with students at a very young age. Most of our more challenged students with autism like doing these activities - you could almost call it a strength - but matching and sorting does not teach them the type of skills they need to survive as adults. It can also become very boring and tedious, leading to acting-out behaviors. Then we wonder, “Why did that happen?” How would you like to match and sort year after year after year?

It's just good practice (for all students) to incorporate functional activities

while teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. Lessons become ingrained when they have real-world applications. There are many ways educators and parents can work on academic skills with the significantly challenged student with ASD, while keeping the lesson functional. Know this: the two can co-exist together. The following six strategies will help you do it.

1 Toss out the term “low functioning”

Each time you use that term you kindle preconceived ideas about the child and what he can/cannot do, within yourself and others. “Low functioning” is not a universally defined term with a direct purpose, so why use it? Instead, reframe your thinking and acting by viewing these children as “differently challenged” or “differently abled” or some other term you like.

2 Expect the unexpected

Expect the child is capable of doing something new, and try it! Don't withhold learning opportunities, or feel they are not worth trying because he will “never” get it. Start small and build. What can you do with the student that challenges him and allows him to be successful? If the child is nonverbal, instead of having him sort yet another pile of things, have him count objects by placing a manipulative (i.e., a block) on a card. Once he gets that, have him give you the correct amount you ask for: “Give me 3 please.”



6 Adapt the skill to a real life situation

If you are going to have a “coin identification” program in place for the student, be sure there’s a way the child can use money to purchase something. This is easily done in the school setting using vending machines and lunch in the cafeteria. Much too often educators teach skills and do not follow with a functional way to make the skill meaningful. If the child is working on a writing program, have him learn keyboarding skills too. However, instead of just having him copy his name, address, phone number, and family members over and over again, have him go to the office or computer lab and perform a real life job that uses keyboarding and has meaning to the student.

The more we work with and explore the potential of students with autism, especially those who are nonverbal and more severely challenged with motor and behavior issues, the more we realize how smart they are. We also realize how deeply ingrained are our own misconceptions about their abilities. Like most people, if given the easy way out, not asked nor challenged to learn and grow, they will take it. And so will we as their teachers. However, the opposite is also true: if our expectations are high, the people around us – these students included - will rise to that level. Be creative, get imaginative, and believe that within your more challenged student with autism great potential lies dormant, just waiting for you to bring it to life. ■

Dr. James Ball, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), has been in the field of autism for 20+ years. He provides private consultation to organizations, schools, and families of children and adults with ASD, frequently lectures on autism topics, and is the author of *Early Intervention & Autism: Real-life Questions, Real-life Answers*. Email him at JBAutismConsult@aol.com or visit his website www.JBAutismConsulting.com.

them read it and perform the action. Have them read directions on the box of microwavable snacks, and then heat up the snack.

4 Think outside the “rigid” box

OK, even when the curriculum says the child needs to do sorting and matching, you don’t have to just accept it as is and present boring lessons. Modify the lesson to incorporate matching and sorting activities into academic activities that challenge the child and help him achieve at a higher level. Practice sorting skills while helping the librarian sort book returns. Let him be the cashier at the snack table, sorting money. There are a great many creative ways you can make the skills taught in the classroom come alive in the natural environment. Stop and think: “What skill am I teaching? How does it correlate to real life? What can I do to create that learning opportunity?” And, stay positive! Believe he can learn, and support him in doing so by always asking yourself: “What can I do to make this successful?”

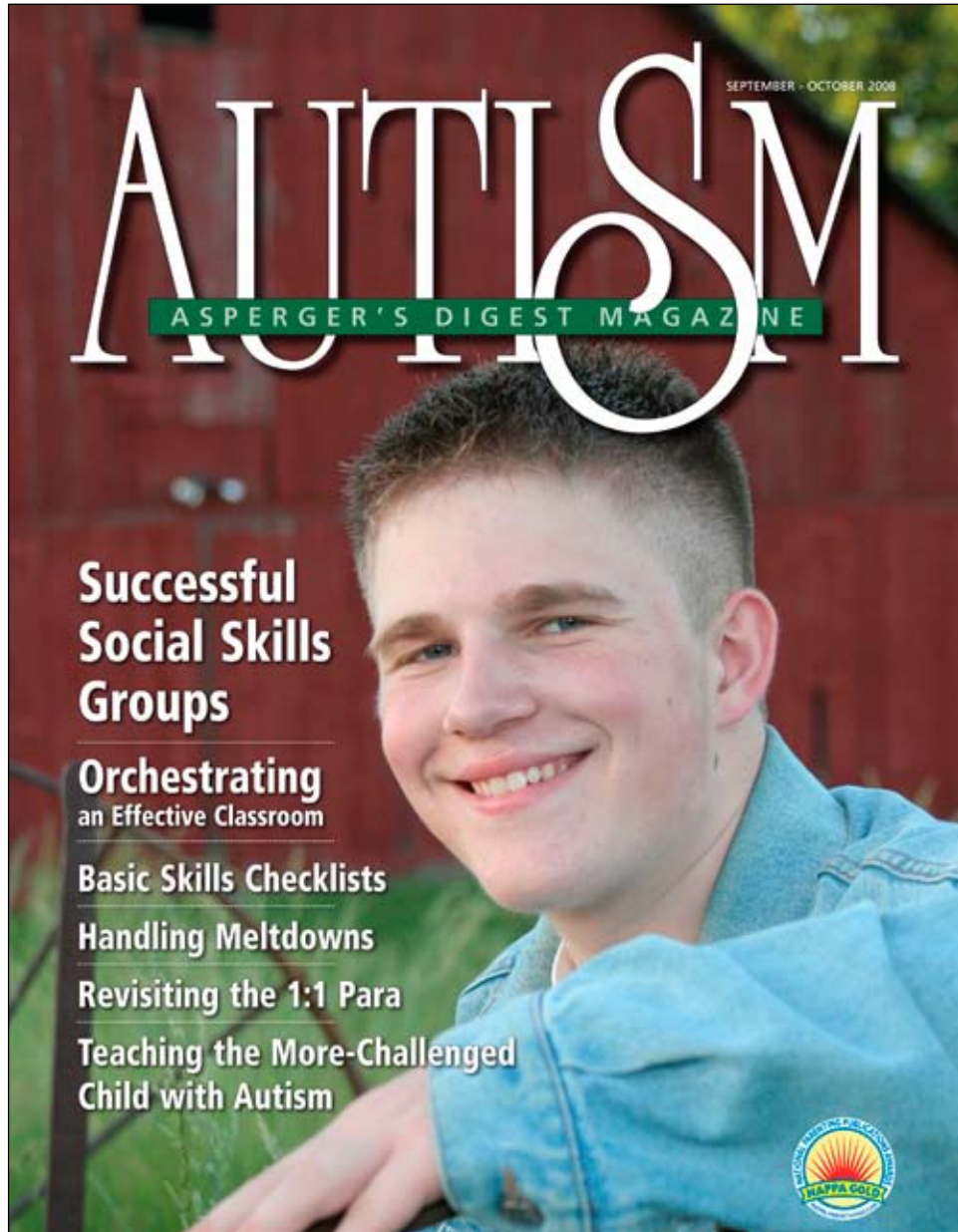
5 Demand more, don’t settle for less

Set the bar high; encourage the child to achieve. If we think *he* can’t, *we* don’t. When we think a child “cannot”, we set up an environment of lower expectations. It turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, if we think he *can*, we *do*. We dream bigger dreams, more expansive possibilities and we find ways to make those dreams come true. It may take more time and more supports, but it’s doable.

This segues very nicely into “get three eggs” when you’re teaching the child how to cook a meal. That’s functional academics! Also, use visuals as much as possible to make the child successful. For instance, teach students to use the visual cues located on boxes of food. Have you read a box lately? Most of them have picture-based directions in addition to text. What a great way to teach a functional life skill.

3 Assume he can read, not the opposite

Just because the child cannot speak doesn’t mean he can’t read. We tend to equate academic prowess with the ability to talk; that is not necessarily always the case. There are many ways to give children the opportunity to read. Have them match the written word to the actual object and then have them match the written word to a picture of the object, and then have them find the word in the environment. This can easily be made functional by starting with survival words, such as poison, exit, and danger, then moving on to other words that have meaning to the child and his life. Once they master reading the word, make it meaningful through generalization. Go to other environments and have them read. For instance, go to a STOP sign and have



**As Appeared in the
September/October 2008 issue.**

www.autismdigest.com

Reprinted with permission of *Autism Asperger's Digest*.
Distribution via print or electronic means by any other individual or
entity prohibited without written permission of publisher.