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Classroom interaction

James is disruptive when working in groups and at learning centre activities. He dislikes the lack of defined space and is threatened by situations that are unpredictable.

Points to note

- In the classroom, a student with autism will have difficulty reading the intentions of the teacher and understanding why things happen the way they do.
- The child may find the social dimension of shared learning to be confusing, which is why many students with autism learn a great deal from educational computer programs. Computer programs present information in a logical and sequential format, perfectly suited to the unique learning style of the student with autism.
- The child may not understand that he is part of a group and may ignore instructions given to the class as a whole.
- The child will need frequent reminders to pay attention, and importantly, what he needs to pay attention to.
- The student may have sensory processing difficulties that make him feel threatened by the close proximity of other students. Group work may cause anxiety and the student may insist on working alone.
- The student may have difficulty with turn taking and waiting his turn. He may ask a lot of irrelevant questions and constantly interrupt the teacher or his peers.
- The student may seem to 'switch-off' at times and seem incapable of tuning into classroom activity.
- Be aware that a student who seems quiet and well-behaved may be most at risk in the classroom. Problem issues that are unseen may well go unaddressed until intense frustration results in verbal and/or physical outbursts.

What you can do

- The student will respond best in a classroom environment that is ordered and quiet, with an atmosphere that is encouraging, not critical.
- It is essential that the classroom teacher has a positive and supportive approach toward the student with autism, the child's peers will pick up on this and also adopt a welcoming attitude.
- Watch for peers who may obviously or subtly annoy the student and ensure they do not sit together. Some peers may feed off or feedback inappropriate behaviours to the student - perhaps the student with autism likes these peers but the relationship is not necessarily desirable.
- Consider taking the student out of the classroom to a quiet area for short periods to teach new concepts in a setting free from distraction.

- Avoid doing things for the student that he can do for himself.
- Written instructions, or a combination of text and pictures, should be used to support verbal instructions where possible.
- Be very explicit when giving verbal instructions - don't assume that the context in which it is given will make the meaning clear.
- Don't assume that the student will read your intentions from your behaviour.
- Make sure the student clearly understands the daily routine. Use a written timetable reinforced with images if necessary. See [Visual schedules](#) for more information.
- Take advantage of the number of quality educational computer programs available - if the student has a particular interest in computers he could be rewarded for good behaviour with extra time on the computer. A student who has difficulty with written tasks could type and print his work.
- Don't automatically assume misbehaviour if the student is not responding to an instruction. He needs to understand that he is part of the group. Say his name to get his attention before giving instructions, even when giving group instructions. If the student is embarrassed by this, agree on a signal, such as a hand clap, that alerts him to attend.
- The student may not focus on what you consider to be the obvious focus of attention. Again, be explicit. For example, you might need to say, "Look at what I'm holding." Not simply, "Look over here."
- Sit the student in the most appropriate place in the classroom, where he is unlikely to be disturbed by the movement and close proximity of others. See also [Physical setup of the classroom](#).
- If the student resists working in small groups, have him work with an integration aide or classroom assistant, if one is available. Then progress to working with one other child, before attempting group work.
- Use teacher-selected group for classroom activities to ensure the child with autism is not left out by his classmates.
- Allow for periods of solitude. The social demands of the classroom can be demanding and frustrating for a child with autism.