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Creative writing and literacy

Points to note

- The child may acquire reading ability without fully understanding the process, which relies on the integrated use of visual, meaning and structural cues. It is typical for children with autism to have an uneven developmental profile.
- The child may be very good at reading because he has terrific visual learning skills. However some can decode words beyond the level of their comprehension. This is known as hyperlexia.
- Some children may have more difficulty learning to read. He may learn the names and sounds of letters by rote but may not understand how these sounds fit together to make a word.
- The child may refuse to read anything but non-fiction; this allows him to gather facts and knowledge on his preferred interest.
- The child may have an excellent rote memory. He may appear to be a competent reader but might actually be recalling a story he knows by heart.
- Most children with autism are visual learners. When learning new words, it is best to take a 'whole word' approach rather than a phonetic approach, as this may teach the child only to sound out the word, not the word itself.
- Comprehension can be difficult for the child with autism because of his 'theory of mind' deficits. This means he has difficulty understanding the motivations and intentions of others, and hence the characters in the books that he reads. He may have an understanding of the story but is unable to answer questions about it. 'Why' questions are particularly difficult as they require the ability to reason.
- In creative writing, the child with autism can lack imagination, he may have difficulty getting started and organising his thoughts in sequence. He may not provide enough information to ensure reader understanding, assuming that the reader knows as much about the plot and characters as he does. He may only write on a limited range of topics. He may be unable to write about anything outside his own personal experience.

What you can do

- If the child is stuck reading books on one topic, encourage him to try books on related topics.
- Home made books with familiar photos and stories about the child's family, pets and activities can be more meaningful than story books.
- If the child has poor imaginative skills he may have difficulty relating to fantasy stories and prefer to read about things he is interested in.
- If the student knows some books by heart, photocopy the text, cut it into sentences and ask him to put these in the right order to develop comprehension.

- Computer programs that teach comprehension and creative writing will be of great benefit to the student and encourage him to work independently.
- Encourage the student to make his or her own story using computer images, photos, pictures and drawings. Encourage him to describe what is on each page, writing the words for him if necessary.
- Practice sequencing using images that show a sequence of events. Ask the student to retell the events in his own words. This will help the child to develop an understanding of questions such as “What happened before ...?” and “What happens next ...?”
- After reading a story ask the child ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’ and ‘how’ questions. Many will find these questions confusing, so it may help to provide two alternative answers to prompt the correct response. As the student’s verbal ability and comprehension improves, you could introduce ‘why’ questions, again giving the child prompts to develop his understanding.
- In creative writing, allow the student to write about personal experiences. Then in order to develop creativity, pose questions like, “What would have happened if...” and have the student write an alternate version.
- If the student has difficulty starting a creative writing task, try getting him to draw pictures or cartoons first to aid organisation of thoughts.