How Can We Best Teach Reading to Students with Autism?

FIRST MYTH: ALL STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SHOULD HAVE PRIMARILY A SIGHT WORD CURRICULUM

The first clear problem is that all or never trap. Nothing in autism is always or never, or all or none. Yes, many students do respond well to learning sight words. However, that does not and SHOULD NOT keep us from introducing phonics to them. Phonics is a door opener for all children. Failing to do everything in our power to teach this approach, will significantly impact the child’s progress in school. This doesn’t mean that some students will be more successful with sight words, it just means we shouldn’t assume that’s the case if they don’t make progress on the classroom curriculum.

SECOND MYTH: STUDENTS WITH AUTISM CAN’T LEARN WITH CONVENTIONAL CURRICULA FOR READING SO WE HAVE TO “MAKE OUR OWN.”

Please understand that I have a great appreciation for how hard teachers work to create materials for their students, to individualize curricula for the students and to adapt materials. However, that is not creating a curriculum. A curriculum is a scope and sequence. It tells you what to teach and in what order. Sometimes it gives you the materials to teach it, like PCI, but many times it doesn’t. Creating materials to teach reading, unless you are developing a true scope and sequence and testing it out in real research, is not
creating what we are required to use to teach all students how to read: a scientifically based reading curriculum.

However, teacher-made and supplemental materials are useful and often critical for giving the students additional practice, but they aren’t the curriculum themselves. For instance, I love using the Edmark Functional Word Series for older students (by itself or with other approaches dependent upon the student). Students need more practice on these words, though, in a variety of situations to be able to use them functionally in their environment. So, I make task cards and file folders for them to practice the words.

Also, I have to do a minor correction. I noted in a previous post on curriculum that Unique is not a reading curriculum. Apparently that same day they announced that they were launching, you guessed it, a reading curriculum. I have not had time to play with it yet but hope to in the next few weeks and then will be back with an update on many of the changes they have put in place to the program.

THIRD MYTH: THERE IS NO SCIENTIFICALLY BASED CURRICULUM FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM.

Curricula aren’t determined, in most instances, to be scientifically based for a diagnosis that is not specific to the reading problems that a student demonstrates. They are evaluated for how they fit the characteristics of the individual reader. Even though students have an autism diagnosis, that does not mean they all have the same difficulties with reading.

I have graduate students I teach tell me that they don’t have specialized curricula for their students so they use website-based “curricula.” That is ok if you have vetted the online curriculum to see if it is scientifically based. Some, like Headsprout from Learning A-Z, has a ton of research to support it. But much of what you find out on the Internet is an attempt to make money but not necessarily an evidence-based practice. It’s not that internet-based or teacher-made tools aren’t useful—they they are vital. But you have to check to see how they fit with the scope and sequence of what you need to teach.

So How Do We Teach Reading to Students With Autism?

START WITH GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULA

Obviously you start with the district’s adopted curriculum before you make changes. You look at whether accommodations will help. And you monitor very often and early. Then if the student is not making progress you move to alternative curriculum. And for each of them you assess early and often to see if it is working.

USE DIRECT INSTRUCTION

There is some early evidence that using direct instruction curricula, such as Reading Mastery, can be effective for students with autism to learn phonics-based reading. The students respond to the high level of structure and repetition that DI uses and many are able to make progress using it 1-1 if not in a group
setting. [By the way, did you know there are DI materials for teaching math? Many of our kids do well with them too.]

TEACH PHONICS AND SIGHT WORDS TOGETHER

It’s so easy to get caught up in an all-or-nothing approach, we have to careful to remember that we can teach sight words AND phonics-based approaches simultaneously. One of the things I like about the PCI Reading Curriculum is that it transitions from early teaching in sight words into teaching phonics. I have worked with many students who are working on Edmark and Reading Mastery at the same time so we are sure we are covering our bases. We also are taking data to see which one is working most functionally for the student.

ASK YOUR SPEECH AND LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST

Because students with autism struggle with reading because, in part, of their difficulty with language, SLPs are natural resources for helping address the reading problems. Some SLPs have more experience than others in teaching reading, but many can be an amazing resource to help to build reading skills and structure language instruction to support them.

MAKE IT FUNCTIONAL AND FOCUS ON COMPREHENSION

After all that, remember that reading is only useful if it can be used and if there is comprehension. Many of our students learn to “word call” where they can read and say all the words, but they don’t know what they mean. Again, the SLP can help with this. Many students will need additional practice on comprehension and there are many teacher-made tools out there that can be used to practice the skill. If you are looking for materials to support reading curriculum, drop me a comment or an email and I’ll send you some resources.

AND FINALLY, ALWAYS MAKE SURE TO BE FOCUSING ON THE BIGGER ISSUE OF LITERACY NOT JUST READING.

Reading is important. Clearly it’s a gateway skill that leads to more efficient learning of all skills across the board. However, literacy and the ability to use print in a variety of different ways from reading and writing in books, through environmental print, and understanding how to access reading material is a critical skill that even our students with the most complex needs can be working on.

Reprinted from: www.autismclassroomresources.com
**Ingredients:**

- Apples of your choice
- Honey Nut Cheerios
- Peanut Butter
- Honey

**Directions:**

- Simply slice the apple of your liking (Granny Smith as used). Spread peanut butter on each slice. Add Honey Nut Cheerios. Drizzle with honey.

Reprinted from: www.comebackmomma.com
As more and more adults with ASD “come out” and embrace their condition with its quirks, challenges and many gifts, more adults with ASD will either marry other adults with ASD or more commonly, “neurotypical” women will marry men on the autism spectrum. Linda and Tom Peters’ charming, funny and delightful book, Our Socially Awkward Marriage: Stories from an Asperger’s Relationship, tells the story of how they met through Chemistry.com and saw qualities in each other that were so compelling that they just couldn’t resist each other. So, they didn’t! They married and Tom had a thriving musical career and a number of special interests including the ukulele and astronomy.

Tom doesn’t seem to have let his special interests get in the way of his love and affection for Linda. They each take turns describing the relationship and how ASD colors his perceptions and approach to life including learning to be more accepting of what happens, being hyper-focused on a particular special interest, the acceptance of each other’s differences and the ways their different personalities complement each other to create a nice balance and a successful relationship.

There is humor and warmth emanating from every page and I just flew through the book feeling more and more hopeful that these “mixed” relationships can work out. What is needed is a lot of patience, understanding of the dynamics of ASD in that person and the willingness to constantly learn, grow and adjust to the affected individual’s needs that may change as he gets older.

This book reflects a seemingly typical pattern...the woman being “neurotypical” married to someone with ASD having been captivated by the shimmering intelligence, and the charm and the sometimes childlike, youthful nature of the male partner. This relationship seems to really work. Tom comes across as a brilliant, yet loving and caring guy who really wants to make this marriage work by putting in a real effort to understand his wife and give her leeway to be herself. I found this little gem to be a delightful read and a very hopeful, feel-good one, too. We need something like this in this troubled, anxious time!
Fall photo scavenger hunt

- Spider Web
- Cloud
- Rocks
- Flower
- Mushroom
- Bug
- Grass
- Moss
- Green Leaf
- Yellow Leaf
- Orange Leaf
- Red Leaf
- Brown Leaf
- Tree Bark
- Acorn
- Twig
WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN’T:
My Life Thus Far

Anne Carpenter

After some false starts in life, including being in a community for adults with developmental disabilities, and several lost jobs before my fateful autism diagnosis thirty years ago, I have finally settled into a lifestyle that seems to have worked out better than I would have expected.

I am still living in a tiny studio apartment on Social Security Disability Survivor’s Benefits that helps me to pay my rent each month. While my rent went up again in August, it is still below the market rate and it is a small, comfortable space with a huge window that lets in lots of late afternoon sunshine! In addition, it is easy to clean - I can vacuum the carpet one day, then sweep and mop the kitchen and bathroom floors another day, then clean the bathroom and the stove and the oven and wipe the kitchen sink clean, and that’s it!

While I have tended to cook the same things over and over again, I have gotten Weight Watchers recipes to help me stay on track and I have been weighing myself every week which helps me to stay on course.

I can take the public transportation buses or Paratransit cabs to the many different places that I need or want to go in my area. I have a Paratransit card that allows me to ride the buses for free. I can take a taxi at a reduced fare.

To socialize, I can’t go to many Meetups because they are often in locations that I can’t get to using the public transportation system. Although, I may try using Lyft to see how that works. I enjoy going to movie and cultural events with friends and family on occasion.

For the most part though, what I have been doing and how I have done what I have done, has worked-either through sheer determination and resourcefulness, help from friends and relatives and just plain “dumb luck.” Even getting up at 5 AM to take the A-Ride, Michigan Flyer bus and Spec-Tran to work at ASM three days a week has worked out remarkably well. So, despite some glitches here and there, what I am doing now works for the most part. For this, I have to be grateful!
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