Whether you are student teaching, preparing for your first year in the classroom, or substitute teaching, you will encounter students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). It is estimated by the Centers for Disease Control that 1 in 110 children have an ASD. If you are unfamiliar with the behaviors of these students, you may feel unprepared to handle the varying behaviors they display.

Offered here is a crash course on some general behavior strategies that may help increase your confidence and ease your mind. Students who have ASD exhibit symptoms in three specific areas:

1. Communication and language delays,
2. Challenges in social interactions, and
3. Atypical behaviors—inappropriate, socially stigmatizing mannerisms (think how Dustin Hoffman’s character in *Rain Man* rocked back and forth).

Some students exhibit difficulties in all three areas, while others in only one or two. Because autism is a “spectrum” disorder, with a range of characteristics, the severity of the deficit varies from student to student.

Applying positive behavior supports, individualized for certain students, sets the structure needed by these students and helps manage their behaviors and your classroom. In fact, these supports can help all students. Following are three practical, low-prep behavior strategies you can implement classroom-wide to help all students. They can be tailored as needed for students with ASD.

**Use visual cues.** Many students with ASD are visual learners. Use concrete materials to complement verbal information. For example, post a schedule of the day’s events, generate checklists for tasks, and create cue cards that outline expected behaviors (e.g., follow the teacher’s directions). You can use the cues with the class or place them on specific students’ desks. If needed, minimize any social stigmas by placing the visual cues inside the desk or post them inside notebooks, folders, and organizers. Remember: Don’t just say it, show it.
Prepare for changes in the daily routine. Students with autism are the ultimate creatures of habit, and changes or deviations from their routine, unstructured time, or non-preferred tasks can cause changes in behavior. It is important to prepare these students for alternative situations. When you are aware of an upcoming change in the routine—substitute teacher or an assembly—forewarn the student and add the change to the visual representation of the day’s schedule of events.

Consider adding a “mystery” event to your schedule on a daily basis so that students become habituated to unexpected activities and tasks. On the daily schedule, identify the mystery as an unknown activity for that day without specifying what it will be. A mystery task can be as simple as a cooperative learning activity. Non-preferred tasks should be addressed by first identifying the factor(s) that make this activity unfavorable for the student. Implementing instructional modifications that make the work more attainable often solve this problem.

Implement a classroom economics-based reinforcement system. Using reinforcement in the classroom can effectively increase appropriate behavior, prove yourself a positive person, and create a positive environment. The economic-based system, often called a token economy, brings together classroom rules, classroom jobs, and mathematics skills. This type of a system sets clear behavior expectations for all students and does not single out the student with ASD.

To get your token economy started, inform students that they will earn classroom money or points for appropriate behaviors that can be used to purchase items from the class store. Those items should be decided on by the students, with guidance from you and approval from the principal.

For the economics component, assign an amount of money or points that can be earned for classroom jobs and classroom rules. Each student receives a “bank book” to record earnings. You might distribute “bank checks” for bonus behavior. You should decide when the class store is open for business and how often students can make purchases—end of the day, bi-weekly, or weekly. Keep in mind the age group of the students and the wait time they can demonstrate.

These are just a few strategies to incorporate into the classroom. Above all, remember to be pro-active, consistent, and focused on ways to increase appropriate behavior. Your students with ASD will respond when you keep their environment structured and consistent.

Would you like more tips and strategies?

Listen to the “Autism Spectrum Disorder Survivor Kit” podcast on the eChapter podcast page under the Teaching Resources menu at KDP Online.

www.kdp.org/teachingresources/podcasts/echapter.php. Additional materials are available.