



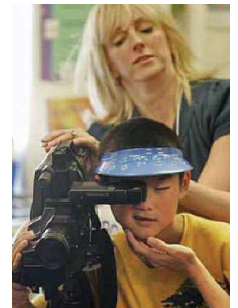
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ASPERGER'S SUPPORT
TEACHER

As a teacher, I want my students to learn how to socialize appropriately. After years of working with children with Asperger Syndrome, High Functioning Autism, and Autism, it is clear to me that these children need a special project that taps into their interests and strengths. Join me as we work together to solve the puzzle of Asperger Syndrome, High Functioning Autism, and Autism.

Asperger's Students Hit the News Beat!

Creating a Newscast for Children
with Asperger's Syndrome



Introduction

The students in the Asperger's Support class of Worrall Elementary School air their own version of a local newscast called 'Action 7' at the end of each school year in June. This year-long project is designed to develop expressive language and written language as well as social and life skills to increase the self-esteem of the students with this diagnosis. Throughout the year, the six students learn to work video equipment, have the opportunity to meet people in the media, design backdrops and props and research, write and edit their own pieces. The students also take on many roles at a news station including anchors, reporters, camera people, editors, sportscasters, and weather forecasters—even writing their own persuasive commercials.

An Idea

As teachers, we are constantly searching for the best visual strategy, verbal strategy or any kind of medium to help us with this population. Even the best sounding ideas have to pass the most critical test—they must actively engage the students where they will be able to acquire the concepts and then go on to generalise them into other settings. For me, as an Asperger's Support Teacher, those areas include making students aware of their surroundings. This includes the community, the nation and the world. I wanted to develop a newscast for children with Asperger's Syndrome in order to motivate them, help them modulate their own behaviour, develop social and communication skills and turn many of their differences into strengths to enhance their self-esteem.

When I thought about the reading of lines that included figurative language,

expression and tone of voice, I realised that what I had initially thought of as an Asperger's Support project was actually just as much, if not more so, a speech and language project. I also envisioned completing this task with regular education teachers, service providers (occupational therapists, physical therapists etc.), parents, paraprofessionals, specialists and administrators within the elementary school.

Getting Started

The first task is to complete a 'Needs Analysis' on the students who will be participating in the project. With the help of the school's speech and language pathologist, we came up with student needs in three categories. They include Social/Pragmatic Skills, Communication Skills and Behavioural Difficulties.

Social/Pragmatic Skills

include the following:

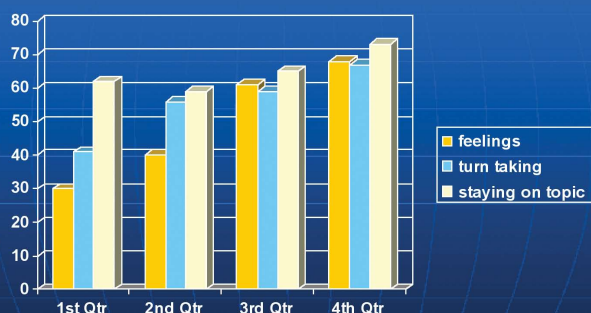
- Turn taking
- Reciprocity
- Hidden curriculum
- Identification and utilisation of feelings/emotions
- See the whole picture but miss the pieces
- Interrupting
- Nonverbal/body language

Communication Skills

include the following:

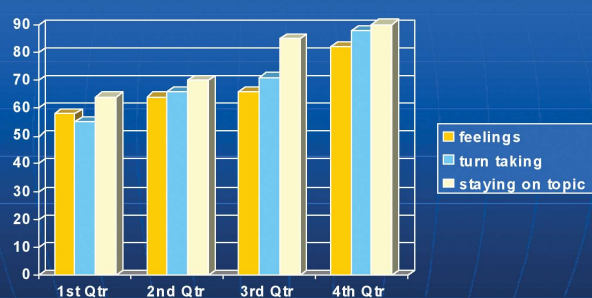
- Conversation skills
- Staying on topic
- Articulation
- Appropriate inflection, loudness, tone of voice
- Listening and understanding figurative language

Student "A" Progress 2005 - 2006



Graph 1

Student "A" Progress 2006 - 2007



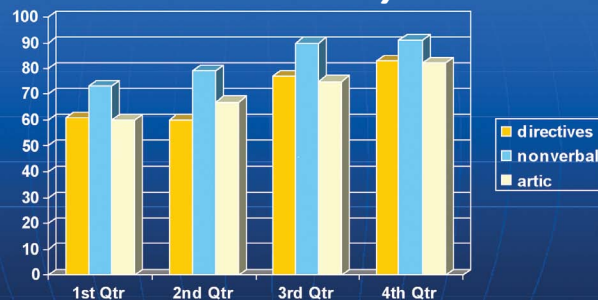
Graph 2

Student "B" Progress 2005 - 2006



Graph 3

Student "B" Progress 2006 - 2007



Graph 4

Behaviour Difficulties include the following:

- Following/complying with adult directives
- Difficulty with transitions
- Resistance to environmental changes or daily routine
- Perseverating/obsessive compulsive behaviours
- Self-stimming
- Organisation dysfunction

Once we identified the specific needs and skills we wanted to address with the newscast, we were ready to begin our task! Data was collected from 2005-2007 on the following goals while incorporating them

into a newscast: Feelings, Turn-Taking, Staying on Topic, Directives, Non-Verbal Body Language and Articulation while incorporating them into the newscast.

It is apparent from the bar graphs above, that the newscast helped the students improve in all areas.

The News

As soon as I tell my students that we are putting on a news programme complete with a commercial, they get quite excited and eager to begin. In fact, they want to know if they will actually be on TV and become famous. First, however, we need to make a plan with the students. What does a newscast look like? What jobs do people have, both on-camera and behind the scenes? How do the on-camera people look and act: posture, eye contact, tone of voice, articulation, 'WH' questions, conversation skills, body language, turn-taking, utilising feelings, transitions within the news, staying on topic, figurative language and interruptions etc.

Co-Teaching

This brings up the 'Asperger's Support Teacher and the Speech and Language Pathologist as Producers' in which we control the jobs that students will have. With our guidance, the students receive key rings of all jobs associated with a newscast. We practice pronouncing each word appropriately until the students are able to read them on their own proficiently.

As the news of the project spread around the school, many regular education teachers wanted to be on board and incorporate many of these skills into their Social Studies units. All classrooms receive at least one of the following publications: Local Newspapers, Scholastic News for Kids, National Geographic News for Kids or Time for Kids at various grade levels. In addition, many of the regular education teachers wanted to incorporate the writing of commercials into their Language Arts curriculum.

With the materials at hand, partnerships were formed where two or more types of expertise were blended. The students and all professionals benefit from this



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process. Our partnerships included not only regular education teachers, but additional special education teachers, related service providers and paraprofessionals. We incorporated three peer models for learning Local, National and World News.

The first model is a Co-operative Learning Model. This takes place in the regular education environment where the entire class is broken up into groups of 4-6 students (fewer in lower grades). Each student is assigned a specific role. The roles include the following: cue card person, camera assistant, reporter, editor /summariser, and constructive criticism checker.

First, the teacher reads an article from Scholastic News, National Geographic for Kids, Time for Kids or the local newspaper. As a class, we review the "Who, What, When, Where, Why or How?" questions that have been generated by both the special education teacher(s) and the regular education teacher. WH question cards are used to provide visual support.

A mock newscast is then modelled for the entire class by the regular education teacher, the speech and language pathologist, the paraprofessional, Asperger's Support Teacher and special education teacher(s). Each adult assumes one of the assigned roles and models it for the class. The speech teacher models tone, volume and expression. The Asperger's Support Teacher models posture, eye contact, use of cue cards with visuals and non-verbal body gestures. Finally, the regular education and special education teachers model the recording of information on the board as well as reporting the information.

After the piece has been read, each adult takes a turn giving a positive statement about how the reporter read the script. For example: "I really liked the volume of your voice. You were nice and loud for the viewers." As a group, one person volunteers and gives another positive statement, followed by how the reporter can improve. For example: "Your eye contact was excellent. Remember you don't have to memorize your story as you will have your cue card in front of you. It's okay to use the cue cards."

After the discussion and mock newscast by the teachers, each group is responsible for summarising the article. Each person contributes however; the editor/ summariser records the information in one paragraph onto large chart paper with a permanent marker. Next the reporter practices reading the paragraph several times out loud to the entire group. The cue card person is responsible for holding up the script without rustling the paper. The editor / summariser and camera assistant will each hold one of two cue cards that include a picture of an eye for eye contact and a picture of a mouth.

Following practice, each group will come up to the front of the classroom and assume their roles for their own broadcast.

The next model is a Peer Assistance Model. Here the students are paired in groups of two. The regular education teacher and/or special education teachers identify weaknesses that require assistance with both students. This may include tone of voice, eye contact, speaking too fast, posture etc. Both students are trained with various specially designed instruction (i.e. use of visuals, repetition etc.) to help their partner. Each person will give their partner a compliment after each reading and / or rehearsal of a script. The paraprofessional will record where changes were made as well as filling out data collection forms as warranted.

The third model is a Class-Wide Peer Tutoring Model. In this model, a stronger student is paired with a weaker reader. The stronger reader reads the passage aloud for the first five minutes, then the weaker reader reads the same passage aloud for five minutes. Since some of the Asperger's children are hyperlexic, we found that these Asperger's children were able to be the stronger readers here if the goal was to read the passage without concentrating on tone, inflection or comprehension. After the first passage is complete, children are paired with new partners and reverse roles.

These models are reinforced in the regular education classrooms once a week and have been beneficial to all students. They love the role-playing and have learned to give wonderful compliments to one another.



"And Now A Word From Our Sponsor" - A Lesson in Persuasion

As expected, students are always eager to be assigned to do a commercial. I have found that commercials work best on film when the entire group of seven works cooperatively. I agree to let students work on commercials alone as practice, but I generally like to see collaboration among students. I limit the commercials in the broadcast to one. We chose a topic of interest, vote on it and the majority wins! Action 7 has done commercials on places such as Philadelphia and Space Camp.

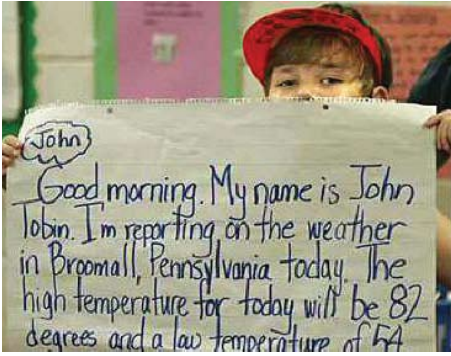
Lights, Camera, Action!

The camera is indispensable and the most valuable prop for the newscast. When filming a show in the classroom, it is important to use the viewer lens to shoot the anchor desk with the Action 7 banner on the front, the reporter or anchor, the blue background (bulletin board paper) and the backdrops.

I decided to utilise over-sized chart paper where the cue card person(s) could hold it up for each segment with the lines written in marker. Each reporter chose a specific colour for their lines.

The camera person is instructed to hit





the record button, count to three, and then give the "go ahead" signal which is pointing to the person on air.

The reporters read from the cue cards where they introduce themselves, give their report, and sign off. The sign off is critical because it signals the camera person to pause the recording. While the camera is on pause, reporters move off, murals and other visuals are changed, and new people are in place for the next segment.

The Show

Typically the broadcast is filmed in the spring during Quarter 3 of the school year.

A full day is needed for filming, so notices are sent to the entire staff during Quarter 2 to prepare them for the "Big Day"!

The excitement begins the morning of the show. Students change into their professional clothes and review their scripts. The studio is set up the day before with the camera in place. I give all of the students a mini-lesson on operating the camera. The anchor takes his / her place at the news desk and the cue card person(s) are standing on either side of the camera and we all close our eyes to do a calming visualisation exercise.

Different backgrounds are used for different segments of the show. This adds variety to the look of the show. Also, when the tape is edited, computer graphics are added to really make it look more professional.

Evaluation

Prior to our first show, my co-producer and I discuss the basis on which students will be evaluated. A Performance Assessment is designed which has a section for student self-evaluation and a section for teacher assessment and

comments. By reviewing this prior to filming, students are made aware of the criteria on which they will be evaluated.

A Success Story

I believe the benefits of this project are endless! Upon reviewing the data from 2005-2007, it is apparent that all students who participated in the newscast have increased their percentage rates in their goals and objectives on their IEPs. In addition, it is amazing to see the growth in confidence, self-esteem and presentation skills, as well as astute awareness of current events over the course of the year. I also believe it is important to use video taping as an opportunity for the students to observe a mannered presence on which they can improve upon with repeated experience as they do the newscast the following year. Also, it gives them the chance to view themselves expressing appropriate social and speaking skills. All teachers should incorporate a newscast into their classrooms. Once they try it out, they will want to do it every week and create a valuable experience for all students involved.

