



# PROJECT ACCESS FACT SHEET #41



projectaccess.missouristate.edu  
 projectaccess@missouristate.edu  
 866-481-3841

## BACK TO THE BASICS:

### *The most important stuff I've learned about teaching kids with autism in 30 years -By Dr. Edna Smith*

Over thirty years ago Susan Hawkins and I sat on our office floor planning our first Project ACCESS training workshop (we had no furniture when ACCESS first started in 1986). We worried about how little we knew about teaching kids with autism. We had been hired and were expected to help support educators all over the state provide appropriate educational programs for students with autism. That was a daunting task when the field of autism was still in its toddlerhood, if not its infancy. It isn't an exaggeration to say we were terrified. But we muddled along and in the years since we have learned a few things that I am happy to share with you. Primary in what I have learned is the fact that if you are going to work effectively with persons who experience autism you need to know not just about behavior but about the *person* doing the behaving. And about the context in which the behavior occurs.

1. The first thing we learned is: **Don't try to change the kid before you change the environment and the curriculum.** Look at the environment around the child. Consider the child's "internal environment." Does something hurt? Is he confused? Anxious? Frightened? Try to understand what is going on around the child and how he or she may be interpreting it. Maybe the sensory environment is overwhelming? Maybe the child doesn't understand what is expected of him. I have learned that there is little point in trying to pile on reinforcement or punishment to try to change a behavior when the environment around the child is so chaotic and frightening (in the child's view) that all he can do is stay on the defensive.
2. Next: **Do what you can to make the environment conducive to learning.** Reduce the sensory overload. Help the child understand expectations. Structure! Structure! Structure! Structure the space. Structure the materials. Structure time. Provide an uncluttered, visually supportive environment with schedules, task strips, choice boards, a few simple, visually displayed rules, and visual organizers. Reduce the "verbal clutter." Most of us talk too much. Use simple, slow, direct speech. Set up an individualized work system for each child.
3. All the time: **Catch them being good...even when it's difficult.** Remember that kids with disabilities often get very little non-contingent reinforcement. If you have autism the chances for getting many "Attaboys" are greatly reduced. Maybe you don't do very many things very well so people don't give you a lot of praise and other reinforcement. One important thing I've learned is to be sure that our students on the autism spectrum get lots of sincere, positive, non-contingent reinforcement. Without reinforcement there is no learning.

4. Then: **Rethink what and how you are teaching.** Think seriously about the curriculum you are putting in front of the child...what you are teaching and how and why you are teaching it. Before you assume that the problem lies within the child ask yourself if the task you are asking of the child is something he is capable of doing. Is it something he has been taught? Does he need some additional support to be able to accomplish this task? And for every activity we require of a child we need to ask ourselves "To what end is the child doing this?" Is this something that will lead to the development of the most independent, employable, socially competent adult possible? Don't forget that we need to prepare children not just for academic work but also for domestic life, community life, as well as social and leisure activities. We must prepare for both leisure and vocational activities because, unfortunately, adults on the spectrum often end up having more than the average amount of leisure time because they are underemployed.
5. **Only after the environment has been manipulated as appropriate and the curriculum has been adjusted as necessary do we start work on teaching the child a new set of skills.** Once the child with autism is in a comfortable environment learning reasonable things probably the most important skill you will teach him or her is communication. And I don't just mean talking. Talking is good but all behavior is communication. We will need to look at any challenging behavior and make some good educated guesses as to what the child is communicating with that behavior. Everything communicates something. Once we figure out what the challenging behavior may be communicating it is our responsibility to teach the child a socially appropriate way to convey the same message as effectively as the challenging behavior conveyed it. Of course, in order to establish the new, more appropriate behavior in the child's behavioral repertoire it must be just as effective and just as easy for the child to do as was the challenging behavior we want it to replace. Further, we must let it work to get the same thing for the child that the challenging behavior was getting for him. Teaching the child a better, more appropriate, way to get what he wants is the absolute best way to reduce challenging behavior.

So these are very probably the most important things that I have learned over 30 years of working with students on the autism spectrum and those who teach them. I have learned that once the child is comfortable in his environment, doing interesting, meaningful, and important things learning comes much easier and behavior is much more appropriate. Ruth Aspy and Barry Grossman said it much better than I can in their 2008 book, *The Ziggurat Model: Designing Comprehensive Interventions for Individuals with High-Functioning Autism and Asperger Syndrome*: ***"When the sensory system is calm, reinforcement is available, the environment is made predictable through structure and visual supports, and task demands are carefully designed, skills can be effectively taught and learned."***