

# WAYS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT YET DIAGNOSED AND THOSE ON THE AUTISTIC SPECTRUM

## **Educating the Underdiagnosed, Lived Experience as an Autistic Female.**

**By Rebekah Kintzinger**

Much of understanding and educating students who do not yet have a diagnosis of autism will involve observing the child for strengths and challenges they display, and include your ability to associate those with spectrum behaviour. Having a deeper understanding, a greater understanding of the autistic spectrum is crucial to being able to educate these students to the best of your ability, and to provide them with the education that they deserve.

If your student does not have a diagnosis of autism, you can still act on what you see in your student, and collect data for a future assessment if that is a possibility. For example - if your student has a hard time transitioning you should use the languages “first this and then this” a lot with them to help with those transitions, and perhaps some pictures to show the transitions happening. Or for example if the student is often playing with things and fidgeting, then they could be offered sensory toys. Try and meet the student’s individual needs and put strategies into their day and change their environment in a way that can better help them learn.

Another helpful tool is to take the time to **ask the student questions** about their learning experience and preferences. You could for example ask the student to write out some “teaching tips” for you. The student’s perspective in guiding their own learning can be very insightful in going forward with them. This could take the form of a writing assignment, or an art project. It involves the possibility of enhancing their own learning, so if the student is able, they will probably be willing to engage in this.

- If they have a communication challenge, ask the parents what works best at home and go from there, or look at previous school records for guidance.

**Make low-stress teaching a part of the IEP.** A description of symptoms and triggers of shutdowns, as well as the importance of avoiding them, should be written into the IEP.

Some teaching styles around low-stress teaching include:

1. **Flexibility:** flexible learning environment that allows the student to determine certain activities. This gives the student more of a sense of power and control.
2. **Controlling social pressure:** more breaks, given more social distance, allowing refresh breaks and rest breaks
  - a. *Refresh break:* distract the student for a few moments, have them take a deep breath. Also wiggling arms and legs, stretching, making funny faces also helps to relieve tension and are fun for the student.
  - b. *Rest break:* should be given if all other things are failing, and should be as neutral as possible. Not given any toys or distractions, something as simple as head down on the desk or similar. After 3 minutes asking the student if they're ready to work again, if the answer is "no" then another three minutes of rest can and should be given. If a shutdown occurs, the student should be given a safe place, such as a quiet corner of the classroom or some schools have portable tents.
3. **Focus on the positive:** this can be referred to as "errorless teaching". When you minimize the impact or importance of mistakes, it reduces the pressure on the student to perform correctly and helps them to focus on the positive with what they are doing.
4. **Give the student more time to respond:** The teacher should speak more slowly, use simple language, and wait until the student appears engaged in the task before speaking again. Do not reword or repeat instructions unless the student has indicated that they do not understand.
5. **Repetition and routine:** Most autistic students find repetition and routine both comfortable and easy to process. These tools are assets to reaching autistic students in their learning goals and should be approached enthusiastically.
6. **Teach and dialogue to the interests that they have whenever possible:** This is incredibly satisfying, because a lot of the experiences an autistic student has are not validating or comfortable. Recognizing a specialized interest, or just an interest that an autistic student has and incorporating it into what they are learning feels great and creates a rewarding experience for both the teacher and the student.

7. **Give choices whenever possible:** Being able to choose from options given, can sometimes lessen the stress of feeling like you have no control over your environment or situation. Rigidity and control are main focus points in autistic life, and helping to let the student feel in control can prevent meltdowns and shutdowns from occurring as often.
8. **Try to stay ahead of the behaviour:** If you notice behaviour starting to deteriorate, do not focus on changing or redirecting the behaviour. Instead the first thing that should be done is to focus on immediately addressing what is stimulating the behaviour. This is the fastest and best way to prevent or reduce meltdowns and shutdowns.

It might seem like redirecting or stopping the behaviour is the most important, but unless the root of the problem is addressed, the likelihood of the behaviour changing in a way that is good for the mental health of the student is very dim.

- a. When a student on the spectrum is forced to stop or redirect behaviour that is stemming from a reaction to something uncomfortable or frustrating, it can cause them stress.
- b. Stress is hard to manage when you're autistic, and too much can lead to shutdowns or meltdowns.
- c. **Shutdowns** occur when the person partially or completely withdraws from the world around them and it can look like many different things, often being mistaken for difficult behaviour, or avoidance.
- d. Shutdowns are kind of a big deal in autism, and they can happen a lot. The problem can really be when a shutdown is not recognized as a shutdown but for something else, and so then the causes of it are not prevented or mitigated. A lot of stress can be reduced before and during a shutdown, but only if the educator recognizes that the student is experiencing a shutdown. If this situation becomes recognized and mitigated, that will directly benefit the mental health of the autistic student. Having a good understanding of the signs of what you're looking for will go a long way into helping the student through times like these.

- e. Signs of a shutdown can include but are not limited to: becoming less or non-verbal, looking “spaced out” or detached from what’s happening, curling up in the fetal position or pulling knees up to chest, hiding.
- f. What you can do during a shutdown: remove them from any noisy, crowded situations, avoid asking questions that require a lot of processing, avoid trivializing or blaming the person for the situation, offer something that makes them comfortable (ipad, drawing supplies, specialized interest, etc). Asking simple Yes or No questions can be very helpful! Do not ask “what’s wrong?” for example.
- g. **Meltdowns** are another type of reaction to being overloaded. It can include yelling, crying, lashing out, growling, more than typical stimming, and other outward behaviour. Meltdowns can also lead to shutdowns. The important thing to remember is that the student is flooded, overwhelmed, overloaded and having a really hard time with control.
- h. How to help the student with a meltdown:  
**be empathetic**, listen and acknowledge their struggle without judgement. Their brains are wired differently and so it’s how they interact with the world. Sometimes the student is so lost in their emotions that they can’t hear anything the educator is saying. In these situations all we need to do is simply sit with or be near them - **make them feel safe**. Punishments can make children feel shame, anxiety, fear and resentment. **Eliminate punishments** during a meltdown, because a student with autism can’t control their meltdowns, so they shouldn’t be punished for them. Offer **sensory tools** and toys to the student when they are overwhelmed, although don’t force them on the student. Once they are calm, it’s a great idea to **teach them coping strategies** for better emotion regulation in the future.