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## **5 Things a Student with Autism Wishes His Teachers Had Known**

*By James Sinclair*

If students are like flowers, then students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are a unique and extraordinary part of the garden that is a school. At first, we may seem out of place – our differences stand out and you can't take your eyes off us. However, you will quickly come to realize that what makes us special can ultimately better the bouquet.

From those who tried to force off my thorns, to those who simply left me to wilt, I definitely had my fair share of ill-prepared teachers while growing up as a student with Autism. After sitting down to write this article, I realized that there were many things I wished my teachers had known when I was in school. So here are 5 tips to help you help your students with ASD grow and thrive.

### **1. Don't stifle our creativity**

Yes, people with ASD can be great at math. We can be awesome with programming and we might even be good at everything else your iPhone has an app for. But, we're also more creative than we are often given credit for – as demonstrated by recent studies into 'the paradox of creativity in autism' (Best, Arora, et al.). Despite this, there is a huge misconception that all students with ASD are built for stats and science, and this can often result in many of them being steered away from subjects in which they might have excelled.

For myself, this occurred during school when I was removed from art classes due to becoming visibly distressed at the lack of precise definition in the lessons. Instead of providing me individualized support and accommodation, I was excluded from this essential outlet to explore my creativity during the school day. As such, it wasn't till I created my blog that I realized that not only could I be imaginative but, as it turns out, I wasn't half bad at it. The lesson here isn't that all children with ASD should become bloggers though; it's that we shouldn't be stereotyped into fields that are purely based on facts and figures.

## **2. Be definitive (but not too definitive)**

People with ASD aren't mind-readers and can struggle with interpreting and understanding actions. Of course, this isn't any great secret, which is why many tips for teaching students with Autism will encourage you to be as definitive as possible when giving instructions.

Now, I'm not going to say this is bad (because it's not), but it's often the case that when many see the phrase "be definitive" they will rely on using examples to teach. This is a problem for people with ASD as, due to our practical minds, we will often only take the outcome away and overlook the nuance and process, limiting the creation of a holistic understanding that drives new knowledge acquisition.

Educators can avoid this shortfall by working at a 1-on-1 level with a student with ASD, coaching them through a task from start to finish. Ensuring that actions are understood over repeated is crucial here and, while it may seem time consuming at first, it's no different from the old 'teach a man to fish' saying – your options are either to give us your full attention and sit down with us once, or give us fleeting support and prepare to sit with us again and again.

## **3. Promote a growth mindset**

Imagine that you're asked to complete a puzzle with 8 pieces. When you finish, the examiner says "Well done. You're really smart," and then offers you the option of doing another 8-piece test or one with 16 pieces. According to multiple studies (Dweck, 2006), you're more likely to go for the 8 piece again in order to avoid the possibility of embarrassing yourself in front of the examiner who gave you praise. On the other hand, if that examiner had said "Wow, that looked tough, but you got there in the end," (or something along those lines), it's more likely that you would take on the 16-piece puzzle.

This is the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset – something which is incredibly important to consider when teaching people who are very literal, such as students with Autism.

This was certainly the case for me growing up. After I was told that I was a 'math whiz' in my early years, I stopped trying to learn new things and thought I would always remain the best (which gave me a nasty shock when I changed schools). Ensuring that people with ASD always know there is room to improve is instrumental in guaranteeing that we do so.

## **4. Don't label us as "bad kids"**

One of the classic misconceptions surrounding students with ASD is that when we have a meltdown and become disruptive, we are intentionally causing trouble for ourselves and those around us. This is well and truly, positively and precisely, unfathomably wrong (and I still don't think I have stressed that enough).

In reality, a meltdown is when our minds have become overloaded/overwhelmed and, instead of knowing that this is the moment to take a break, our bodies instead shutdown and 'reboot' in our most natural state: the fight or flight mode. As most are aware, this can cause quite a disturbance and be very upsetting for all those around. However, it's not more upsetting for anyone than the person with Autism themselves.

When this does happen, it shouldn't be seen as an opportunity to punish or scold the actions of your student with ASD, but to step up, offer support, and identify intervention strategies for that student in the future.

Take a moment to consider if the meltdown was:

- Caused from not understanding a question.
- Due to learning too many different things at one time.
- Triggered by something in the room causing a sensory disturbance and making it impossible to focus.

Either way, the one constant is that throwing us out of the classroom won't help. That's why, when dealing with a meltdown, always remember to tackle the cause and not just the response.

## 5. Teach us to embrace Autism

I spent most of my early childhood keeping my Autism a secret, locked away with the fact that I often wore pajamas under my school clothes and that I was still watching (and loving) *Dora the Explorer* until the age of 16. This need to hide the real me meant that I was far too busy disguising my Autism to learn, and it often resulted in me pretending to be sick or purposefully disconnecting from my peers.

Of course, teaching a child with Autism to avoid this by embracing their condition is not quite as simple as a motivational speech – after all, Autistic or not, what adolescent is 100% comfortable with their identity? But small tricks like giving students with Autism a safe space to recharge our batteries and lending an ear when we seem upset can often be enough to hold us over until we find our own way. Compared to the previous 4 tips, this may not seem like much. However, just like teaching students without ASD, teaching someone with Autism is about giving us the tools to succeed and then helping us find independence.

Though students with ASD often come to school possessing their own unique tools of success, they can often suppress them in pursuit of fitting in. This means that to help a student with Autism reach their full potential, we need educators who will look beyond simple book learning; who will guide us while we learn to see our sometimes obsessive personalities as unparalleled concentration, our often irregular approaches as inventive problem-solving, and any and all of our other differences as the strengths they truly are.

Reprinted from: [www.rethinked.com](http://www.rethinked.com)



## How to Make a Fall Sensory Bin – [happyhooligans.ca](http://happyhooligans.ca)

**A sensory bin starts with a base.** Natural materials such as dry rice, sand, lentils, oats, and corn kernels are wonderful to explore.

The pasta and rice in this bin have been used for sensory play many times. I just bag it up and store it in between uses.

Everything in this bin, I already had in the house, and it's all been used for assorted bins and seasonal play before. That's the beauty of making a sensory bin; you can re-use these treasures over and over again, each time using a different combination of materials so you'll never have the same bin twice.

You don't have to spend a lot of money making a sensory bin. Go through your cupboards, craft supplies, holiday ornaments, the kitchen drawers, your fabric stash, the toy box etc. You'll find lots of interesting items once you start looking.

### **What to put in your fall bin:**

Pinecones, chestnuts, acorns, walnuts, sunflowers, wheat, seed pods, artificial apples, leaves and flowers, miniature gourds (real or artificial), plastic gemstones or glass beads in autumn colors etc.

My artificial flowers and wooden gourds were thrift shop purchases some years ago. Other items, like the pumpkins and the gemstones, I purchased a few years back, at the dollar store. The bowls and small scoops were also second-hand shop finds.

Until recently, the apples decorated my Christmas tree every year for the past 2 decades. Butterflies – dollar store.

The pinecones and seed pods, I collected in the yard this morning. The pinecones and seed pods, I collected in the yard this morning.

### **Tools and instruments for a Sensory Bin:**

Scoops, wooden bowls, jars and muffin tins are perfect for pouring and sorting and organizing. Ice cube trays work too. Tongs are always fun and they're great for fine motor development and preparing little ones for using scissors. Our favorite scoops are the little meatball-makers. We have two sets, both thrift shop finds.



# Shopping with my Family

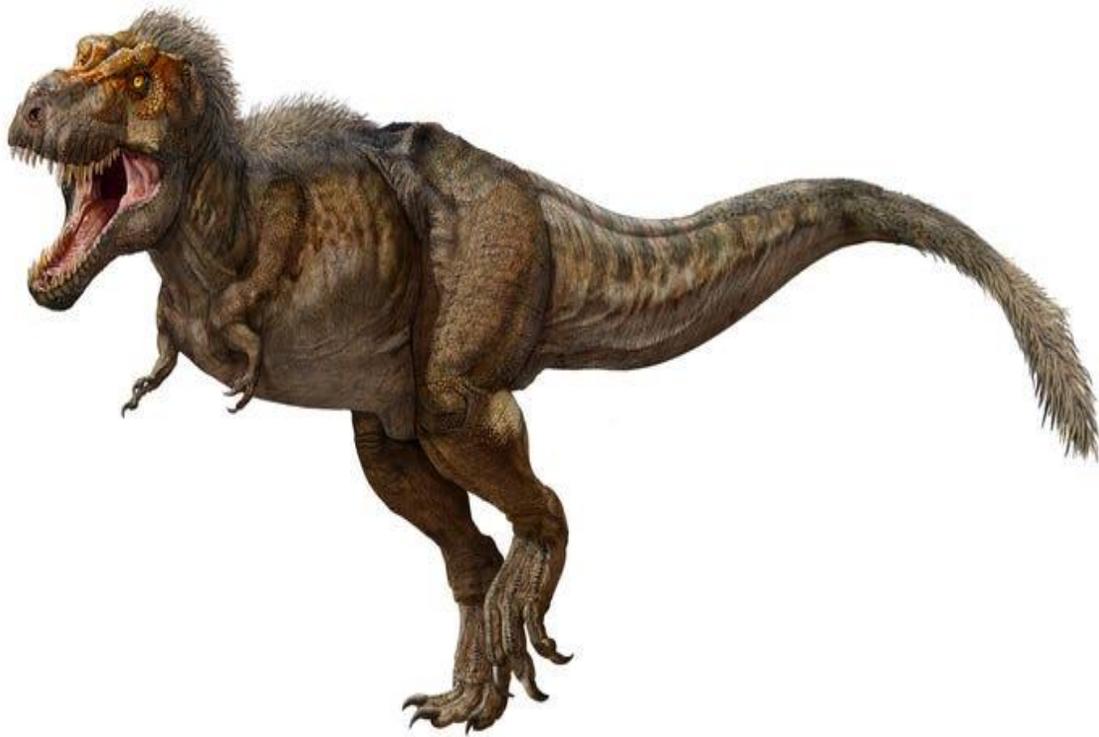
*www.ocali.org*

Going to public outings can sometimes be overwhelming for individuals with ASD, particularly grocery shopping. They may have a hard time focusing on what they need to do and might become distracted. This may result in wandering away from family members in public. Because the individual loves dinosaurs, the following scenario and Power Card were written to remind an individual to stay close to family members while shopping. T-Rex is such a cool dinosaur. This dinosaur likes to adventure out and look for things, but he knows he needs to stay close with his family especially when hunting for food. T-Rex also doesn't want to get lost. Just like T-Rex, I need to stay close with my family while we hunt for food at the grocery store.

## *Power Card*

### **T-Rex wants you to remember:**

- Stay with your parents while shopping at the grocery store.
  - Hold on to the grocery cart.
- Only put items in the grocery cart that Mom and Dad tell you to.
  - This makes T-Rex happy.





## Apple Zucchini Muffins

### Ingredients:

#### For the Muffins:

- 2 1/4 cups white whole wheat flour
- 3/4 cup dark brown sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 1/4 cup unsweetened applesauce
- 1 tablespoon oil melted coconut oil, canola oil, or vegetable oil
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 cup grated apple I use Granny Smith
- 1/2 cup grated zucchini moisture slightly squeezed out
- 1 cup chopped peeled apple I use Granny Smith

#### For the Topping:

- 2 tablespoons turbinado sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon

### Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Line a muffin pan with paper liners or spray with cooking spray. Set aside.
2. In a large bowl, whisk together flour, brown sugar, baking soda, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, and allspice. In a small bowl, whisk together buttermilk, applesauce, oil, egg, and vanilla extract. Pour the wet ingredients over the dry ingredients and mix with a wooden spoon or spatula until just combined. Do not over mix. Gently stir in the grated apple, zucchini, and chopped apples.
3. To make the topping, combine turbinado sugar and cinnamon in a small bowl. Stir well.
4. Fill the prepared muffin pan with muffin batter, filling each cup about  $\frac{3}{4}$  the way full. Sprinkle each muffin with cinnamon sugar topping. Bake for 20 minutes, or until muffins are golden and a toothpick inserted in the center of a muffin comes out clean. Let muffins cool to room temperature and serve.
5. Note-these muffins freeze well.

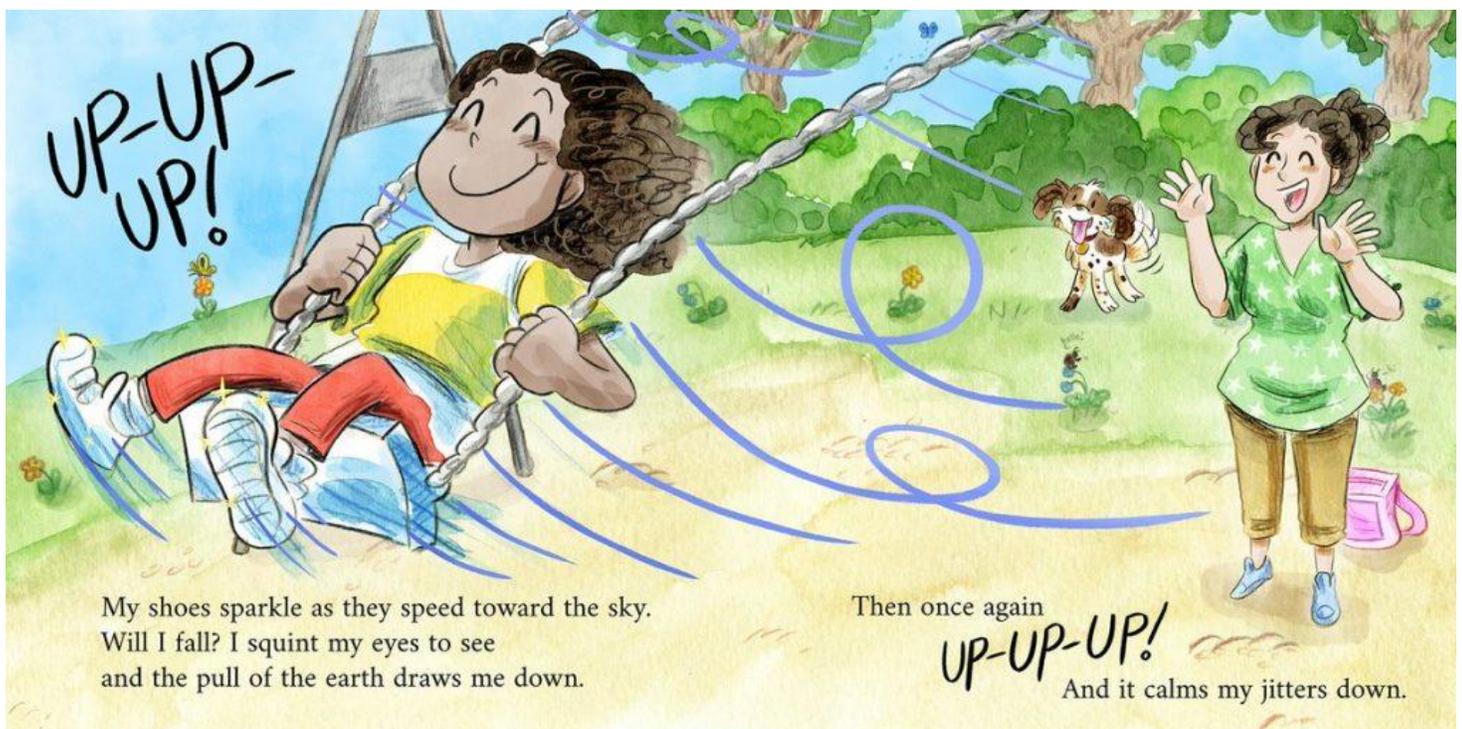
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## Wiggles, Stomps and Squeezes Calm My Jitters Down

**Wiggles, Stomps, and Squeezes Calm My Jitters Down** is a wonderful picture book written by **Lindsey Rowe Parker** and illustrated by Rebecca Burgess. This book takes you through the eccentric world of a young character who has sensory differences and feels the world in a different way than other children. The illustrations capture the feelings of the character perfectly!

**“I need a squish. I need a squeeze. I can’t explain why. I get jitters down deep inside and it makes me want to run.”** (Lindsey Rowe Parker)

Each line of the book describes what it feels like to be in this character’s body. From the steaming pile of mush to the feeling of getting dressed, the author describes the intensity of having sensory differences. Wherever this character goes, there are different challenges such as finding the right clothing and getting sand all over you! There are also great thrills such as swinging high, running fast, and stomping that calms the jitters down.



As a speech-language pathologist for over 20 years, I work with both children and adults with sensory differences. **Wiggles, Stomps, and Squeezes** gives a genuine glance into what it feels like to have sensory differences. For one child, that can be jumping on the trampoline. For another child, that can be getting deep sensory input with squeezes and hugs. We need to listen and observe our children to help them understand these differences and advocate for themselves. Part of what I do with children is giving them the language to label these feelings and needs. For example, if a child needs a squeeze, I model the language both verbally and with visual support, “I need a squeeze”. Also, teaching feelings is key since we want children to communicate how they feel (both positive and negative). If a child does not like getting sand on them, we want to teach them the word “uncomfortable”, “help”, “wash”, etc. These are important words to teach for communication. When they are swinging high and loving it, model the words “I love this!”, “This is fun”, “This feels great” “I feel excited!”

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Mel & Mary Pausch  
Jane White-Flanagan

**In Memory of Brian Trahey:**

Walter Alix  
Char Arnold  
ACEC of Indiana  
ACEC of Michigan  
Dan & Kathy Babcock  
Beth Bauer  
Kurt & Laura Beck  
Carrie & Chris Bowman  
Eric & Joni Burns  
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