Spring 2023 Horizons Newsletter

Autism Support of Michigan
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Special Announcement from ASM:

We are pleased to inform you that the name of our organization has been changed from Autism Society of Michigan to **Autism Support of Michigan (ASM)**.

We ensure you that this rebranding will not change our mission or availability to help those on the spectrum, their families and professionals that assist these individuals.

Our contact phone number, website, email and mailing addresses will remain the same. Please feel free to contact us at: 517-882-2800 or asminr@autism-mi.org with any questions, or concerns.

He Has "Mastered" This Skill at Home; Why Doesn't He Do It Anywhere Else?

by Amy Seeley

This article was contributed by Louise Southern of ASNC's Clinical and Training Department.

Long ago, I worked with a young child who could answer a variety of social questions such as "What's your name?" "Where do you live?" and "What is your mom's name?," but he could only answer the questions under certain conditions. When asked the questions at school by others, or when the phrasing of these questions was varied, he struggled to respond. What was happening here was a classic problem with generalization.

Generalization is the process of transferring skills or concepts taught in one set of conditions to other conditions. This includes transferring the skills into other settings, to other people, to other materials, formats, and to other activities. It often involves making connections between representations, responses, or things in order to see a broader, "big picture" concept. Generalizing skills from the teaching context to real-life applications is incredibly important. A skill "mastered" in the classroom or "mastered" in the home setting but not applied to real-life situations is not particularly functional. Despite its importance, the process of generalization is sometimes treated as an afterthought, rather than carefully considered when a new skill or response is first taught.

When we think of generalization, we most often think of generalizing a skill from one setting into other settings. For example, we might teach an individual how to ask for help when needed in the classroom. This skill of asking for help must then be transferred, or generalized, into the home, the community, and the workplace so that the student is able to ask for help in those settings as well.

Additionally, an individual with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may associate a certain skill with the person who taught him that skill. They may struggle to generalize that skill to other people. Using the same example as above, a student may learn to ask for help from one teacher but does not use the same skill when she needs help from other teachers, her supervisor at work, or her mother at home. She associates asking for help with one teacher. Thus, generalization must occur not only to other settings, but also to other people.

Furthermore, some with ASD may associate a particular response with a particular item, question, statement, exemplar/representation, or object. If the behavior of asking for help is associated with the question, "What do you need?" then the individual might not ask for help unless we first ask that question. In reality, this question is a prompt upon which the individual might become dependent. Generalized communication of "help" when needed is not likely to occur when this is the case. Furthermore, "help" is a concept that has many contexts and many variations (e.g., I need help when I am lost, I need help when I run out of paper, I need help when I don't understand the instructions, I need help when I am behind on a deadline, I may need help when I am sick). Thus, it may be necessary to support some individuals in connecting varied circumstances so that over time, they develop a working concept of help. Developing that concept of help can support the individual in correctly identifying when he might appropriately ask for help in new situations.

As professionals working with individuals with ASD, we must take systematically arranged and integrated steps to promote generalized responding across contexts. Here are some basic guidelines to consider:

- **Plan for generalization right from the start.** When you select a skill or concept to teach, consider the end goal, so you know what you are working toward. Is this skill relevant in more than one context?
- **Provide close monitoring, feedback, and prompting (prompting that is quickly and systematically faded) along the way.** Each new condition should be viewed as a new instructional context in which you carefully arrange opportunities for the individual to experience success practicing or displaying the new skill.
- **Teach the skill in a familiar setting with a familiar person and then practice the skill with multiple people under natural conditions.** Practice the skill with multiple people, such as other instructors,

peers, co-workers, and family members. The more variation, the better. Generalization involves the careful arrangement of increasingly novel and varied opportunities for the individual to experience success practicing or displaying the skill.

- **Practice the skill in multiple settings in which the skill would be naturally expected**. Some with ASD may form associations of who and where to engage in certain behaviors. Specifically, they may associate a certain skill with the location in which it was taught, rather than gaining a broader "big picture" perspective of the skill. Thus, teaching the student the skill in multiple settings is crucial.
- **Target the skill or concept using multiple materials, examples, stimuli, and representations that are naturally embedded in the environment.** When you are teaching a skill that initially involves particular materials, stimuli, or examples, it is important to quickly and systematically introduce multiple and varied representations of that concept. For example, if a child is learning to identify numerals, it is important in many cases to systematically introduce and teach various representations of the numeral (written, foam numbers, Play-Doh in shape of the number, on the board, in books, etc.). In this way, the child obtains a generalized concept of each number and can recognize it under various conditions. As another example, if you are teaching an individual to distinguish between safe pedestrian cross walk areas versus no-cross zones, you cannot simply target one intersection in that community and assume that he will then correctly discriminate between safe and unsafe areas. It would be important to teach the individual to recognize and respond to multiple versions of a crosswalk zone (and of course in multiple community locations).
- **Similarly, be sure to teach a wide variety of responses and give ample opportunities to practice those different responses.** This will support the individual in generating a response in new situations, because he or she may have a range of options from which to "pull," based on the situation. For example, if you are working with an individual on social initiations, there are a range of initiations that you might teach, such as "What are you doing?" "That looks fun," wave and smile, and "Can I try that too?".
- **Arrange reinforcing consequences that are likely to occur naturally in the generalized contexts.** When possible, it is important to arrange and deliver reinforcing consequences that are naturally related to the skill or response you want to see. When the consequence is one that is naturally connected to the behavior, it is more likely that this behavior will generalize to other contexts because those same contingencies between behavior and consequence naturally exist in those other contexts. For instance, if you are teaching the skill of asking for help, the reinforcing consequence that naturally relates to that behavior would be receiving the help that was requested.
- **Arrange reinforcement to occur intermittently (not every time), as it would in the natural environment.** In the "real world," social skills and other responses are not always reinforced. For instance, sometimes we start a conversation with someone, and it takes off. Other times we may try, and it fizzles quickly. So, while in the early stage of skill acquisition we may need to reinforce a behavior a skill every time it is performed, we need to quickly shift to a pattern of reinforcement that is more naturalistic, more intermittent, and somewhat randomized. This matches what we experience in natural contexts.
- **Review strategies directly before the individual is to perform a particular skill or response.** Practice, role-play, and rehearse with them. Review any visual supports (e.g., a visual support that identifies an array of appropriate topics of conversation; a set of reminders or rules; a social story) that have been developed in relation to this skill or behavior that you are working to generalize.

Reprinted from: www.autismsociety-nc.org

COMMON EXAMPLES OF STIMMING BEHAVIORS

- Lining up toys or rearranging objects
- Rocking back and forth
- Spinning in circles
- Flapping hands
- Repetitive or hard blinking
- Pacing
- Chewing or mouthing objects
- Flicking, snapping, tapping, or drumming fingers
- Cracking knuckles or other joints
- Humming or whistling
- Singing the same song repeatedly
- Clapping
- Spinning objects
- Clearing throat or coughing repetitively
- Opening and closing doors
- Flicking light switches on and off
- Clenching fists
- Tapping a pencil
- Twirling or pulling hair
- Walking on tiptoes
- Repeating words, phrases, or sounds
- Biting fingernails
- Moving or waving fingers in front of eyes
- Rubbing, scratching, or picking at skin
- Picking at scabs or sores
- Bouncing leg or foot
- Moving toes
- Sniffing things
- Head banging or dragging head on the floor
- Licking things
- Rubbing or stroking particular types of objects, fabrics, or surfaces
- Bouncing, jumping, or twirling
- Starting at rotating objects (e.g., ceiling fans)
- Punching
- Biting
- Staring at a visual

Chocolate-Pretzel Bird Nests

Ingredients:

- 1½ cups chocolate chips
- 3/4 cup smooth peanut butter
- 5 cups pretzel sticks, broken in pieces.

- 1 10-ounce bag candy coated chocolate eggs.
- 1 10-ounce bag jellybeans
- Green sprinkles

Preparation:

1.Cover a baking sheet with parchment paper or a silicone baking mat.

2.Pour chocolate chips and peanut butter into a microwave-safe bowl.

3.Microwave the mixture for 30-second intervals until melted, stirring between each interval.

4.Break the pretzel sticks into smaller pieces and place them into a large bowl.

5.Pour the chocolate mixture on top of the pretzels and toss the pretzels to coat completely.

6.Once pretzels are coated, drop 2 tablespoons at a time into a small pile on the prepared baking sheet. With your fingers, lightly mold the pile into a nest shape. Drop some green sprinkles onto the nests to create edible grass and leaves.

7.Place the baking sheet into the fridge for 15 minutes, or until the chocolate hardens. Once the nests have been set, take the sheet out of the fridge and fill the nests with chocolate eggs and jellybeans. Enjoy!

Reprinted from: www.today.com.

GUEST ESSAY – NYTIMES.COM

Temple Grandin: Society Is Failing Visual Thinkers, and That Hurts Us All

When I was younger, I believed everyone thought in realistic pictures the same way I did, with images clicking through my mind a little bit like PowerPoint slides or TikTok videos.

I had no idea that most people are more word centric than I am. For many, words, not pictures, shape thought. That's probably how our culture got to be so talky: Teachers lecture, religious leaders preach, politicians make speeches and we watch "talking heads" on TV. We call most of these people neurotypical — they develop along predictable lines and communicate, for the most part, verbally.

I was born in the late 1940s just as the diagnosis of autism was being applied to kids like me. I had no language until age 4 and was first diagnosed as brain damaged. Today, many people would say that I'm neurodivergent — a term that encompasses not only autism but also dyslexia, A.D.H.D. and other learning problems. The popularization of the term neurodivergence and society's growing understanding about the different ways that brains work are unquestionably positive developments for many individuals like me.

Still, many aspects of our society are not set up to allow visual thinkers — which so many of us neurodivergent folks are — to thrive. In fact, many aspects of our society seem set up specifically so we will fail. Schools force students into a one-size-fits-all curriculum. The workplace relies too much on résumés and G.P.A.s to assess candidates' worth. This must change not only because neurodivergent people, and all visual thinkers, deserve better but also because without a major shift in how we think about how we learn, American innovation will be stifled.

When I was 7 or 8, I spent hours tinkering and experimenting to figure out how to make parachutes, fashioned from old scarves, open more quickly each time I tossed them into the air. This required careful observation to determine how small design changes affected performance. My single-mindedness, verging on obsession, was probably because I was autistic. At the time I loved a book about famous inventors and their inventions. It impressed me that Thomas Edison and the Wright brothers were so single-minded in figuring out how to make a light bulb or an airplane. They spent lots of time obsessively perfecting their inventions. It is likely that some of the inventors in that book also were autistic.

We hear a great deal about the need to fix the infrastructure in this country, but we are too focused on the things that need improving and updating rather than the people who will be able to do the work. For over 25 years, I designed equipment to handle livestock and worked with the highly skilled people who built the equipment. When I look back at all the projects I designed for large companies, I estimate that 20 percent of the skilled welders and drafting technicians were either autistic, dyslexic or had A.D.H.D. I remember two people who had autism and held numerous patents for mechanical devices they invented and sold equipment to many companies. Our visual thinking skills were key to our success.

Today, we want our students to be well-rounded; we should think about making sure that the education we provide is as well. At the same time, I wager that the people who will fix America's infrastructure have spent hours and hours on one thing, whether it be Legos, violin or chess — hyper-focus is a classic sign of neurodivergent thinking and it's critical for innovation and invention.

I often get asked what I would do to improve both elementary and high school. The first step would be to put more of an emphasis on hands-on classes such as art, music, sewing, woodworking, cooking, theater, auto mechanics and welding. I would have hated school if the hands-on classes had been removed, as so many have been today. These classes also expose students — especially neurodivergent students — to skills that could become a career. Exposure is key. Too many students are growing up who have never used a tool. They are completely removed from the world of the practical.

Despite my accomplishments, if I were a young person today, I would have difficulty graduating from high school because I could not pass algebra. It was too abstract, with no visual correlations. This is true for many of today's students who get labeled as bad at math, students who might otherwise pass alternative math courses such as statistics that would also apply to real-life work situations. There is too much emphasis in school on testing and not enough on career outcomes. The fact that I failed the SAT in math prohibited me from getting into veterinary school, but today I am a university professor in animal sciences and I am invited to speak to groups of veterinarians to advise them on their work. The true measure of an education isn't what grades a student gets today, but where they are 10 years later.

I am often invited to give talks at corporations and government agencies, and the first thing I tell managers is that they need a neurodiverse work force. Complementary skills are the key to successful teams. We need the people who can build our trains and planes and internet, and the people who can make them run. Studies have shown that diverse teams will outperform homogeneous teams. If you've ever attended a meeting where nothing gets solved, it may be because there are too many people who think alike.

Today, Taiwan produces the majority of the world's highest tech silicon chips. Much of the specialized mechanical equipment used for processing meat is made in Holland and Germany. When I visited the Steve Jobs Theater in California, pre-Covid, I discovered that the glass walls were created by an Italian company. The massive carbon fiber roof that looks like a spaceship was imported from Dubai. The reason this equipment is coming from outside the United States can be traced in part to differences in educational systems. In Italy and the Netherlands, for instance, a student at about age 14 decides whether to go the university route or the vocational route. The vocational route is not looked down on or regarded as a lesser form of intelligence. And that's how it should be everywhere, because the skill sets of visual thinkers are essential to finding real-world solutions to society's many problems.

Temple Grandin is a professor of animal science at Colorado State University and the author of "Visual Thinking: The Hidden Gifts of People Who Think in Pictures, Patterns and Abstractions."

is Autism Acceptance & Awareness Month!

With Special Thanks To:

In Dedication to Sean, Elaine & Ara Ahlquist:
Mary Ahlquist

In Dedication to the Billings Family:
Melissa Burch

In Dedication to Eden Souser:
Grace Martucci

In Honor of Givanni Bugli:
Mark Kattula

In Honor of Emily Christine Ludwick:
Bob & Chris Piper

In Honor of Heather & her family
Ellen Kneller

In Honor of Zachary Fradkin:
Mark Zmyslowski

In Memory of Douglas Hicks:
Deborah Hicks & Sue Miller

In Memory of John Richard Jones:
Timothy LaVere

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Thank you!!!