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## Autism E-News

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## Autism and Literacy

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This article provides ideas and techniques that educators have found to be successful in teaching reading to children with autism. While this article is not a tutorial on how to teach reading or on the mechanics of learning to read there are numerous books and programs that are available. The TTACs across Virginia have numerous resources available for loan if you are interested in further study.

There seems to be confusion about whether or not children with autism are able to learn to read. While children with autism may have a difficult time with phonics instruction and comprehension they CAN learn to read. Furthermore, even in the absence of speaking and writing, children can learn to read and spell. Keep in mind that literacy covers a wide range of skills from exposure to print material to formal instruction.

### **Why spend the time to teach reading?**

The ability to read can help to increase functional communication. Information a child may not process and understand auditorally may be understood visually. Reading will increase knowledge as well as provide a leisure skill. Reading can also increase social skills by providing a common topic to talk about.

### **Why teach reading using whole words instead of phonics?**

Many children with autism have strengths in visual learning and decoding skills and are weak in auditory learning and comprehension. By modifying a reading program to focus on visual learning styles, children with autism can experience success. There is more than just a link between literacy and language. Language is the basis for literacy. Text that we read is oral language set down in visual mode. We cannot see spoken words, but we can see written words. For children with strong visual spatial skills, this can be their key to opening a locked door. One child with autism stated that learning to read was like finding water in the desert.

### **How early should literacy skills be introduced?**

Koppenhaver & Erickson (2003) conducted a study in North Carolina with preschool children with autism. They found that by providing a literacy rich environment for preschoolers with autism and severe communication impairments, the children increased their understanding and use of print materials and tools (without direct instruction, but in a tightly structured environment). By increasing natural opportunities for engagement with printed materials and writing tools, emergent literacy behaviors increased.

### **What types of literacy programs are available?**

*Comprehensive Literacy:* The most popular method currently practiced is a comprehensive literacy approach. Many educators are using a 4 Blocks framework developed by Patricia Cunningham. The Blocks include:

- Guided Reading – to enhance comprehension
- Self-Selected Reading – to build fluency
- Word Block – to develop spelling and word decoding
- Writing – to teach how to write

This method includes a phonics dimension, but does not focus on phonics. Exploring more on this topic may be useful. Many books and courses are available that teach the dynamics of the 4 Blocks framework.

*Pat Oelwein:* Pat Oelwein, a special education teacher, has authored, *“Teaching Reading to Children with Down Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Teachers”*. She outlines a program that has helped children with Down syndrome learn to read. Her approach centers on visual learning and it is an appropriate program for children with autism. The author first introduces semantically potent, meaningful words using flashcards, games, charts, and books. After the child has learned words, then individual letters and sounds are taught.

*Joanne Cafiero:* Although Dr. Cafiero has not yet published a book on literacy and autism, she is on the cutting edge of providing efficacy studies. Dr. Cafiero uses the 4 Blocks framework along with language experience stories. During the language experience, photographs are taken of student activities and later constructed into a book. The books are duplicated so that all students have their own copy during a guided reading activity. The target words in the language experience story are used in word games for additional practice. The book is duplicated; some copies are adapted, and made available to the students for self-selected reading. The target words are also used for writing journals and daily news. Preliminary results from research indicate that more literacy behaviors are exhibited when the student uses language experience books that are adapted with Picture Communication Symbols (PCS). When reading adapted books, the students also demonstrated a decrease in aberrant behaviors.

### **What do these three programs have in common?**

1. Instruction starts with words, not letters or sounds.
2. Instruction begins with words that have meaning and motivation for the student.
3. Instruction and materials are individualized for each student.
4. Games are incorporated into instruction and provide lots of practice when working

with words.

When setting up a reading program, remember that language made visual will enhance communication and that all children can learn to read. Keep reading material on the child's instructional level.

This article is only an overview about possible reading approaches. All children are different and what works for one child may or may not work for someone else. The important goal is to begin teaching every child to read, regardless of the barriers. If you hit a barrier, be creative and find another way to get to the goal.

### Getting Started

1. Look over your classroom and see if there are any modifications for making language visible and to encourage reading.
2. Try setting up an interactive bulletin board or word wall with a picture and word match activity.
3. Set up baskets or boxes with various levels of reading materials. You can include books, magazines, maps, menus, training booklets or just about anything that has words on it.
4. Set up a writing center with different types of writing tools (paper, pens, pencils, crayons, letter stamps, magnetic letters on cookie sheets, etc.)
5. Consider adapted books based on language experience of the classroom routine.
  - Take digital pictures of the daily activities
  - Insert the pictures into a PowerPoint slide show.
  - Write a sentence for each picture
  - Adapt with Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) to make language visible.
  - Print and Enjoy Reading!
6. Encourage students to use literacy materials in their dramatic play. For example, in the home area place food packages, appliance instructions, and menus.
7. Read aloud to your students and use pictures to insure comprehension.
8. For primary students that are progressing on a reading program, *Teach Me Language*, by Sabrina Freeman and Lorelei Dake is a language program that incorporates reading.

### Web-Based Resources

Adapted Books (over 502 downloadable adapted books using BoardMaker)  
[http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/boardmaker/adapted\\_library.asp](http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/boardmaker/adapted_library.asp)

Additional Information on Four Blocks Reading  
<http://www.readinglady.com>

Increasing Literacy Skills in Students with Disabilities: A Pictorial Approach  
<http://www.slatersoftware.com/WhitePaper.pdf>

Emergent Literacy: Assessment and Intervention Issues  
 Linda Watson, Ed.D., CCC-SLP  
<http://www.med.unc.edu/wrkunits/syllabus/distedu/childas/publish/handouts/emergent.pdf>

Opening Doors to Literacy for Children with Autism  
<http://www.vcu.edu/ttac/publications/PDF/TTACSummer.pdf>

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