Activities and Ideas for Teachers of Children with Autism

Created by

Laura A. Riffel, Ph.D.
caughtyoubeinggood@gmail.com
www.behaviordoctor.org

Activities for Children with Autism

Most children with autism can do more than they are being asked to do in the classroom. This section of the book is dedicated to the following two areas: 1) addressing the physical and emotional needs of the child with autism and 2) providing some academic restructuring ideas for the classroom teacher or parents working their children at home. The ideas are in alphabetical order. It jumps from social, ecological, and behavioral interventions to academic restructuring ideas; however, the alphabetical order will make it easier for you to find what you are looking for when you come back to this section.

Aggressive Behaviors

Behavior is communication; however, we can not let children with autism bite, scratch, kick, or hit themselves or others. Here are some redirections that have worked for other children:

Biting

Give the child a chewy tube or a chew tube on a keychain and direct them to bite this when they feel like biting. If they bite themselves put it where they will see it- keep it clipped to their belt loop. If they bite you or another adult keep it clipped to the adult target and direct them to bite that when they feel the need to bite. Reward them with praise and or a tangible when they bite the tube instead of themselves or others. This usually stems from a sensory need and when they get overloaded they go for the first thing.

Plopping

When a child drops to the floor and refuses to move we call that plopping. There could be two different functions to this but if it happens frequently and at no apparent time interval then it is probably for attention. Put a mat around the child so that no one can make eye contact with the child and sit them out. Act like it is no big deal to you that they are on the floor. This won't work if the function is escape. If they are trying to escape a particular activity try to sandwich the non-preferred activity between one that follows that is extremely rewarding. Use and First-Then schedule to show them what is coming next.

Pinching

Place a clothespin on the spot where the child usually pinches you. During times of non-stress direct them to pinch the clothespin. Reward them with praise or tangibles for pinching the clothespin. When they do forget and pinch you remind them to pinch the clothespin. Once they have mastered pinching the clothespin on you, move the clothespin to their own clothing and direct them to pinch that when they feel the need to pinch.

Tantrums

Children who have tantrums frequently, tend to build up momentum until they don't realize where they are in time or space. It's very hard to come back to reality once you have left the gravitational pull. We have used bean bag chairs to act as shock absorbers for the tantrum energy. The child is directed to sit in the beanbag and communicate a want or need. They are rewarded for this activity during a non-stress time. Once they are beginning the stages of tantrum they are taken to the beanbag and returned there every time they get up until they learn to stay in the beanbag during times of stress. Eventually, they are given a communication tool to let them communicate what it is that is bothering them. A blanket is near so the child can put the blanket over their head if they are on sensory overload and need to escape lights and sounds.

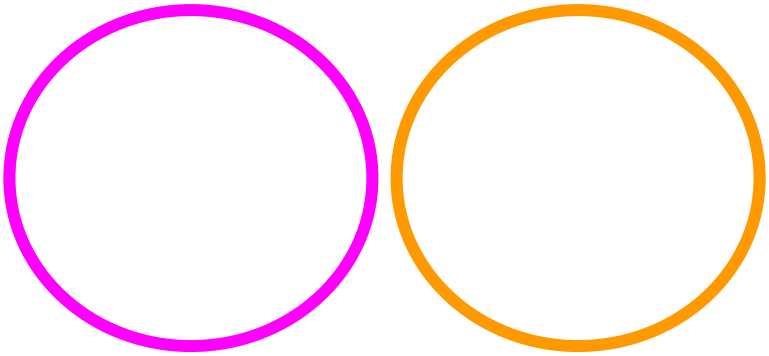
Categories (Teaching Classification Skills)

Even children with lower cognitive abilities can look for similarities and differences. I had students with severe intellectual disabilities who could put things in the proper place in a Venn diagram. Here's how I taught the concept of a Venn diagram:

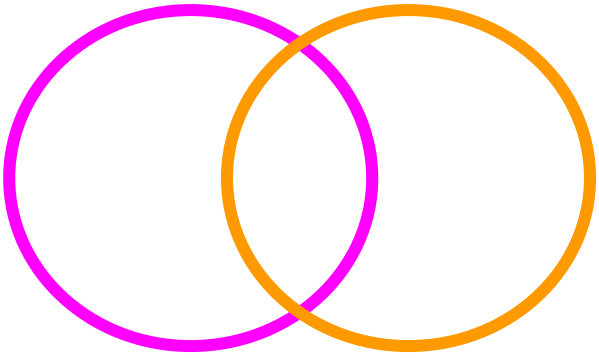
Hula Hoops:

I started with two hula hoops like this:

I would start with something simple like dark socks and white socks. Then I would move the hula hoops closer together so it looked like this:



And we would sort them again. Then I would add socks with light and dark patterns on them into the pile of socks. I would then move the hula hoops so they looked like this:



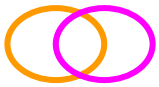
I would model that the patterned socks went in the middle because they were white and dark both. Once the students understood this concept I moved on to more complex differences and similarities.

Categories (Teaching Classification Skills) continued:

Here are some examples of things you can put into categories with hula hoops apart:

1. Plastic animals
   a. Animals with two legs - Animals with four legs
   b. Animals that fly - Animals that walk
   c. Animals that walk - Animals that swing through trees
2. Vehicles
   a. Vehicles with two wheels -Vehicles with four wheels
   b. Water vehicles – land vehicles
   c. Vehicles that fly- vehicles that go on the road
3. Dollhouse people
   a. Men - Women
   b. Girls - Boys
   c. Adults- Children

Examples of things you can put into categories with hula hoops together:



Hula Hoop 1	Intersection	Hula Hoop 2
Red and white socks	Red, white, and blue socks	Blue and white socks
Brown animals	Brown and white animals	White animals
Animals in the circus	Animals in circus and on a farm	Animals in a farm
Food from McDonalds (Plastic symbols) Wal-Mart has plastic replicas of both foods.	Food that you find at both places (Hamburgers, ice cream cones)	Food from Dairy Queen (plastic symbols) Wal-Mart has plastic replicas of both foods.

Gatekeeper- For Higher Functioning Students

1. Take sentence strips and write animals on them with a coordinating picture.
2. Give each child a card.
3. Stand with your arms straight out to the sides.
4. The children line up and approach you- you either tell them to pass or tell them to go sit down.
5. You only let children with certain characteristics through: (example: only animals with four legs)
6. The students have to look at who got through the gatekeeper and see what the classification was that you were looking for in your entry criteria.
7. This is a game that could be played with inclusion buddies who pair up one on one with the students.

Communication

First it is important to remember that all behavior is communication. Many times the very behaviors that we want to change are the ones that are occurring because the child desires to communicate a want or need to us but is unable to do so with speech. This section is on the dos and don'ts of communication. The don'ts are based on things we have seen being done that were not successful for the child and the do's are based on things we have seen have great success for children.

DON"T

1. Ø Talk about the child as if they were not there. Example: right in front of the child I've had a child psychologist say, "He's not very bright is he?" I beg to differ whose IQ is lower at the moment. I believe that we always make the assumption that the child understands all language spoken and unspoken in the room. My friend JT who is an adult with autism can pick up on the fact that someone is upset by the tone of their voice. He will tell them that they need to do the cactus which is his Yoga stance for calming himself. So take a chill pill and watch the tone of your voice as well as what is said in front of the child.
2. Ø Bark commands to the child as if they were a dog.
3. Ø Use vague concepts they don't understand. Be happy vs. Show me a smile.
4. Ø Forget to make eye contact with the child even if they aren't making it with you. They will glance your way at times and its best if your eyes are on them when you are talking to them.

DO

1. Use a lilt in your voice.
2. Smile when you talk to them.
3. Make eye contact whenever possible without forcing them to look at you.
4. Talk to them as if they understand every word you say.
5. Break requests into progressive steps: (make sure they have 10 consecutive correct responses at each level before you move to the next)
   a. One step commands first (stand here please)
   b. Two step commands (go get your shoes and bring them to me)
   c. Three step commands (go get a bowl, put it at the table, and sit down for snack)
6. Label all appropriate behavior:
   a. I like the way you are sitting up straight and tall.
   b. You walked down the hallway next to the wall so well.
   c. You did such a good job of keeping your hands at your sides.

Communication Devices

PECS

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) was developed in 1985 as a unique augmentative/ alternative training package that allows children and adults with autism and other communication deficits to initiate communication. First used at the Delaware Autistic Program, PECS has received worldwide recognition for focusing on the initiation component of communication. PECS does not require complex or expensive materials. It was created with educators, resident care providers and families in mind, and so it is readily used in a variety of settings.

PECS begins with teaching a student to exchange a picture of a desired item with a "teacher", who immediately honors the request. Verbal prompts are not used, thus building immediate initiation and avoiding prompt dependency. The system goes on to teach discrimination of symbols and then puts them all together in simple sentences. In the most advanced Phases, individuals are taught to comment and answer direct questions. Many preschoolers using PECS also begin developing speech.

The system has been successful with adolescents and adults who have a wide array of communicative, cognitive and physical difficulties. The foundation for the system is the PECS Training Manual, 2nd Edition, written by Lori Frost, MS, CCC/SLP and Andrew Bondy, PhD. The manual provides all of the necessary information to implement PECS effectively. It guides readers through the six phases of training and provides examples, helpful hints and templates for data and progress reporting. This training manual is recognized by professionals in the fields of communication and behavior analysis as an effective and practical guide to one of the most innovative systems available.

Information taken from http://www.pecs.com/page5.html

Big Mac Switches

Big Mac Switches are available at:

These switches can be pre-recorded with output voices so the child can communicate without his or her own voice.
Example: "I need a drink please" can be coded into a switch and the student can learn to hit the switch to get a drink. Once they learn to use the Big Mac well they can advance to higher levels of switches.

http://www.ablenetinc.com/productLocation.asp?page=/products.asp

Communication Devices continued:

Super-Talker

I really like the following because it is a step progression from 1 voice output all the way up to eight. As the student progresses the teacher can snap in a new grid and they go up to 2 then 4 then 8 different output choices that can be matched with pictures so the child can correlate the spoken word to the picture of the item.

SuperTalker™ progressive communicator
(also available at http://www.ablenetinc.com/productLocation.asp?page=/products.asp)

Step by Step

Another tool that can be used for teaching turn taking and other activities is a step by step. You can start off programming it to say: My turn- Your turn. The child is taught to press it when he begins and press it when he ends an activity that he is sharing with the teacher or another student. "My turn- Your turn" teaches the child reciprocity which is a very difficult task. Taka Perry, our clinic teacher uses it to say "work", "break" and the child uses it to request a break when working. If she doesn't want him to have a break yet she just presses "work" and he goes back to work until he presses it again.

Step-by-Step with levels

All the same great features of our Step-by-Step communicators, with the addition of levels. Levels are ideal for prerecording sequential messages to be used at specific times during the day, or for recording and storing sequential messages that are used on a regular basis. Prerecord grocery lists on level one, knock-knock jokes on level two and the events of the day or any other set of sequential messages on level three. There is no limit to the number of messages per level within the 75 seconds of recording time.

$159.00 (Also available at: http://www.ablenetinc.com/productLocation.asp?page=/products.asp)

Fecal Smearing

There are many reasons behind fecal smearing but everyone will agree that it is no joy to clean up and the worries about safety are of major issue.

Costume Pattern

A solution to this that we have discovered at the BIP office is to sew pajamas that zip up the back. We used a child's Halloween costume pattern (jumpsuit style) and just put the zipper up the back instead of the front, with elastic at the sleeves and bottom of the legs. If the child has a little Harry Houdini in him or her, the parents can pin under the top of the zipper with a safety pin. This keeps the child from maneuvering the zipper down.

Usually the fecal smearing occurs during the night time so these jumpsuits can be made from flannel and flame retardant materials available at stores like Wal-Mart. However, if they perform this activity during the day, the suits could be made from denim or any other durable material.

Simplicity Pattern #4871 would work – it can be made all one color and minus the tail, head, and neck piece.

Intervention

The back zip jumpsuit is only a deterrent to the activity so a replacement behavior needs to be taught. There are two likely reasons behind fecal smearing:

1) attention (the child gains a large amount of attention albeit negative, but attention just the same)
2) sensory input (the child has something with a unique texture and a uniquely strong smell.

If it is undifferentiated when you determine the function then you can employ both of the following techniques:

1) Provide absolutely no attention to the child. Clean up the mess without giving the child eye contact or any verbalizations. Be sure the give the child plenty of attention during times when they are using appropriate behavior. (Especially if they eliminate in the toilet)
2) Start the child on a sensory diet for smells and textures. This would include many different types of putty and squeeze balls and essential oils that have strong odors. Tea tree oil has a nice strong scent and is safe for them to smell.

Fidgets

All children fidget in their seats. We used to have three television stations to choose from and when we did watch television the commercials came at 15-18 minute intervals. Now children have 600 channels to choose from, commercials come in 11-13 minute increments, and they can flip constantly between commercials with their attention changing as rapidly as a click of the dial. Children with autism are no different than normally developing peers when it comes to short attention spans for work tasks. So here are some techniques to use with children with autism or any child who needs to get up and move:

DISC'O'SIT JUNIOR MFG:89.12 /12.800 S121986

This 12" diameter inflatable disc with smooth tactile bumps enables your client to work on postural training while seated or balance activities in seated or standing positions. Ideal for clients both young and old who require dynamic seated activities. Inflate by mouth to desired level. Colors may vary.

https://www.schoolspecialty.com/ordering/ECommerce;jsessionid=E1D18FED41551E183FB47F820460F008

Item #: 121986794 **Your Price: $19.99**

Pilates Ball Chair

These chairs are available at many office supply stores and usually cost around $89.00. They allow the student to sit and keep moving at the same time. The important consideration is whether or not they would self-stimulate by jumping on the ball chair. Each child is different so it would depend on their need for that sensory input.

Massage Chair

Of course this picture is a pipe dream but many shops like sharper image and even Kohl's etc. sell mats that go inside chairs that vibrate. I believe I bought one for my students about 5 years ago for $39.99 at a place similar to Marshall's Department Store. I hooked it to a switch so the student could activate it easily when they needed the sensory input.

Filtering Therapy

Children with autism like to filter the light. They sometimes do this by "wagging" their fingers in front of their face. You may see them pulling out handfuls of grass and dropping it into the wind in front of their face.

Here is a center you can make in your room that will give them some things you can let them filter with. Purchase several under the bed plastic storage boxes and beach toys like shovels, buckets, plastic shapes etc.

Here are some things to put in the boxes:

1. Rice
    a. You can color the rice by using food coloring and letting it dry over night spread out on wax paper before you put it in the box.
2. Dry Beans
3. Sand (However, custodians tend not to like sand because it scratches the finish on the floor)
4. Easter grass
5. Shredded paper
6. Cut off the strands from cheerleader pom-poms
7. Christmas tinsel

You can hide small toys in the boxes for the children to find. I used large plastic gold coins and hid them in the boxes under all these items and the children loved to pull them out and then hide them again.

Light Therapy

Children with autism are many times over stimulated by fluorescent lights. The lights give off a humming sound that many of them are unable to filter out.

A classroom closet can be cleaned out and turned into a light therapy room. Here's a good way to set it up.

Make sure the room is large enough for the child to enter. If a closet isn't available a large refrigerator box can be used. The walls or sides of the box should be painted black. The light source for the closet should be separate from the room lights. Put up any of the following all over the light sensory room or inside the box:

1. Glow in the dark stars, animals, bugs, etc.
2. CD disks hanging from the ceiling as they spin and reflect the lights
3. Christmas lights that blink and some that don't
4. Theme light shapes available throughout the year at places like Target
    a. Valentines
    b. Shamrocks
    c. Easter eggs
    d. Christmas shapes
5. Black lights
6. Bubble tubes
7. Fan mounted on a shelf above so it blows on the CD's causing them to move and spin.
8. Music hooked in to the same power source.

Everything should be plugged into a PowerLink control unit available from http://www.ablenetinc.com/cart/Browse.asp The child can hit a Mac switch to turn on each light individually. It should be set on a timer so that they have to depress the switch again to make the lights come on each time.

PowerLink® 3 control unit

The PowerLink® 3 control unit gives students the ability to control most electric appliances, tools and toys with single switches. PowerLink 3 control unit also gives students the power to take turns operating devices, activate two devices in sequence or experience the freedom of choice making when deciding between two activities.

Math Skills

Children with autism need to have one to one correspondence to understand that one means one object and two means two objects. Here are some ideas to teach that concept:

Games to play:

1. Magnetic numbers with toothpicks in baggies
    a. put a magnetic number in a baggie with 10 blunt end toothpicks. Have the child match the number of toothpicks to the number by picking only that amount out of the ten.
    b. Same as above but use pennies, tiny shells, plastic toys etc.
2. Lay out circles on the floor
    a. tell the child to step forward on three dots, then two more, then one more by spinning a large spinner showing the number you tell them to move
3. Hide items in the filtering boxes and show the student a number and ask them to find that many coins, shells, etc. that are hidden in the filtering boxes.
4. Put items in the water therapy tubs and show the student numbers and have them pick up that many
5. Give the child some tongs and some fuzzy pom-pom balls and have them use the tongs to pick up a certain number of pom-poms based on the number you show them. They could even have to put the pom-poms into divided sections in an egg carton. This does two things- small motor skills and one to one correspondence of numbers with objects.

Music Therapy

- Many people with diagnoses on the autism spectrum have natural musical talents; therefore, music therapy provides an opportunity for successful experiences.
- Music is processed in both hemispheres of the brain; therefore music can inspire cognitive functioning and may be used for remediation of some speech/language skills.
- Musical elements and structures offer a sense of security and familiarity in the music therapy setting, encouraging students to attempt new tasks within this predictable but compliant framework.
- Music offers concrete, multi-sensory stimulation (auditory, visual, and tactile). The rhythmic factor of music is very organizing for the sensory systems of individuals diagnosed with autism. As a result, auditory processing and other sensory-motor, perceptual/motor, gross and fine motor skills can be improved through music therapy.

Ideas for Music Therapy

Easter Eggs

Fill plastic Easter Eggs with about 1 T. of rice. Superglue the edges shut and they become easy to handle shakers that can be used to keep rhythm.

Scarves

Filmy scarves can be used to wave to the beat of the music.

Posters

Poster boards can become giant song boards using Velcro and Boardmaker pictures for repetitive songs like:
The farmer in the dell (changing pictures for who choose what)
Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of (water, Kool-Aid, ice tea, milk, etc.)
Mary had a little (lamb, dog, goat, cow etc.)

(The students can have matching song books at their desks so they can follow along)

Sixty Beats per Minute

Dr. Rachel Freeman at the University of Kansas researched what happened to heart rates just prior to aggressive behaviors and self-injurious behaviors for children with disabilities.

Sorting

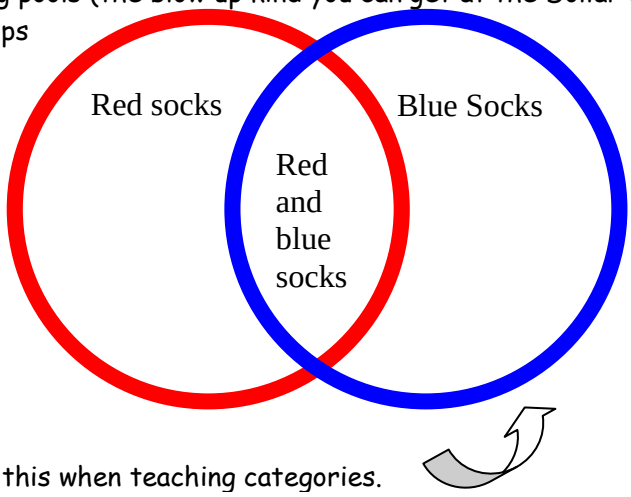
It's sad to see children with autism sorting the same thing day after day. Sometimes 18 year olds are still sorting the same red, yellow, and blue bears they were sorting when they were four years old.

If you want them to sort here are some ideas of other things to sort:

1. socks
2. laundry by colors (start a laundry business in the school and sort, wash, and fold laundry for donations that you spend on class treats)
3. clothespins
4. samples of shampoo, conditioner, and lotion from hotels
5. silverware
6. canned goods
7. hair bows
8. hot wheel cars
9. books- small books vs. big books
10. pencils vs. pens
11. balls- (ping pong, tennis, koosh, racquetball)
12. Go down to the supply closet and see if there are markers or other supplies that the secretary would like sorted- there will be a social pay off when the job is finished.

For sorting activities you can use the following containers:

1. muffin tins
2. egg cartons
3. divided plates
4. laundry baskets
5. small plastic baskets
6. butter tubs
7. swimming pools (the blow up kind you can get at the Dollar Store)
8. Hula hoops



See more about this when teaching categories.

Water Therapy

Many children with autism love to explore in the water. You don't have to purchase a water play table that costs hundreds of dollars. An 88cent dish pan from Wal-Mart will do just as well and is much more portable. Here are some things you can put in water:

Floating toys:

1. plastic boats
2. plastic lids from Quick Trip cups
3. tiny plastic pickle and relish tubs from Quiznos Sandwich shop
4. plastic toys from McDonald's Happy Meals
5. gumball machine plastic domes that toys came inside
6. balls from the sensory ball center or a few balls from the ball pit at McDonalds- they will probably give you a few if you ask.
7. bobbers from fishing
8. ice cubes
9. soap or bubbles

Sinking toys:

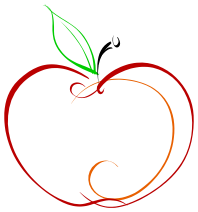
1. sinkers from fishing
2. marbles
3. silverware
4. water balloons
5. balloons filled with sand and tied on the ends
6. water wiggles

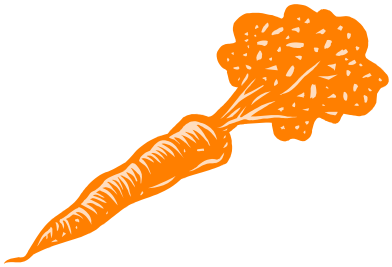
Compare and Contrast Games:
What sinks and what floats:

1. carrots and apples
2. koosh balls and racquetballs
3. ping pong balls and marbles

Ask them to point to the one they think will float. You could have Boardmaker pictures and ask them to choose which one they think will float. Put that into a sentence strip that says:

Bo thinks ___apples____ will float.
Perry thinks –carrots--- will float.





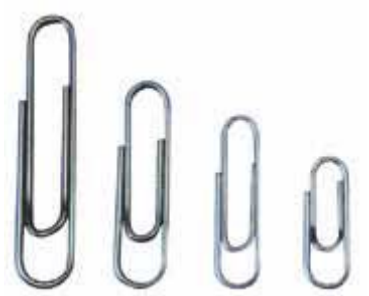
Counting Behaviors:

Sometimes we are dealing with hundreds of a behavior in a day. It is very difficult to stop what we are doing to record the number of times a behavior occurs. I worked with a young man who interrupted his teacher 63 times in 30 minutes; imagine collecting that data for a whole day.

We want to know baseline behaviors so we want to count how often a behavior occurs. It's too much to write it down every time when it is occurring. Using a baseball pitch counter works great because it's easy to hold on to and it goes up very high in numbers. Make sure you don't get the umpire clicker because it only goes to 4.

As you can see, this one goes up to the thousands. They cost around $7.95-$12.95.

You can put pot holder loops on one arm and move them to the other one when a behavior occurs if you are trying to count.



Some people move paper clips from one pocket to another to count behaviors.

Protection for You:

Sometimes our children with autism strike out at the ones that are around them. Many times the function of the behavior is to get attention. When a child bites you or scratches you, it is very hard not to react. For this reason, we recommend wearing padding when working with children who are at this stage. Once they learn there is no payoff for the behavior it will dissipate. These are karate arm pads available from a sporting goods store.

There is space for your fingers to come out through the opening on the small end. They are about one inch thick with padding. You can wear them under your clothes.

For kids who like the reaction they get when they pinch, put a clothespin on the place where they typically like to pinch you. For example, the back of the arm seems to be a spot they like. I put a clothespin on my clothing in that area. When they start to pinch me, I redirect them to pinch the clothespin and then give them praise for pinching the clothespin and not me. They get attention for doing something more appropriate. Eventually, you can fade the clothespin to their clothing and they will pinch it when they feel the need to pinch.

Tactile:

I remember when my daughter was little, we would start out the door in the morning and if the seam on her socks were not just right she would sit down on the floor and take off her shoes, her socks, and anything else that was bothering her. She does not have autism but she was tactile sensitive to certain things. She is in her twenties now and still prefers flip-flop shoes to any other kind.

Many children with autism feel an overwhelming sensation when someone tries to touch them. It is not that they do not want to be touched but touching causes their nervous system to go on overload. Richer and Zappella (1989) suggested that this avoidance was due to anger or fear, but many adults with autism such as Temple Grandin and others have reported that it is not anger or fear, rather it is too much information coming in which is confusing and quite overwhelming. Know what it is like when your nose itches and you can not scratch it? Small itches and scratches like that are torturous to children with autism. Clothing that feels scratchy feels more like abrasive sand paper rubbing skin raw (Grandin, 2000). Think about how you felt the last time you worse something uncomfortable to work (pants too tight, material that was itchy, pantyhose on backwards). You were able to tell yourself that as soon as you had a chance you would change whatever was offensive; children with autism cannot tell themselves that they can change their clothes. I have worked with children who only wanted to wear soft cotton or some liked wearing a leotard and tights under their clothes so that their clothes did not touch their body. It makes restroom time more difficult; however, if it makes the child more comfortable in their own skin, then it is worth the effort.

Some therapists work on tactile issues by gently applying tactile and vestibular stimulation (Ayres, 1979; King, 1989). This is designed to desensitize the tactile system. Hospital scrub brushes can be used to rub on the skin. Some therapists have found that doing this while the child is swinging is more tolerable to the child. Some children have increased speech, eye contact, and ability to show affection during this type of therapy. Hypersensitivity to touch can be desensitized through firmly but gently caressing a child with various cloth textures (Ayres, 1979). The pressure must be firm enough to arouse deep pressure receptors. Avoid touches that are very light because they increase arousal and excite the nervous system.

Ray et al. (1988) found that a non-verbal child will often initiate speech sounds while he or she is swinging in a swing. Swinging stimulates the vestibular system and the engages the cerebellum. I have found that children bouncing on a small indoor trampoline will initiate singing, or speech while bouncing. Bhatara et al. (1981) discovered that spinning in a chair twice a week helps reduce hyperactivity. Research also indicates that vigorous aerobic exercise reduces some target behaviors (Elliot et al. 1994).

Stimulation that is called deep pressure is also calming (Ayres, 1979; King, 1989) This can be done by rolling a child up in an exercise mat and then rolling a weighted ball over the mat or rolling the mat slowly around the room. Many children with autism will seek