

# ADDRESSING AUTISM IN THE CLASSROOM WITH A COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL APPROACH

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*For students with Autism, social interactions present both a behavioral and a social struggle that can lead to increased anxiety. Because their impaired communication skills affects their speech, others have difficulty understanding them, and contributing to their inability to understand appropriate speaking times. Students with autism are protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which establishes procedures assuring that children with disabilities are educated with those who are not disabled to the maximum extent possible. Cognitive behavioral therapy includes several techniques that allow students with High-Functioning autism to improve social and behavioral skills. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy uses goal-oriented and systematic procedures to address inadequate adaptation of behaviors and cognitive processes. The following will address strategies for teachers to foster the skills of their students through a cognitive-behavior approach.*

Imagine if social language was like a foreign language. You can see someone's facial expression changing but you have no idea why or what it means. You do not know how to react or what to say. You find yourself focusing on the fan spinning or the hand of the clock ticking rather than anything else that is going on around you. When asked to explain the answer on your paper, you struggle to recall any of the steps that you took to get it. Forming sentences is always a challenge for you, fumbling with your thoughts and getting stuck on the word that you keep saying over and over. When you finally

say the sentence you don't know what to do next. Their response does not make sense, you don't have any desire to keep talking to them. So you back away into your own world that is much more safe and comfortable. Maybe it is thinking about trains or reciting baseball statistics, but it's not what the teacher is saying and it is not what your peers are saying. You see them looking at you but you do not want to look back, afraid to make eye contact. You do not laugh or smile because what they are saying is not funny and it does not make you happy.

These are common and daily strug-

gles that students with Autism face. Children with Autism are on a spectrum of severity. It is often that students with Autism have fairly normal cognitive functioning. However, it is their social impairments that can really hold them back in the classroom. Unable to adapt to social settings, or have positive social interactions students with Autism can face great anxiety in social climates.

### Characteristics of Autism

In order to begin investigating teaching methods for students with Autism, it is first important to understand the characteristics of the disorder. Individuals with autism look different across the spectrum. They range from being severely impaired, which can affect their speech and motor skills, to high functioning, which mainly affects their ability to communicate and interact socially with their peers. One core characteristic that is true across the entire spectrum is impaired social interactions (State & Kern, 2012). These individuals fail to respond to social situations in an appropriate manner due to their inability to pick up on social cues, or “read” others. They do not appropriately take turns during conversations and tend to obsess over one certain subject matter or object, giving them a limited range of topics to discuss with others (O’Connor & Stichter, 2011). Because of this challenge, they struggle in relating to their peers and engaging in social interactions, including important interactions that may occur within a classroom setting. Their impaired communication skills give them difficulty with pragmatics (understanding language in a social context), causing them to speak in ways that are challenging for others to understand, or causing them to interrupt at inappropriate times during a discussion (State & Kern, 2012). It is clear that these characteristics are not condu-

cive to a general education classroom environment. Therefore, it is important to seek out methods of teaching that will foster social growth and positive learning experiences for students with autism.

### Autism in Schools

While Autism affects individuals differently, it is evident that their differences will manifest especially in the classroom. This is indicative of the need for an alternative teaching method for students with Autism. Alternative resources and experiences will be important for students with Autism, but it is also very important that these students be included in the general education setting as much as possible. Autism is included under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Under the IDEA, each state is required to establish certain procedures in regards to educating children with disabilities, including an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Hulett, 2009). An IEP is developed to ensure that the child is provided a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. This means that to the maximum extent possible, these children are to be educated with their peers who are not disabled. Special education, separate schooling, or any other removal from the general education classroom should only occur when the education services provided cannot be achieved satisfactorily due to the nature or severity of the disability (Hulett, 2009).

### Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Approach

In order to ensure the best setting and least restrictive environment for students, a carefully studied teaching strategy must be selected. The social deficits associated with Autism make it difficult for students with Autism

to comfortably acclimate into the classroom setting. One approach is a cognitive-behavioral strategy, relying on the principle that in order to reconstruct behaviors that are more conducive to the classroom setting, students’ thoughts and anxiety triggers must first be addressed (Rotheram-Fuller & MacMullen, 2011). In this strategy it is important to understand not only how the students are acting, but also the thoughts that led to these actions. By gaining this understanding, educators can help Autistic students with social interactions. Positive social and emotional communication will make learning all the more possible and beneficial in a general education setting. There are a variety of approaches that implement cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) as a means of teaching strategy. The six main components of CBT are psychoeducation, somatic managements, cognitive reconstructing, problem solving, and exposure and relapse prevention (Rotheram-Fuller & MacMullen, 2011).

The first step to CBT is psychoeducation. It is first and foremost important to educate the students on what a diagnosis of Autism entails. It is helpful for these students to know and understand that they are not alone at that everyone may become nervous in certain situations. This acceptance and understanding is very important in providing students with meta-cognitive skills. Gaining an understanding of themselves is the first and essential step to the cognitive-behavioral approach (Rotheram-Fuller & MacMullen, 2011).

The next aspect to this approach is somatic management. For many students with Autism, many symptoms of anxiety are often comorbid to their other symptoms. Social situations, especially, will cause severe anxiety in students with Autism. This is why an aspect of this method relies on relaxation

techniques in attempts to alleviate some of the stress that children will face in challenging social situations. Another important part of this approach is having students identify triggers that are causing their stress and, ultimately, their behavioral problems. This is another practice that will foster metacognitive awareness within students and lead to a greater understanding of how they think (Rotheram-Fuller & MacMullen, 2011).

Once an understanding of students’ Autistic thoughts has been established, the method of cognitive reconstructing can be approached. After students are aware of their cognitions they can replace them with more adaptive thinking. This mentality can better ease them into social settings and make them feel more in control of their environment. With more effective conditions, it is more likely that students will produce positive thoughts and having a more overall positive outlook. Different effective strategies can be implemented for this cognitive reconstructing to occur (Rotheram-Fuller & MacMullen, 2011).

A proven effective strategy to improve social skills of an individual with Autism, is self-management (State & Kern, 2012). Self-management is a strategy that teaches individuals how to control or regulate their own behavior. It is important that a self-management intervention consists of two or more strategies including self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement. Self-monitoring is important because it is used by the individual to understand how frequently a target behavior occurred. Along with self-monitoring, self-evaluation allows for the individual to evaluate their actions and behaviors, and decide how appropriate they are. Lastly, self-reinforcement allows for individuals to reward themselves when they exhibit appropriate behaviors and meet their goals.

Studies have found that self-management interventions done in the past have been successful in improving social interactions, such as initiations and appropriate responses. Video modeling is a specific technique of self-management used to improve social skills, including conversational skills (State & Kern, 2012). Video modeling involves the individual watching a video of a peer or an adult modeling appropriate and desirable behavior. In this technique, it is important that the video does not include undesirable behaviors because viewing such behaviors may inhibit the development of positive social skills in the individual.

A variation of video modeling is video feedback, which allows for self-evaluation to be done through reviewing the appropriateness of the individual's own behaviors. This technique is beneficial because the individuals are given the opportunity to observe themselves in a natural context. Additionally it allows for the social behavior to be addressed without interrupting the social interaction. Video modeling, in addition to video feedback, results in the greatest improvements in children and adolescents (State & Kern, 2012).

Students with Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have poor problem-solving skills and have been shown to generate lower-quality solutions to problems than those generated by their peers (O'Connor & Stichter, 2011). The Autistic students are unable to judge the quality of these responses, which results in repeated behaviors in the future. These problems occur because of their inability to focus on relevant information lack of consideration for the outcomes of their actions. An important aspect of (CBT) is to increase problem-solving skills and to use strategies that help these individuals in new situations through exposure. Effective prob-

lem-solving strategies should include the skills used in analyzing situations, thinking of solutions, and monitoring the quality of the solution (O'Connor & Stichter, 2011). If the individuals become successful in problem-solving skills, this becomes a form of positive reinforcement and will increase desired behaviors in future situations as well as increase their desire to put themselves in social situations.

The willingness of individuals with Autism to put themselves in social situations leads into the next aspects of CBT: exposure and relapse prevention. Because the triggers of anxiety have been previously identified, it can lead to a greater understanding of how to expose students to these situations. Exposure should be gradual, meaning that students should be slowly introduced to stress and not overwhelmed by it. The exposure should also be controlled so it is effective in the student's learning. Because these situations are stressful for students with Autism, they constantly avoid them. Once students are gradually exposed to situations and their anxiety decreases, they realize that they are capable of appropriately handling the situation and this acts as a reinforcement. Reinforcement increases the likelihood that behaviors will occur again. Once more positive experiences are reinforced it serves as relapse prevention and will increase the amount of appropriate responses and behaviors (Rotheram-Fuller & MacMullen, 2011).

Several studies have reported anxiety as a major role in the symptoms of ASD. Cognitive behavioral therapy has most commonly been used in addressing anxiety and has been proven effective because it helps decrease the anxiety that causes some of the ASD symptoms of impaired social interactions (Wood et al., 2009). The reduction of anxiety

felt by children with ASD decreases the likelihood of avoiding social interactions, as well as the repetitive behaviors they use to regulate their emotions.

### Conclusion

Improving social interactions will facilitate many aspects of the lives of students with Autism spectrum disorder. By using cognitive behavioral approaches, teachers can help these students better acclimate into an inclusive classroom setting. This approach relies on the idea that in order to successfully manage appropriate behaviors, the thoughts behind the actions should first be addressed. There are various approaches that are a part of cognitive behavioral therapy. The first approach involves helping students with Autism better understand their disorder and the symptoms that are involved. This can help students gain insight into their own thinking and gain metacognitive skills. The next step is to assist the students in identifying what triggers their anxiety in social situations, and to make strides to alleviate some of that stress through somatic management. Cognitive reconstructing can take place through a variety of methods but ideally this approach will reshape maladaptive thoughts, ultimately leading to more adaptive behavior. Once a greater understanding of cognitions has been gained, students can practice problem-solving strategies and apply these to new situations. The process of exposure should be gradual and carefully allotted. When students apply successful problem solving methods, their behaviors are reinforced by the positive outcome of the situations. This increases the likelihood of repeating the behavior and serves as relapse prevention. These techniques are very beneficial toward preparing students with Autism for positive social experiences. These experiences will ultimately

better their learning experiences and their interactions, both in and out of the classroom.

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