

Teacher Toolbox



Teacher Toolbox – September 2023

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Classroom “Fixer-Upper” – Setting your classroom up for success!

Now that the first day of school has passed, your schedule is up and running, and you are starting to get an idea of what your students' needs are, you can tackle your classroom setup! Wait... what? Did I hear you say, “But I already set up my classroom!!!” That's okay... it's not “*Demo Day*”! There's no need to grab your sledgehammer and start over. Just consider the following points as you ask yourself, “Is my classroom designed to foster calmness or chaos?”

Regardless of students' ages or ability levels, mindful classroom setup can increase skill acquisition and independence while simultaneously lowering stress and anxiety. Research has consistently shown that students in organized and structured classrooms demonstrate more on-task behavior and higher academic achievement. Establishing a supportive classroom environment for all students is an important component to consider when planning and implementing instruction, especially for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Whether students are served in general education settings, self-contained settings, or any combination of locations, an organized classroom is key.

Individuals with ASD often have impaired concentration, sensory processing differences, and the need for “sameness”, which can make the educational environment especially challenging. Participation may be limited due to a student not understanding what is expected of him/her in a specific area of the classroom or during an instructional activity. An organized classroom with defined areas and spaces decreases anxiety and increases predictability, which leads to decreased challenging behaviors and increased positive outcomes. The TEACCH method, which stands for the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children method, was specifically developed for children with autism spectrum disorder at the University of North Carolina by Dr. Eric Schopler in 1972 (<https://teacch.com/>). The TEACCH method relies on the core principles of visual learning, sometimes called Structured Teaching: the organization of the physical environment, a predictable sequence of activities, visual schedules, routines and flexibility, work/activity systems, and visually structured activities (check out this video example <https://youtu.be/vkymZzmg4jw>).

Structured teaching develops teaching strategies and changes the environment to make the world more meaningful for all students, especially for students with unique needs. These structures can be utilized at all developmental levels and do not limit the curriculum. The calm, predictable and familiar environment reduces the potential for anxiety and challenging behaviors. Examine your current classroom space and consider the following questions:

1. Have I created physical and visual boundaries to define my classroom areas and expectations?

Kara Hume from the Indiana Resource Center for Autism explains, "Segmenting the environment helps clarify the expectations. Once students are taught expected behaviors for each space in the classroom, the distinct areas become powerful cues for appropriate behavior." Providing physical and visual boundaries to students provides them with the following critical information: where each area begins/ends, where they should be for each activity, and what activity will be occurring in that area at that time. When taught and routinely expected and reinforced, these visual boundaries are designed to exaggerate the cues about the classroom spaces and expectations, which promotes routine, order, and a calm atmosphere for all students.



Colored placemats indicate that snack is the current activity occurring at the table (which is used for a variety of activities throughout the day).



A tabletop study carrel is used to indicate that this student is to complete tasks independently. It is removed when the teacher is providing instruction or the student is working with a group.

2. Have I minimized auditory and visual distractions?

Let's face it... some classrooms look like "Teachers Pay Teachers" or Lakeshore have vomited all over the walls! Too many objects and pictures plastered on every surface can serve as visual distractions for children who lack the underlying abilities to filter out "unnecessary" visual information. When too much sensory information is presented (auditory, visual, etc.), some students' processing may slow down, or if overloaded, may stop completely. Teachers may consider reducing the amount of stimuli in the classroom, or may decide to hang the information out of the field of vision of the most distractible students (i.e., behind the students, in a center area that doesn't require as much attention or focus). Putting all extraneous materials and supplies out of sight (e.g., in cabinets, boxes, drawers or folders) and covering open shelves or computer screens with fabric or paper may help students focus on relevant information, increasing their attention to the task at hand.



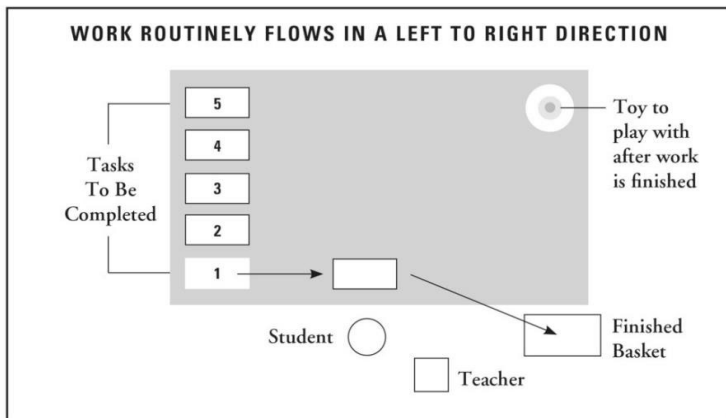
A piece of fabric folds down to cover the contents of the shelf.



A sheet covers a computer not currently in use.

3. Have I created effective work systems for students with more significant needs?

Consider placing a work system for some students to use during independent work time. It is a systematic and organized presentation of tasks and materials that visually communicates at least four pieces of information to the student: The tasks/steps the student is supposed to do, how many tasks/steps there are to be completed, how the student knows he/she is finished, and what to do when they are finished. Work systems are most effective when used consistently during independent work time each day and are designed to match the student's developmental level, strengths, needs, and interests. Tasks used in independent work areas are related to the student's individual goals and objectives, reflect previously mastered skills, and are rotated frequently to increase engagement and task endurance/completion.



- Work bins or task baskets are set up with a schedule that tells the worker what to do first and next
- Visual at the end indicating what to do when finished

There are many more classroom considerations that may decrease challenging behaviors and increase positive outcomes. If you'd like to hear more about this topic, register for the Autism Toolbox Series: "Classroom Fixer Upper" presentation on September 14th, 2023, for an in-depth workshop that will explore many additional ways to achieve a calm and effective learning environment, by utilizing the current resources you have. In the meantime, remember to implement classroom changes slowly, explain them to students thoroughly, and reinforce the new routines frequently. Over time, you will see a few small changes can produce many positive results!

Click link to register:

<https://www.ces.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Autism-Spectrum-Disorders-ASD-Toolbox-Series-9.14.23.pdf>



References

Hume, K. (2007). Clean Up Your Act! Creating an Organized Classroom Environment for Students on the Spectrum. *The Reporter* 13(1), 15-18.

<https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/asd-teacch-method-works/>

<https://teacch.com/>