Creating Environments to Support Young Children with Autism



The early childhood environment acts as a powerful second teacher. Every physical, visual, and temporal choice fosters engagement, independence, and learning. For young children with autism, each element must be intentionally planned to help them succeed. The classroom itself can show the children where to go, what to do, and when to do it from the moment they enter until the time they leave. Predictable environments, visual supports, visual schedules and routines, supported transitions, and opportunities for choice making helps autistic children feel safe, secure, and in their control. That sense of security is what lets a child settle in and learn.

Modify the Learning Envirnment

In a thoughtfully designed space, every visible item has a purpose and each element makes the environment predictable and concrete. Arrange the furniture and establish a classroom flow to help young learners understand expectations. Use low bookshelves, dividers, rugs, and wide walkways between activity zones to clearly define areas for large group, small group, and centers. Within each learning center or area, the materials should convey what activity takes place there:

- **Large Group Area**: Carpet squares or a circle rug to define personal space during whole-group instruction.
- **Small Group Area**: A small table with chairs and organized bins of materials for teacher-led or child-led learning.
- **Center Areas**: Specific items tailored to each center (e.g., a play kitchen for dramatic play, a shelf of blocks for construction, or an easel with paints for arts and crafts).

Early childhood classrooms are often filled with a variety of bright visual elements and learning materials. To minimize distractions and reduce visual overstimulation for young children with autism:

- Hide unused materials in closed cabinets, lidded bins, or behind curtains
- Keep wall décor minimal and purposeful

Visual Supports

Spoken words are fleeting and can take additional time to process. Visuals enhance the classroom environment by providing a concrete and predictable representation of what the children hear. Providing clear visual supports promotes learning and independence. Visual supports that are intentionally planned, directly taught, and reinforced can:

- Provide concrete, permanent reminders
- Create guidance with visual aids
- Reduce the need for repeated verbal directions
- Prevent prompt dependency

Common visual supports include:

- First/then board: Shows what to do first and what to do next, to support transitions,routines, or any new skill with steps
- Hygiene routines: Step-by-step visuals for daily self-care tasks, such as handwashingand toileting
- Rules and expectations: Area-specific visuals that show how to interact with peers and engage with materials in learning spaces like the block area, reading corner, or art table

Schedules and Routines

Young children with autism learn best when expectations are clear, visible, predictable, and consistent. Visual schedules provide clarity around the timing, sequence, and duration of activities throughout the school day, showing children what is happening and when. Daily routines can be further supported with mini-schedules or **task analyses**, which break complex activities into manageable steps required to complete them. Incorporate the following tools to support task completion and independence:

Developmental readiness matters! Meet children where they are and support the steps they cannot manage alone.

- **Class-wide visual schedules**: Post the daily sequence of activities at the children's eye level. Reference the schedule frequently throughout the day and during transitions to build predictability and a sense of security.
- **Individualized schedules**: Use physical objects, real photos, or icons with text to tailor daily schedules to each child's unique needs and to support their understanding.
- **Routine visual supports**: Break everyday classroom activities (such as circle time) and self-care tasks (handwashing, cleaning up, or lining up) into step-by-step guides to build confidence and independence.

Transitions

A transition is the time between different activities and the process of moving from one task or location to another. Transitions often require cognitive flexibility and navigating a lot of sensory input. Young autistic children benefit from learning the steps of important transitions sequentially and systematically. Supporting transitions can be fun, creative, and incorporate a child's strengths using strategies such as:

- A consistent cue that a change is coming, like a clean-up song or a chime children have been taught to recognize.
- A visual countdown that makes "almost done" something a child can see.
- "All done" and "waiting" supports, like a labeled bin for finished work or a waiting mat, that turn abstract ideas like "it's over" into something concrete.

Providing Choices

"No" is a valid choice. Honoring a child's refusal or decline is one of the most powerful ways to show that their voice and choice matters.

Because young autistic children often process information and communicate preferences in unique ways, they may need support to learn choice-making skills. Choice making involves considering different options, making a decision, and then communicating that choice. A visual choice board shows a child what the options are and provides a concrete way for them to indicate their preference. A choice board may include:

- What to do, like which center to visit or which activity to start first.
- What to eat or drink, like choosing between two snack options.
- What to engage with, like which book to read or which sensory activity to try.
- Who to be with, like choosing a partner or where to sit.

Resources

- Early Child Learning Path: Environment Login Required
- Early Childhood Family Resources
- Factsheet: Early Childhood Preference Assessments

Connect with ACE:

- Visit the ACE Website & Early Childhood Website
- Sign up for the ACE Mail List
- Follow ACE on: Facebook & Instagram



For additional information, visit the ACE website:
www.vcuautismcenter.org

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