

AUTISM AND COMMUNICATION

STORY-BASED LESSONS TO PROMOTE COMMUNICATION SKILLS, READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS, AND WRITING SKILLS

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT AUTISM AND READING AND WRITING SKILLS?

The core characteristics of autism include differences with social communication and restricted interests and/or repetitive patterns of behavior. Academically, reading skills can vary for autistic children. Many autistic individuals have average to above-average word reading and comprehension abilities. Other autistic individuals may struggle with one or both of those areas. Some autistic children may have difficulty with understanding figurative language (e.g., idioms, hyperbole, metaphors), determining the meaning of an unknown word or phrase, or considering a character's thoughts or feelings while reading. Approximately 65% of school-aged children with autism have difficulties with reading comprehension (Davidson 2021). Because of this, understanding reading and writing skills is critical for educational team members serving those with autism.

All autistic children, including those who need significant academic support, can learn to gain meaning from text and should receive quality instruction in the five areas of reading: phonological awareness, phonics, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary. Reading is an important life skill beyond the classroom. Reading promotes functional independence and can be a valuable leisure skill. For these reasons, it is essential that educational teams consider ways to enhance reading

instruction to ensure it is appropriate for all learners. Speech-language pathologists have specialized knowledge in processes through which learners decode and comprehend due to their expertise in language, and can be valuable team members when planning for and addressing students' reading and writing needs.

WHAT ARE STORY-BASED LESSONS?

A story-based lesson, sometimes called a shared story, is a procedure that promotes gaining meaning from text read independently or read aloud by another person. When participating in a story-based lesson, a student is exposed to literature through reading along with a peer or an adult, often time using adapted books. Adapted books can be personalized to match student profiles. Some ways to adapt books include adding visuals within a book, altering text complexity, or changing the physical properties of the book to increase student independence with page turning and other tasks. Typically, the student and peer or adult each have their own copy of the book or share a copy of the book. The student participating in the story-based lesson must be permitted to hold and manipulate the book. The teacher or peer can systematically prompt the student to participate in story reading, by pointing to the title or important words and illustrations, turning the page, reading or repeating key words of phrases, or answering comprehension questions.

WHY ARE STORY-BASED LESSONS EFFECTIVE?

Story-based lessons are effective because they promote meaningful connection in literacy activities, give students a routine through which to engage in reading, encourage development of comprehension skills through careful scaffolding, and increase opportunities for meaningful inclusion in the general education environment. Many times, students who require moderate to significant levels of academic support and who are not yet reading independently have limited access to reading instruction and can have limited long-term reading outcomes (Browder, Trela, & Jimenez 2007). However, research shows that “students with significant disabilities can gain early literacy skills, including enhanced communication, through the sharing of stories” (Erickson & Kopenhaver, 1995; Kliever & Biklen, 2001).

Story-based lessons for autistic students are most successful when Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs) for teaching autistic students are included. EBPs like augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), modeling, prompting, reinforcement, task analysis, and visual supports are all EBPs that complement story-based lessons. To learn more about EBPs for teaching autistic students, check out the National Autism Center’s “an Educator’s Manual to Evidence-based Practice and Autism, 2nd Edition: nationalautismcenter.org/resources/

for-educators/; the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice: ncaep.fpg.unc.edu/research-resources/; or TRIAD’s tip sheet on Evidence-Based Practices for Autistic Students: triad.vumc.org/ebp-tips.

WHAT IS A ROUTINE FOR STORY-BASED LESSONS?

1	Choose a story-based lesson target and set a purpose for reading.
2	Choose a text.
3	Determine teaching points: High frequency words, vocabulary, repeated words or phrases, or a comprehension based skill.
4	Prepare before, during, and after reading teaching points and activities: gaining and maintaining student attention and engagement, tracking important events and details, increasing comprehension (and complexity of comprehension skills).
5	Adapt book if needed.
6	Complete shared reading and take data on student progress towards goal.
7	Revise for future instruction.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER READING TEACHING POINTS?

Interaction and Engagement	Simple Comprehension	More Complex Comprehension and Beyond
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Turning pages <input type="checkbox"/> Tracking words <input type="checkbox"/> Pointing and gesturing <input type="checkbox"/> Single answer choice response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Answering wh- questions from a field of choices <input type="checkbox"/> Pointing or gesturing to label <input type="checkbox"/> Completing repeated phrases <input type="checkbox"/> Predicting next events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Graphic organizers with support to complete <input type="checkbox"/> Summaries and retells

HOW CAN EDUCATIONAL TEAM MEMBERS WORK TOGETHER TO IMPLEMENT STORY-BASED LESSONS?

TEAM MEMBER	POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS
General Education Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Identifying most important TN state standards to emphasize through story-based lessons » Sharing texts with the educational team that will read in the general education setting » Working with other team members to adapt text or rewrite text to a more appropriate comprehension level » Implementing story-based lessons with the student
Special Education Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Determining student's instructional reading level » Working with the general education teacher to set lesson targets and appropriate purposes for reading, based on general education curriculum and student IEP » Choosing appropriate visuals, engagement prompts, and comprehension questions for the story-based lesson » Working with other team members to adapt text or rewrite text to a more appropriate comprehension level » Implementing story-based lessons with the student » If applicable, training and observing paraeducators to implement story-based lessons with the student
Speech-Language Pathologist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Selecting appropriate vocabulary to teach from a text » Working with other team members to adapt text or rewrite text to a more appropriate comprehension level » Considering how to incorporate AAC into story-based lessons » Adding pertinent vocabulary or text-based language to a student's speech output device (e.g., answers to wh- questions, characters' thoughts or feelings, sequence of events, etc.) » Implementing story-based lessons with the student » If applicable, training and observing paraeducators to implement story-based lessons with the student
Paraeducator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Observing other team members implementing story-based lessons with the student » Implementing story-based lessons planned by other team members with the student » Creating materials needed to implement story-based lessons
Administrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Providing teams with common planning time to choose goals, adapt texts, and create story-based lessons » Allocating funds to provide teachers with appropriately leveled texts for students of varying reading abilities

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