Classroom Adjustments: Autism

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| 00:00:00:00 | CLAIRE | It was a worksheet and they had a blank square, and the question was something to do with... "Explain what characteristics of this animal are for defence and protection." And it was, you know, "Fill the box with your answer." So when he went to answer the question, when he had to fill the entire box, he actually chose to write a sentence in quite large letters around the perimeter of the inside of the box. So he filled the box and he answered the question, to the point where "The animal uses its tail for protection." |
| 00:00:36:13 | SERPIL | This is Claire. She's talking about her son, Christopher, who has autism. |
| 00:00:41:15 | CLAIRE | So the teacher then went back to him and said, "OK, yes, that's fine. That's correct, but what else can you tell me?" And he went on to verbally explain in much more detail the other things that the animal would use the tail for. So he demonstrated that he had a very good grasp of the topic, and if he'd written that down, they would have been very happy. But if you just looked at what he had written, you might have marked him down, or thought his level of understanding was a lot lower than it actually was. |
| 00:01:07:02 | SERPIL | Christopher is on the autism spectrum and he experiences difficulty with handwriting and decision making. Because autism occurs on a spectrum, his experience is different to other students with autism, but there are also similarities. So his teacher's made some general adjustments in the classroom and some specific adjustments just for him. Hi, my name is Serpil Senelmis and this podcast is part of an NCCD portal series. In this episode, we'll meet an autism expert and an inclusion support teacher specialising in autism to discuss what sort of adjustments you can make in the classroom to enable students like Christopher to participate fully. We'll hear more about Claire's experience as a parent and of course, the star of the show, Christopher. He'll explain what school is like from his perspective. |
| 00:02:12:22 | SUZANNE | So my name is Suzanne Carrington. I'm a professor, and I'm Assistant Dean of Research in the Faculty of Education at QUT. And I'm also the program director for the education program in the Autism Cooperative Research Centre. So autism is a disability that affects people in a range of different ways. It's actually often talked about as a spectrum. So people, or children, would have difficulties with communication. They would have difficulties with socialising, and they would often have a need for particular routines, and they have interests in particular topics and sometimes they can become very obsessed in some of those topics. So it's a spectrum of disability. And people can be very good at some things, and then have really great difficulties in other areas of their life. And so, when children, for example, on the autism spectrum go to school, it's really important that teachers get to know what they're good at and where their difficulties are because every child on the autism spectrum is very different. |
| 00:03:29:11 | SERPIL | So, for a teacher, is it then important to think about autism as a spectrum, or is it better to think about it in terms of mild, moderate, and severe? |
| 00:03:41:02 | SUZANNE | No, definitely as a spectrum because what we would often see for children who are at school, they might have particular strengths in certain areas of their learning or particular areas of the curriculum - maths, for example, they might be exceptionally good at maths - but may have great difficulty with even socialising or opening up their lunch box and working out, you know, what they need to eat, or how to find their way around the school, for example. So the differences in what they're good at, their strengths, and in terms of what their needs are - their learning needs are, or their social needs are - can be hugely varied. And so, teachers really need to take the time to get to know the individual child. They often need to talk to the parents and the caregivers. They need to have conversations with the student themselves to find out what will help them best to learn and to be successful in the classroom. And every child on the autism spectrum will be different. |
| 00:05:00:13 | HELEN | Hello, my name is Helen, and I work as an inclusion support teacher in a school in Brisbane - in a primary school. I guess one of the things I start with when I'm working with the teacher is to say, "Now, just because you've worked with one child on the autism spectrum before doesn't mean that this child is going to be the same." So every child is very different. That's actually one of the first key messages that I put forward. But in saying that, there are some very key strategies and understandings that we keep in mind when we're working with children. |
| 00:05:34:01 | SERPIL | Within the autism spectrum, Helen identifies two categories of behaviour that may require adjustments in the classroom. |
| 00:05:41:22 | HELEN | And the first is some difficulties in social communication. And the second is in some of the more restricted behaviours that a child shows, particularly some really intense interests at times, or perhaps some behaviours such as moving around a lot or some flapping of our hands. So there are some particular characteristics that are common for some children on the spectrum, but certainly, every child is very different. |
| 00:06:09:19 | SERPIL | So in addition to making adjustments for individuals, you can also make general adjustments that benefit many students. |
| 00:06:17:11 | HELEN | One example of that would be making sure there's some really good routine and structure in a classroom. And prep teachers do this really well - early childhood teachers have a lot of routine in their day, but it's just as important for our older kids, as well - so year five, year six, and even into high school. |
| 00:06:34:21 | SERPIL | When it comes to talking about autism, one of the challenges is that it involves a range of behaviours - there's no one key symptom that can be identified or addressed. |
| 00:06:45:05 | CLAIRE | We've discussed autism with Christopher a few times, and we don't keep it from him. We discuss, quite openly, the topic of autism around him. I'm not sure he truly understands that he has autism. He understands that he's...I guess, to put it simply, that he's a little bit different, that he sees the world a bit differently to other children. And, you know, he knows that he has help with things that other children don't have help with - like, he sees a speech pathologist and he sees an occupational therapist and he sees a paediatrician and a psychologist. And I think he realises that other children don't do that, but I don't really think he understands the implications behind why he does it and other children don't. I think the challenges that he's had at school, from the beginning, have always been to do with... almost his expectations of himself. And he notices that he doesn't get the work finished in the way that other children get work finished and sometimes other children will point that out. You know, I've actually been in the classroom, sort of helping out with reading, or at different times, and I've seen other children say, "Oh, look, Chris has only written two words and I've finished the page," which is a bit disheartening. And he notices that. But he does his best. But that's always been... causes some anxiety for him, because he knows that he doesn't get the work done. And as he gets older, he's more and more aware of time pressures that are in the classroom to get work done. And the more time pressure there is, the more anxious he becomes and the less productive he becomes. |
| 00:08:14:01 | SERPIL | Now, that sounds like a bit of a feedback loop in the making. So making adjustments that can reduce anxiety and increase productivity would be a great help. Dr Carrington from the Autism Cooperative Research Centre says the secret to success is becoming familiar with the student. |
| 00:08:35:04 | SUZANNE | So the important thing is to get to know the students because the students that will be in the classroom who are on the autism spectrum will have different abilities. So children may have an intellectual disability. They may be very talented in some areas of their learning. So it's important to get to know the child in terms of what they're good at, their learning strengths, and getting to know what their needs are. |
| 00:09:03:10 | SERPIL | Can you give me examples of some of the adjustments that can be used for students? |
| 00:09:09:07 | SUZANNE | Yes. So, many students, including students on the autism spectrum, really can benefit by having lots of visual cues. So visual scaffolding, visual schedules about what's going to happen, using visual presentations, for example, like concept maps. So lots of ways that we can present material in different ways. Using concrete materials. Providing scaffolding. So breaking a learning activity down into steps. Looking at, for example, if it's a worksheet or something that's being presented on the board, looking at how the resources might be laid out so that the page may not be so busy and full of lots and lots of text. We can break it into segments. And the interesting thing for teachers is once they start making some of these adjustments, the adjustments actually can work very well for many children in the class. They're not just adjustments for the child on the autism spectrum. |
| 00:10:14:10 | HELEN | Absolutely, and it's two ways. So not only is the adjustments that we put in place for children on the spectrum going to help lots of other kids, it means that teachers don't have to feel as overwhelmed as they might do if they're thinking about... let's say four children who have disability in their class and having to put in individual strategies for all four children. That's not possible in a busy classroom, all the time, much of the time. |
| 00:10:41:07 | SERPIL | A good broad-based adjustment that can benefit all students is to maintain a regular routine and structure in the classroom. |
| 00:10:48:18 | SUZANNE | Many students on the autism spectrum can really benefit from having what we call work systems, and really, sort of, good structure and routines and supports to help them get organised and complete tasks. So having different processes also for children in primary school or in secondary school, helping them to know what's going to happen next, how long they have to complete a task, lots of structures and colour-coded systems to help them organise their life or their work at school can be very useful, not just for students on the autism spectrum. |
| 00:11:28:06 | CLAIRE | Routine's very important for a lot of children on the spectrum. And, you know, if you say, "This is what's going to happen during the day," and then it changes, that can cause a lot of problems, because they just...often very black-and-white too, and literal. So they take what is said, obviously, literally, and that can cause problems, because when something doesn't pan out the way they're expecting to, that can lead to meltdowns or, you know, upset, which can then, obviously... then interrupt their learning, because they can't learn if they're upset or anxious. |
| 00:12:02:16 | SERPIL | At Helen's primary school, that structure has extended out of the classroom and into break times. |
| 00:12:08:21 | HELEN | One of the things we've implemented at our school is what we call Games Room. Now, we believe in these approaches being very inclusive, so it's certainly not just for children with disability to come in. It's for any child who wants a quiet space with structured activities during recess to come in and have a game. And we've got adults that interact with the children and model and teach them appropriate interactions throughout that period. I'm on Games Room on one day a week. I really like that time. |
| 00:12:43:02 | CHRISTOPHER | Are we recording already? |
| 00:12:44:19 | SERPIL | Yeah, we are. |
| 00:12:49:21 | CHRISTOPHER | Hi, my name is Christopher and I go to grade three. |
| 00:12:52:22 | SERPIL | Christopher, when you're having some trouble in the classroom learning something, how does your teacher help you? |
| 00:13:02:04 | CHRISTOPHER | Well... Can I just have a moment to think about this? |
| 00:13:07:03 | SERPIL | Of course. |
| 00:13:17:21 | CHRISTOPHER | Well, normally there's a group of kids which need help with their work, so my teacher works with that group of people sometimes. Like, sometimes when we're doing maths... Not maths tests. Otherwise, that would be cheating. Sometimes, when we're doing maths, sometimes, when it's really easy, we just need a little boost. |
| 00:13:45:10 | SERPIL | And do you have a close relationship with your teacher? |
| 00:13:49:10 | CHRISTOPHER | Not too much, but, well... I do like her. She's very nice. So is all the other teachers I've had. |
| 00:13:58:09 | SERPIL | And how does she then help you? |
| 00:14:00:11 | CHRISTOPHER | Well, there's a lot of different ways she tries to help me. Like, there's this room. We have a bag room, and then we have, like, this other room, which is like a storage room, but Mum actually had a talk to my teacher about it and the teacher said I could stay in at recess if I wanted to, and I could also use that room a bit if I feel like I need a time-out. |
| 00:14:41:02 | SERPIL | When it comes to making individual adjustments for students, Dr Carrington has some simple suggestions that don't require a lot of effort or time. |
| 00:14:49:22 | SUZANNE | So some students on the autism spectrum have particular issues, for example, with sensory needs. And so they may need a very individualised approach at certain times of the day or with adjustments that need to be made to the classroom environment or to the learning setting that can support their sensory needs. So some students, for example, on the autism spectrum may not be able to cope to be in the whole noisy classroom for the whole day. They might need to have some individualised learning time where they either have a quiet place where they can work by themselves, they might have an opportunity to go and work in the library or to go and work outside. So those sort of individual adjustments can be made to particularly support a particular need that a child might have, like a sensory issue. Some students on the autism spectrum might have particular needs in regard to being very anxious in certain times - for example, having a supply teacher or a relief teacher come into the classroom, which is very different for them and a change of routine, might mean, for that day, that child on the autism spectrum needs to have some very individualised support because they will be much more anxious than they would be if they were in their regular day of classroom activities with their regular teacher. |
| 00:16:23:13 | SERPIL | Claire has seen anxiety becoming a challenge for Christopher when routines change. |
| 00:16:28:22 | CLAIRE | He doesn't cope well with any form of change, so... He's had a couple of situations where he's had a different teacher, or the teacher's left and has been replaced and he's found that very challenging. |
| 00:16:38:06 | SERPIL | And increasingly, when decisions need to be made. |
| 00:16:41:03 | CLAIRE | So he needs to make sure that he understands what needs to be done, and that he gets started, because getting started can be a real challenge for him. Decision-making is a problem. And he can become paralysed by actually not being able to make a decision. That then leads to more anxiety, because then he starts to run out of time because he's not getting the work done. |
| 00:16:58:24 | SERPIL | Inclusion support teacher Helen, who works in a primary school, recommends providing the right information to the student in good time to reduce anxiety. |
| 00:17:08:12 | HELEN | There's one particular student who is on the autism spectrum in prep and he will be moving into Year 1 next year. So there are some strategies that we know we have to put in place for him because he is feeling anxious about the change. And one of those strategies is putting together a little story that shows him what it looks like to be in Year 1 and to comfort him and reassure him that it's going to be great fun and he'll be just fine with the change. So we're taking some photos of the Year 1 classrooms, some of the teachers in Year 1, photos of the playground and giving him a little bit of description about what the routine in Year 1 looks like, and what the things that will stay the same are going to be too. |
| 00:18:04:23 | SERPIL | So far, we've mainly been talking about behaviours, but one of the common physical symptoms of autism is difficulty with handwriting. Claire finds that Christopher can be much more prolific on the keyboard than with pen and paper. |
| 00:18:18:06 | CLAIRE | We get much more out of him in terms of quality and quantity of work if he's able to do it on a device than if we have to actually ask him to sit there and write. He does find it quite exhausting to write. I think it's also that fear - it's that anxiety that comes from committing something to paper. It's sort of linked to that decision-making. He has to make a decision and then he has to commit to it, and once it's on paper, if he changes his mind, it's much harder. And then he has to either cross it out or it looks messy or he's committed to it. Whereas if you're typing something, you can delete it, you can start again. So I think he finds it easier to actually get started and do the work than if you actually give him a piece of blank paper, which he finds quite confronting. |
| 00:19:00:01 | CHRISTOPHER | I actually like writing, even though I have a little bit of trouble staying focused. |
| 00:19:05:12 | SERPIL | What is it about writing that you like? |
| 00:19:08:01 | CHRISTOPHER | Well, I actually like getting new ideas down on a piece of paper and then reading them - like, actually, describing them. Like, "The dragon had emerald-green eyes." Or "The witch's teeth were rotten yellow, like a rat's teeth." |
| 00:19:30:05 | SUZANNE | Many students on the autism spectrum have a lot of difficulties with handwriting. They have a lot of difficulties with processing, looking at information on a whiteboard or a blackboard and then transferring that down onto paper, particularly using the traditional form of handwriting. So using a laptop is very useful. Students might be able to use a mobile phone, for example, to take photos of particular things in the classroom. So taking photos of PowerPoint slides or even being emailed copies of PowerPoint slides. Using a mobile phone, for example, even just to record different parts of the lesson can help them to learn and to revise. So there's a lot of technologies also that can support communication. If some students either don't have the regular verbal type skills in communicating, those students can use more visual symbols and lots of technological supports on iPads that actually help them and support them with communication, with executive functioning, helping them to organise and plan. Even using headphones in a classroom. If it's a very noisy classroom, many children will have headphones to try and block out some of that noise. |
| 00:20:48:11 | HELEN | Some of the strategies we put in place for children we know have difficulty with this task is the use of technology. So it might be typing on a computer or a laptop. Or voice-to-text we use sometimes as well. And it doesn't have to be fancy, expensive equipment. In fact, the Siri function on iPads is a really good function for a child to speak into the iPad, and that's then recorded in writing. So a child doesn't even have to pick up a pen. They don't have to have the fine motor or motor planning to type yet. It's about getting ideas down. And that's writing. The nice thing about the Australian Curriculum is there is the capability to put these adjustments in place. Another thing we know about autism is their... We call it executive functioning skills - so the ability to plan and to organise themselves. So one of our students in a higher year level is actually using things like timers and schedules to remind him about tasks that he has to do, and to help him plan out when an assessment piece is due and then what parts he has to do in the days leading up into that due period - what he has to do in each time. These aren't special, expensive pieces of technology. It's technology that we, as adults, use every day. I use reminders. I use a calendar. But it's about teaching our children how to use that effectively. |
| 00:22:25:21 | SERPIL | Suzanne, can you tell me about a student you've observed who benefited from classroom adjustments? |
| 00:22:32:08 | SUZANNE | So I can give you an example from a student who was in Grade 1 who was on the autism spectrum. It was a little boy, and he was meant to be doing a cut-and-paste matching activity where they had to match the names of animal categories, like reptiles and mammals, to a picture of different types of animals, and put them into those different categories. And this particular student had some sensory issues, and he often became very obsessed with the sensory experience of using glue. So instead of just putting the glue on the paper and sticking the little picture into the chart where it should have gone, he just loved the feeling of the glue on his fingers. He had this wonderful sticky, you know, thing going on with his fingers, and playing with the glue, and became really obsessed with that, and ended up getting in such a big mess. And the teacher, you know, was pulling their hair out and getting a bit frustrated, and the activity wasn't being done successfully, whereas if she had thought maybe a little bit more about that little boy and knew about his sensory issues, she would know to avoid having glue and scissors and sticking activities going on. And this little boy in particular actually knew all of the scientific names for all of the categories of animals. You know, he knew the names that you see in the museums and the categories of the different animals. So he could do this activity in a much higher level than anybody in Grade 1. Probably, he was at almost a university level of understanding of the names of the categories of animals, but he couldn't actually do the cut and paste and the sticking activity that he was required to do in Grade 1. So teachers need to often think about, "Well, what am I really trying to achieve with this activity?" And in this case, it was trying to teach and then assess the children's understanding of the categories of animals, rather than, you know, how good they were at sticking and pasting little pieces of paper onto a chart. But also, the teacher could be aware of those sensory difficulties that that child might have, and then think about, "Well, what type of adjustments do I need to make taking all of that into consideration?" |
| 00:24:53:03 | SERPIL | And as Helen points out, it's just as important to review those adjustments as the year progresses. |
| 00:24:58:23 | HELEN | We have a look at what the strategies we put in place were. We need to work out if we have put those strategies in place with fidelity, because we can't just say, "Oh, we've been trying a visual schedule," but, in fact, we only put that in place on day one, and we didn't refer to the schedule with the child, and the rest of the class, each day. So we have to work out if we are putting the evidence-based strategies in place with fidelity, and then, if it's not working, we try and work out why that might be the case and what other strategies we could try. |
| 00:25:30:11 | SERPIL | So get to know the student, work with the parents, put adjustments in place and review them in time. Christopher's mother, Claire, also recommends keeping an eye out for the smile-and-nod reaction, which can often hide a real lack of understanding. |
| 00:25:46:17 | CLAIRE | Christopher gets distracted very easily, and I'm sure it's the case with a lot of children on the spectrum. And it's almost like a smile-and-nod situation where they don't really hear. And they are not necessarily going to put their hand up and say, "Oh, I'm not really sure what I'm doing." And that creates a level of anxiety. And I think it's important to recognise that often children with autism, particularly with Christopher, he will tend to fly under the radar, because he is quite fairly quiet. He doesn't cause a lot of fuss, so it's easy to think that he's coping OK. He'll carry a lot of things internally and that will build up. And also, when you're asking them to do a task, you'll assume that it's OK, because they're sitting there quietly, and you think they're getting on with it, but the reality is they may not have heard or understood. |
| 00:26:51:09 | CLAIRE | I think one of the big things, and the teachers do it quite often, is just to remind him that...giving him an opportunity that he can maybe finish work at another time. They'll have an opportunity at the end of the week to go back and revisit work that they haven't finished, and he can finish it then. I think it's also just... For him, knowing there's an option takes away a lot of the pressure. He doesn't always necessarily take it up. And it's the same where if he has a bit of sensory overload from too much noise in the classroom or he becomes a bit overwhelmed, he knows he has the option to go to the quiet room or go and sit somewhere and just have some quiet time. And very often he won't take it up, but he knows that it's there, and that's enough for him, to reassure him. |
| 00:27:47:17 | SERPIL | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that can be made in the classroom to enable students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. You can find all episodes on the NCCD portal. I'm Serpil Senelmis. Thanks for listening. |
| 00:28:25:05 | JAMES | This podcast is supported by the Australian Government Department of Education for the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability, or NCCD, Portal. Copyright 2019 Education Services Australia Ltd, unless otherwise indicated. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0, unless otherwise indicated. |