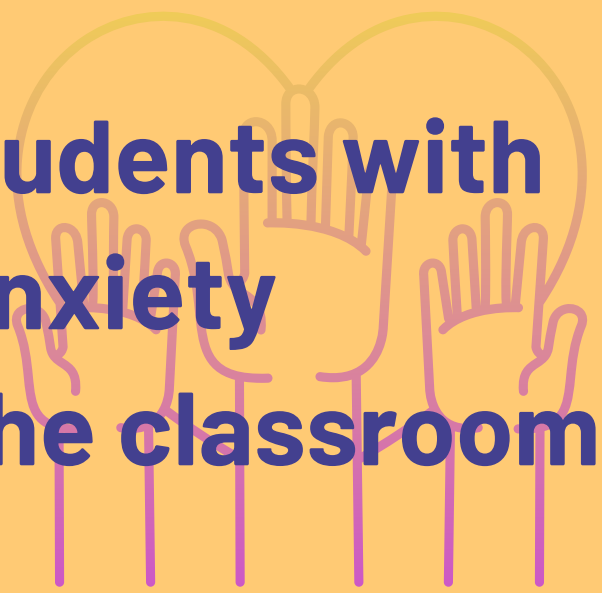


Helping young students with Autism reduce anxiety contributors in the classroom



Autism and anxiety

Children with autism can struggle with numerous challenges in the classroom that contribute to feelings of anxiety. Autism can be defined as a developmental disability that impacts verbal and nonverbal communication as well as social interaction. Characteristics linked to autism can include stereotyped movements and repetitive activities, resistance to change in routine or environment, and atypical responses to sensory encounters (Texas Education Agency, 2023). Some of these challenges include social skills, sensitivity to noise, and lack of visual representation of what is to come next. Each of these challenges can lead to overstimulation, which contributes to feelings of anxiety (Stockall & Blackwell, 2022). Classroom teachers can use a variety of methods to serve moderate and high-functioning students with autism, ages 5 – 11, in order to help students achieve success.

Accommodation Suggestions

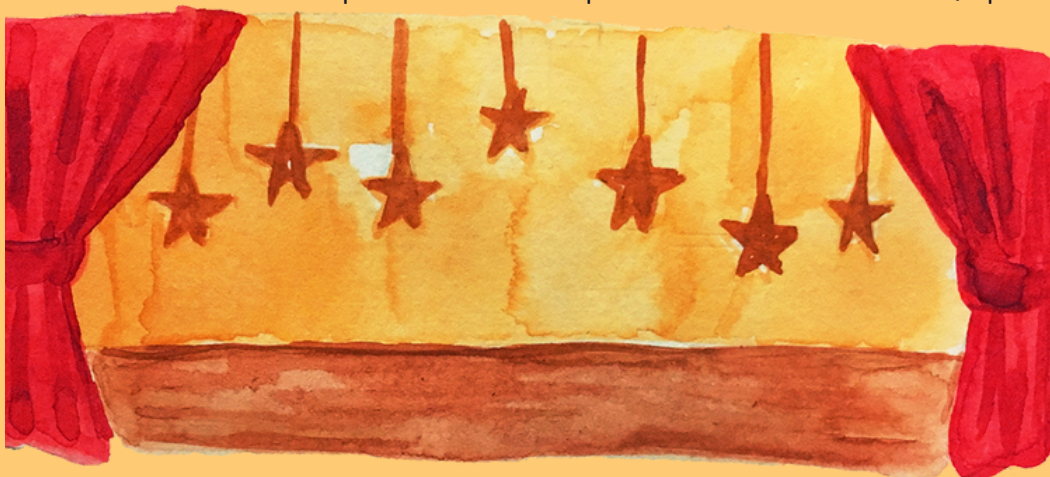
Helpful accommodation suggestions to ameliorate anxiety-inducing feelings in students with autism include implementing theatrical play programs, the use of noise-reducing equipment, and the use of visual supports. Each of these supports contribute to the overall success of the child with autism by reducing feelings of anxiety by empowering students with confidence, comfort, and clarity (Steensel & Heeman, 2017).



1

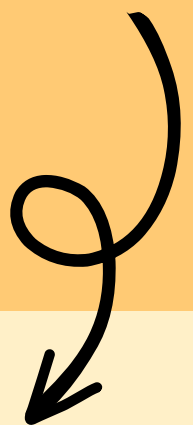
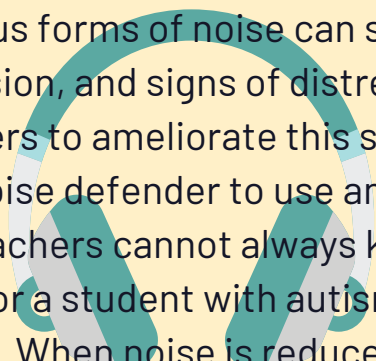
Theatrical Play Programs

Theatrical Play Programs give students the opportunity to practice the development of social skills for everyday situations in a structured environment (Mpella, 2019). These programs make way for students with autism to interact with peers without autism on a level playing field in that every student is given unique instruction on how they should act out their roles. Teachers can take advantage of this accommodation strategy by initiating common situations such as conflict and friendship in theatrical scenes. Every child gets the opportunity to practice and improve upon social skills without singling out children that struggle with social skills. Through this type of cooperative play with intentional stimuli and clear goals, studies have shown that students with autism show repeatability of social skills practiced and improved social interaction (Mpella, 2019).



Noise Buffering 2

Reducing noise pollution or offering noise buffering with the use of earmuffs, noise-canceling headphones, or silicone earplugs are beneficial accommodations to students with autism. Various forms of noise can startle students as well as cause muscle tension, aggression, and signs of distress. Teachers can introduce several forms of noise defenders to ameliorate this stress. Ideally, teachers can offer students the choice of noise defender to use and make them available throughout the school day. Teachers cannot always know when a specific sound will initiate noise intolerance for a student with autism, so it is important that noise defenders are readily available. When noise is reduced for students that are hypersensitive to sounds, it gives students the opportunity to remain focused, on-task, and tolerant of outside auditory stimuli (Ikuta, 2016).





Accommodations Continued...

3 Visual Supports

Visual supports provide tangible and/or concrete objects to assist students in completing everyday tasks. Visual schedules often include pictures and words in a set order as seen in Figure 1. As students with autism can find transitioning from one activity to the next a challenge, visual schedules alleviate that struggle. Students find predictability and reliability in their visual schedules. Visual schedules provide flexibility to the teacher as well. Changes in a daily schedule at school are inevitable but showing a student with autism the change early in the day before the change happens, and reminders throughout the day, help to reduce anxiety-inducing feelings. As students grow more independent, the pictures can be removed and a schedule with only words and time periods may be used. Visual schedules help students with autism know what has been completed, what is happening now, and what is going to happen next, which helps these students to transition along with their peers. Visual schedules are useful to young children without disabilities. These schedules can be individualized or used whole group. In the natural classroom environment, visual supports help students with autism gain independence with minimal intervention or disruption (Meadan et al., 2011).

Figure 1

Example of a Visual Support Schedule

1. Put away backpack



2. Seat Work



3. Theatrical Play



4. Restroom break



5. Reading



6. Lunch



Embrace
Equity



The benefits of accommodations to students with autism help to reduce anxiety-inducing symptoms. Accommodations that are easily implemented promote social acceptance, enhanced social skills, and gains in achieving academic and functional goals. All students have the right to an equitable education. Theatrical play programs, visual supports, and noise-buffering equipment are just a few of the changes that can ameliorate struggles while also increasing confidence in students with autism.



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