

While autism-specific programs are ideal, sometimes they are not an option. The good news is there are things parents and childcare providers can do to help the child with autism.

Surround the child with typical peer models, ideally of the same age.

Often children with autism are paying attention even when it appears they aren't, so having other children to imitate is important. In a childcare setting, try to keep the child with autism close to and facing the other children as much as possible. Keep in mind, the child might need short breaks throughout the day.

Put favorite toys and snacks out of reach and/or in hard-to-open containers so the child has to have help getting them. This allows the child to have opportunities to practice communicating.

Encourage self-help skills.

At first you might need to put your hand over the child's hand to help him accomplish tasks like hand-washing. Over time, reduce your help until the child is independent.

Talk to and read to the child as much as possible, even if he doesn't respond. Talk to him and read to him according to his age.

Help her shift interests.

Children change interests as they get older; for example, as a child without autism ages, she might no longer enjoy watching Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood and prefer to watch Tangled or Sponge Bob. Helping the child with autism shift, too, can help other children accept her more easily.

Break skills down into steps.

For example, if teaching a child to play with a shape-sorter, start with just a couple of pieces. Once the child can insert those pieces, you can add more.

Be careful about handling negative behaviors.

If a child is told to do something—for example, to go to the math center – and he tantrums or hits another child and then doesn't have to go, he could learn that anytime he doesn't want to do something, he should repeat that negative behavior. Behavior experts suggest following through on directions and requests regardless of the child's reaction.

If it won't be cute later, don't let her do it now!

It can be very hard to break some children with autism of routines, and they don't always have the social awareness needed to stop doing certain behaviors as they get older. It's common for parents to say, for example, "We're not worried about her carrying that blankie around. Pretty sure she'll decide to get rid of it before she goes to high school." A child with autism might not EVER want to get rid of his blankie, so adults will need to decide when that should happen, keeping in mind that the longer a behavior goes on, the harder it is to stop.