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Autism Acceptance In Education & With Peers

Chelsea Budde

Acceptance in the world of autism is a huge concept. It is a necessary element of providing care for an individual with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and without it, interventions can marginalize the very person we're trying to support, whether at home or at school.

As the parent of two children with ASD, I have applied Jennie Wright's 7 Stages of Grief 2 (as in the loss of a loved one) to an ASD diagnosis in my son. I went through each of her first six stages before I reached acceptance, also known as the last stage. That pattern would make sense, but we as parents can circle back to another stage, skip one and linger somewhere in between not knowing what direction you are heading. Here are the seven stages:

1. SHOCK & DENIAL
2. PAIN & GUILT
3. ANGER & BARGAINING
4. DEPRESSION, REFLECTION, LONELINESS
5. THE UPWARD TURN
6. RECONSTRUCTION & WORKING THROUGH
7. ACCEPTANCE & HOPE

While it is important that we give ourselves as parents and guardians permission to grieve in our own way, we also need, for the sake of our children, to get to stage 5 and work toward acceptance. Because not accepting who our children are as human beings means we'll tolerate others' exclusion or reduction of their nature. To foster acceptance, we need to model acceptance.

That last principle applies to educational staff as well. We can't very well expect typically-developing students to accept their peers with autism if we don't offer them the same academic and social opportunities. Yet without the proper support, including a student with autism in a regular education setting may set up all parties involved for failure.

Even if your school doesn't exhibit an inclusive model, acceptance is still paramount for educational programming. Understanding autism and all the different experiences that come with it will help you accept the reality your student is living. For example, if you've taken the time to understand sensory processing differences, then you'll accept that your student might not be able to sit through an all-school assembly without protective ear wear.

The same understanding will lead to acceptance at home and carry over into community outings as well. Parents: if you know your child isn't "misbehaving" when he has that meltdown at the department store over an unfulfilled expectation (no matter how unreasonable it seems to you), then you'll accept that, given his accessible coping strategies, perhaps his outings are better limited to places where he can be successful.

Parents and teachers alike may be unaware of another's current knowledge base, or not be in full understanding of a student's particular needs. Of course we educate, encourage and empower. But while we're doing that, we are not trying to transform individuals with ASD into neuro-typical people. We are accepting their differently-wired brains, and all that entails, while making sure they are the best individuals they can be.

Peer Students

We also need to teach and encourage the peers of students with autism to be good friends. They deserve to understand why the rules of engagement are different for their peer with autism. They should be empowered with autism awareness so they can come to the same understandings you've achieved as a caregiver. They will come to accept what they understand, enabling them to demonstrate empathy and support if needed.

Expecting peers to arrive at acceptance without the benefits of awareness and understanding is unfair. If you are an educator, find a way to work autism sensitivity training into your curriculum. Here are some ideas:

- Read a developmentally-appropriate book where a character or the narrator has ASD. Allow for discussion.
- Show an autism peer sensitivity film. (try Good Friend, Inc.)
- With parent permission, invite a member of the student's IEP team (SLP, counselor, special education teacher, etc.) to talk about autism with the class.
- Host a "Circle of Friends" for lunch opportunity for select students, whereby the student with autism is the "attraction", and the healthy social interaction is fostered by a trained staff moderator.

Education & With Peers

Social Tools

Peers also need social tools in their toolbox when interacting with their classmate with autism. Tell them:

- Most people with autism have something they really like or know a lot about. Find out what your classmate's special interest is and engage them with a picture or a fact about it.
- Many individuals with autism experience the senses differently. Some people really like deep pressure, like hugs, whereas others find unexpected touch painful. Some people hear things so well that big noises hurt their ears. Think about what you're doing that might make someone else uncomfortable.
- Meltdowns aren't fun for anyone. Give your classmate his space when he's upset. Don't take anything he says or does personally during this time. A meltdown is like an out-of-control bike crash: it's scary, embarrassing, and painful. Provide a dignified recovery period.
- Bullying someone on the basis of their disability is against the law. If you see anyone harassing your classmate with autism, take a stand! You can stand by your friend, tell the aggressor to stop, and/or report the bullying to a teacher.

If you are a parent, these same education points can be utilized in your neighborhood or with family members who are in their age group. You will be surprised how a little education can go a long way in providing a supportive environment for your child, at any age.

Building Acceptance: Where Do You Start?

One example of how to teach acceptance is by demonstrating the negative effects of "exclusion". Offer a desirable activity to the students, but exclude students on the basis of physical characteristics, clothing choices, and/or favorite sports or entertainment figures. Ask students how it felt to be excluded. Teach them about autism and that differences in brain wiring and how that is manifested, are largely out of the student with autism's control. Autism is an invisible disability; students need to understand that their classmate with autism isn't choosing his or her disability-driven behavior, any more than a person who uses a wheelchair to get around is choosing not to use his or her legs.

Read books for your own education on autism, and this can and may bring a better understanding that leads to an acceptance stage. You should also introduce reading material or book ideas to share in the education of autism and acceptance. Be sure to view it yourself first, to make sure it's relevant to your student or child with autism. While it's best for understanding and relationships to be as specific as possible about autism's impact on the student, parents and educators may need some time and encouragements to share that information with classmates. Why so? Sometimes it's the fear of offering additional tools for bullying or even more inclusion. However, without the knowledge, your child or student may be perceived differently anyways, so arm others so there's an opportunity for a more positive environment. Providing this atmosphere for a frank discussion offers a great platform for self-disclosure for students, especially those who are older.

With a little creativity and flexibility mixed with a lot of positivity and a smidge of dedication, you can create a culture of acceptance both at home and at school. Foster a culture where your child with autism is part of the group not because he blends, but precisely because his differences are valued.

Chelsea Budde is co-founder of nonprofit organization Good Friend, Inc., whose mission is to create autism awareness, teach acceptance of differences, and foster empathy for students with autism spectrum disorder among their typically developing peers. (See www.goodfriendinc.com for more information.)

References:

- Peyser, Tony. "A Cure For Autism." Verse- Case Scenario. BuzzFlash.com. 13 December 2007. Web.
- Wright, Jennie. "7 Stages of Grief." recoverfrom- grief.com. 2007. Web.
- "How Can I Be a Good Friend to Someone with Autism?" 2007. "Choosing To Be a GFF (Good Friend Forever)" 2011. Good Friend, Inc. goodfriendinc.com. Web.
- "Circle of friends (disability).

Book Recommendations

The following books are recommended as guides to acceptance.

(Suggested grade level for audience/readers in parentheses.)

- Since We're Friends (2007), by Celeste Shally (EC-1st)
- Why Does Izzy Cover her Ears? (2009), by Jennifer Veenendall (1st-3rd)
- All About My Brother (2002), by Sarah Peralta (1st-3rd)
- My Friend with Autism (2002), by Beverly Bishop (1st-4th)
- Taking Autism to School (2002), by Andreanna Edwards (2nd-4th)
- Rules (2006), by Cynthia Lord (4th- 7th)
- Jay Grows an Alien In His Shoes (2007), by Caroline Levine (6th-8th)
- The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (2003), by Mark Haddon (10th-12th)

Autism education or sensitivity training can occur in a generalized manner, in which students learn about acceptance and sensitivity not related to a particular student at school. It can also be much more specific to the needs of that student and his or her family. It is very important to communicate with the parents or guardian of the child with autism before any sensitivity training is done. The teacher or school psychologist leading the class discussion should reach out to the parents or guardian of the child with autism to understand what they are comfortable with in terms of disclosure. S The authors focused on analyzing (a) peer acceptance and peer rejection of typically developing students, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in general secondary education; (b) attitudes of general secondary-aged students toward peers with ADHD and ASD; and (c) the relationship between peer acceptance/rejection and students' attitudes. A cross-sectional study was performed (n = 437 typically developing students, n = 28 students with ADHD/ASD; range = 12–15 years old). Students were asked to indicate with whom t