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Literacy and comprehension

Points to note

- Many children with autism are fascinated with numbers and letters from an early age. Some will teach themselves to read by the time they reach school.
- The child may acquire reading ability without fully understanding the sounds that different letters make. It is typical for a child with autism to have an uneven developmental profile.
- The child may be very good at reading. He may be able to decode the words but does not understand what he has read. This is known as *hyperlexia*.
- Some children will have more difficulty learning to read. They may learn the names and sounds of letters by rote but may not understand how these sounds fit together to make a word.
- Some children with autism only read non-fiction books; this allows them to gather facts and knowledge on their preferred interest.
- Some children have excellent rote memories. They may appear to be a competent reader but are actually recalling a story they know word-for-word.
- Children with autism are visual learners. When learning new words, it is best to take a 'whole word' approach rather than a phonetic approach, as this may teach the child only to sound out the word, not the word itself.
- Comprehension is often difficult for a child with autism because of his 'theory of mind' deficits. This means he has difficulty understanding that others (including characters in books) have motivations, intentions and beliefs different to his own. There is difficulty in understanding questions, in particular 'why' as this requires reasoning.
- In creative writing, a child with autism may lack imagination and have difficulty organising his thoughts in sequence. He may not provide enough information to ensure reader understanding, assuming that the reader knows as much about the plot and characters as he does. He may only write on a limited range of topics.

What you can do

- Some young children will need encouragement to develop an interest in books. Try lift-the-flap books, noisy books and books related to the child's preferred interest. To make sure he does not get stuck on one topic, try to expand his interest toward related topics.
- Choose books with repetitive, simple stories at first. There is no point reading a story with complex sentences or concepts if the child does not have the language skills to understand the story.
- Home made books with familiar photos and stories about the child's family, pets and activities can be more meaningful to a child with autism.

- Help the child to understand that words have meaning by attaching labels to items in the classroom. Encourage the child's parents to do this at home, also.
- If the child lacks imagination he may have difficulty relating to fantasy stories, preferring books that are more meaningful to him personally. A child who is a competent reader may be more interested in gaining knowledge by reading non-fiction books about things that interest him.
- If the child has a favorite, familiar story, photocopy the text, cut into sentences and have him put them in the right order.
- Computer programs that teach sounds and word recognition will be of great benefit to a child with autism and will encourage him to work independently.
- Encourage the child to make his or her own story using computer images, photos, pictures and drawings. Encourage him to describe what is on each page, write the words for him if necessary.
- Practice sequencing using sets of cards that show a series of events. Ask the child to retell the events in his own words and help him to understand and answer questions such as "What happened before ...?" and "What happens next ...?"
- After reading a story ask the child 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'how' questions. Many children with autism find questions confusing, so it may help to provide two alternative answers to prompt the correct response. As the child's verbal ability and comprehension improves you could introduce 'why' questions, again giving the child prompts to develop his understanding.
- In creative writing, allow the child to write about personal experiences, then to expand the activity and develop creativity, pose questions like, "What would have happened if..."
- If the child has difficulty getting started in creative writing, write a starting sentence for him.