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Encouraging numeracy skills

Points to note

- The child with autism may find it easy to learn things by rote, so you may find they are very good at counting and number recognition. Counting is predictable and ordered, which is very reassuring to a child with autism.
- While the child with autism may be excellent at counting, he may become confused when shown how to add, especially if he is yet to develop a concept of number.
- Another confusing aspect of numeracy is the perplexing array of words that mean the same thing. For example, when talking about subtracting you may say 'minus', 'less', 'take' and 'take away'. When adding, you might say 'plus', 'and', 'add' etc. Just as it can be difficult for children with autism to learn that some words have more than one meaning, they can be confused to learn that one concept can be described by so many different words. Avoid using just one term, thinking that this will avoid confusion. The child is likely to become 'stuck' and have even greater difficulty later on.
- Some children will have difficulty with concepts like more, less, half, double, quarter.
- Some children with autism like the rigidity of maths; doing the same problems over and over and getting the same answer.
- Some children will grasp the concept of a new exercise after doing one or two questions – they won't see the point in completing an entire worksheet.

What you can do

- Use the child's special interest and meaningful, real life concepts to help develop an understanding of numbers. If the child likes trains, for example, you could make up activities where the child has to put a certain number of passengers in each carriage, or add cargo cars to a locomotive.
- Teach the child to generalise information and think flexibly by making a dictionary of math words that have the same meaning. Put this on the wall as a visual reminder.
- Computer programs that teach early numeracy skills will be helpful in motivating the child with autism.
- You might reduce the amount of work the child has to complete if you feel he has quickly grasped the concept of the exercise. Forcing the issue will only lead to conflict.