WHAT YOUR AUTISTIC STUDENT WANTS YOU TO KNOW

We asked two amazing women on the autism spectrum to give you their best advice about your autistic students. What might they be experiencing? What might they be thinking? How might they be feeling? May Megan's and Lydia's guidance bring you clarity and their thoughtful words of wisdom enlighten and inspire!

Megan Amodeo is an autistic stay-at-home mom with 3 beautiful daughters, two with autism and one with ADHD. Megan received her Bachelors of Education from Northern Illinois University and has an Illinois Type 10, K-12 degree in special education. She taught At Risk/Special needs Kindergarten, Self-Contained/Multi-Disabled Early Childhood, and Hearing Itinerant K-8. My student population included deaf, hard of hearing, autistic, learning disabled, behavior disorders, medically fragile, and severely mentally challenged students.

Lydia Wayman is a young adult autistic writer, speaker, and advocate. She has a B.S. in Elementary Education and M.A. in English and nonfiction writing. She has blogged at *Autistic Speaks* since 2009, is a Geek Club Books monthly columnist, and has contributed her writing and editing to many other websites, magazines, and books. Lydia is the copy editor for Geek Club Books' *Horrible Hugs* autism children's book. She also speaks at local and national autism events, and her story was featured in the *Wall Street Journal* and on Good Morning America in 2015. Lydia uses her personal experience and professional knowledge to help parents and teachers find creative solutions to the everyday challenges for autistic kids.

LYDIA SAYS:

Before all else, presume competence in every student. We'll never achieve what we've never been challenged to try. Instead of asking if a child can achieve, ask yourself how he can be supported to get there. He may need more time, extra repetitions, visual supports, assistive technology, creative teaching methods, or a different form of scaffolding (Hint: That last one? Use the special interest!)

Thinking and speaking don't always happen together. For many who are nonverbal, the lack of speech has nothing to do with the mind and everything to do with a mouth and body that don't obey. If a child with limited speech struggles with meltdowns or self-injurious behaviors, the most urgent need is access to communication. It's well known in the autism community but the power and possibility of communication even without speech has not yet reached into most schools. Here are links to blogs of two autistic students: **Faith, Hope, and Love...with Autism** and **Emma's Hope Book.** They are unique… but their abilities and the fact that they were so long overlooked is a very common situation for non-speaking autistic people.

On the other hand, those who don't show obvious delays in speech aren't adequately supported. I was a verbal child… when it came to what I know. Since I never spoke about feelings, relationships, or fears, it was assumed I didn't feel or understand those things. Typing has been my golden ticket to full communication. Instead of encouraging speech at all times and discouraging other methods, make communication the goal and have other options (typing, pictures, play options) available for all your students to use.

Inclusion is a wonderful thing, but it doesn't work if it ends when the textbooks close. To be included, the child has to be integral to the culture of the class. If something hilarious happens when he's not there, catch him up. If there's a vote to be taken, be sure to do it when he's there. Ask him for input if you ask a question during a lesson. Include him!

Eye contact makes it very difficult to learn. In fact, it's really an either-or thing for me. I can't hear you if I'm also looking at you, so looking away is not a sign of disrespect… it means that I recognize your words as important enough to put all my focus on them.

Similarly, some children have to work so hard to keep their bodies still, there's no energy left to learn. Stimming (repetitive behavior) is a way of blocking out uncomfortable sensory input by creating my own positive sensory input. Consider your classroom environment and whether you can reduce clutter and visual overload. Other ideas: hand-held fidget toys, bungee cords looped around the front legs of the chair for a place to kick, a large box on its side with a piece of fabric for a curtain, yoga balls to use in place of seats, or an open area in the back of the class where the child can pace back and forth. In every classroom, there are kids who would benefit from these options regardless of diagnosis. Having the options available to everyone also minimizes the "other-ness" of the child on the spectrum.

Stimming should never be stopped (unless it's self-harming). To insist a student must stop any hand flapping when he's excited is like asking you to stop smiling any time you're happy. The movement may be different, but it's a natural means of expression.

LYDIA SAYS:

Visuals are a powerful tool. For the child who interrupts the lesson, the teacher can silently place a notecard on his desk that reminds him to "shhh!" The child who struggles to follow directions may benefit from a card taped to his desk with rules--waiting his turn, hands to himself, quiet working, etc. Color-coding subject folders, using a visual timer, and making use of graphic organizers during lessons all appeal to visual learners.

Writing the daily schedule on the board, whether it's the whole day for an elementary teacher or the flow of the class period for older students. It takes away the fear of what comes next and the anxiety of the unknown. Like many strategies, a schedule benefits the whole class. The autistic child can use picture cards (using an inexpensive whiteboard with a vertical strip of Velcro as the base), color coding, or standard pen and paper (depending on the needs of the individual) to make a portable visual schedule.

Whether or not it's easy to understand, language should never be labeled "meaningless." Children who say words and phrases that are out of context in the situation are often scripting (delayed echolalia). They "borrow" words from characters or other people to convey their needs the best they can. Often, if you can find the source of that phrase, you'll find the character in the movie is feeling some intense emotion; instead of "I'm scared," you'll hear the quote. Some kids use two-part scripts, asking another person to take the other part--this is a powerful way of connecting!

In the early years, kids are very accepting, but it doesn't take long for them to become wary of children with disabilities. They learn it from the adults around them, and it becomes this thing that everyone recognizes but no one knows how to discuss. When kids ask they are hushed and told the question is rude. Disability is not a bad thing, and noticing them isn't either. Instead learning to hide their curiosity, children need to be given the language to talk about it respectfully. There are great resources out there--try these to start:

- **Bluebee TeeVee:** Two young adults on the spectrum explain autism to children in eight short episodes in a way that is kid-friendly and technically correct!
- **A hair-dryer kid in a toaster-brained world:** Mary McLaughlin of the blog MOM-NOS uses a brilliant analogy to explain autism to her son's general education class

You will meet many kids on the spectrum… and some of them won't have IEPs or even a diagnosis (yet)! The child who won't go into the cafeteria or the gym… the child who is extremely dependent on routine… who struggles with the abstract, who doesn't have any friends, who is a target for bullies but thinks they're his friends… who seems to be shockingly good at some things and extremely delayed in others… These children are often told they're "smart enough to know better" or that they're goofing around to get out of the task. The child may not be able to tell you why, but a child should not need a label for his needs to be recognized and then supported.

MEGAN'S TOP 50

1. Autistic boys and autistic girls are vastly different.
2. Girls with autism can mimic social mannerisms and often appear "typical."
3. Not everyone with autism spins, hand flaps, or repeats the same word over and over.
4. Parents of children with autism have a wealth of knowledge about their son/daughter.
5. Social interaction is extremely difficult for those on the spectrum.
6. Children with autism are often bullied without being aware of the bullying.
7. Autism is not a result of bad parenting or lack of discipline.
8. Autistics tend to be rigid.
9. Routine is very important.
10. Sensory overload is real (too much noise, light, crowds, etc can all be triggers).
11. Having a sensory box with various sensory toys is very beneficial.
12. Autistic children become autistic adults.
13. Visual aids like schedules, charts and graphs are helpful.
14. All staff should have working knowledge of autism spectrum disorders.
15. Understand that expressing emotions can be difficult for those on the spectrum.
16. Everyone is diagnosed at a different age.
17. It is called a spectrum because there are a myriad of functioning levels
18. Some high functioning autistics seem normal (we are not).
19. Acknowledge that children on the spectrum might act different at home.
20. Autism is not an illness, it is neurologically based.
21. Do not worry about eye contact.
22. People on the spectrum can be unintentionally blunt.
23. During the early grade schoolyears, consider providing social groups.
24. Take the initiative to pair compassionate students with those on the spectrum.
25. Unless asked, do not provide medical or nutritional advice to parents of children with autism.
26. Occupational therapy can be very helpful for sensory issues.
27. Autistics sometimes become intensely focused on specific subjects.
28. Allow the strengths of those on the spectrum to be utilized.
29. Understand that parents of children with autism are often overwhelmed.
30. Provide a safe area for meltdowns.
31. Meltddowns are not tantrums.
32. Temple Grandin is a wonderful autistic author and advocate.
33. Rain Man is a great movie, not all autistic individuals are Rain Man.
34. It is very difficult for high functioning autistics to try to be "typical."
35. Food sensitivities and aversions are not uncommon.
36. Autistic children often prefer the company of adults.
37. Idioms and slang need to be taught.
38. Speech pathologists can teach social skills.
39. Social stories are awesome!
40. If parents are willing, allow them to talk to all students in the class about autism.
41. Not every autistic has savant skills.
42. Individuals with autism want human companionship, we do not want to be isolated.
43. If your school has access to therapy animals, they can be wonderful assistants/helpers.
44. Meltdowns can appear to come out of nowhere.
45. Autistics often don't understand jokes or sarcasm.
46. Autism is not contagious.
47. There is no cure.
48. Not every autistic wants to be "fixed" or cured.
49. Many autistic individuals are proud to be autistic.
50. We all want to be accepted and included.

GEEK CLUB BOOKS