



Bell Ringing For Students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder

**Guidance Paper
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Communication Strategies

Purpose of Paper

Bell ringing is an activity that most people who are reasonably fit can enjoy and at Campsea Ashe we encourage anyone and everyone to 'have a go'. Given the number of young people who are diagnosed as ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder), we asked the advice of a teacher of children with ASD. Although not a bell ringer herself, the author, Rachel Holmes, is an authority on ASD and her advice is worthy of consideration. We hope this paper will help others teaching young people with ASD.

Communication Strategies For Students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder

1. Keep language simple. People with ASD find language complex and need instructions kept simple. Try and avoid unnecessary language:
eg “put hands here” is better than “if you put your hands here you will find it easier to hold the rope”
It can be sufficient to use just 1 or 2 words to remind a pupil of a previous instruction.
2. Leave plenty of time for processing language. This can be several seconds. If the instruction needs repeating then use the same language rather than trying to change the wording and add more words for the child to then process.
3. Be aware of open questions. These can be difficult. Better sometimes to use closed questions (eg “do you need help?” rather than “how do you think you’re doing?”)
4. Keep choices to a minimum (maximum 2 options). Choices can be difficult for a pupil to make. However, they can be useful in helping deal with behavioural difficulties – eg “do you want to stand here or here?”
5. Try and frame an instruction in the positive rather than the negative (eg “hold the rope here”, rather than “don’t hold it there”)
6. Be aware that the student will often take words literally. Avoid joking or sarcasm. Say what you mean! If you offer a statement like “are you ready now?”, you may well get the answer “no”!. Better to say “it’s time to listen now”.

Using Visual Information

Students with ASD often learn in a visual way. This can be useful in helping with both learning a skill and behaviour.

Visual Environment:

Wherever possible try and make the environment helpful in showing the student what to do. This might mean:

- chalking a safety circle on the floor to show where a student needs to be
- drawing around his feet to show him where he needs to stand (or just use a large piece of paper to stand on which can be blu taced to the floor etc)
- marking on the rope where he needs to hold it
- having a separate space to sit when waiting (eg a waiting area, and a performing space)

Visual Prompts

- writing key instructions (and using pictures where possible) can be useful as reminders (eg” keep hands to yourself”) and sticking somewhere prominent on the wall
- use gestures (often without words) to remind the child when they need to be quiet etc (eg fingers on lips); or have a special code that is a bit more fun (eg hand on shoulder means quiet!)
- agree the top rules and write out to be looked at again at home. The child may be able to make their own poster with these rules as homework? It could then be stuck up somewhere to remind him of what he needs to do.

Learning Tool

- when learning a new skill, write a simple step guide (very basic). This helps the child know what they have to do, and saves them learning through verbal memory. Very useful to get images from the computer to show what is needed (eg 1. Right hand above left. 2. Pull 3. Both hands near rope. 4. Right hand hold rope

first, then left above right.). As you can see I am making up how to pull a rope but a simple step by step instruction will be useful.

- make use of the patterns in bell ringing. Send home the order and colour the numbers that are for the child.

Time

- waiting is a often a huge problem for people with ASD. Instructions like “you need to wait 5 minutes now” are often pointless as they have no idea how long this is. Use an egg timer (tell child how many times they have to turn it over according to how long you want them to wait), or even just use the clock/watch and tell them when it will be their turn
- give them something to do whilst waiting. This could be an actual activity (eg allow them to read a book that interests them), or it could be a watching task to do with bell ringing (eg asking child to record the bell changes or write the pattern 1,2,3,4,2,4,3,1 etc).
- if the child is fidgety bring in something for them to fiddle with (eg blu tac). Be clear that this is for waiting time and needs to be put down when it is work time.

Behaviour Management

Using the ideas above should help, but other useful strategies:

Reward chart:

- make a very simple reward chart with a very specific instructions (eg not talking during waiting time etc). Agree a reward with mum. Ask child to decorate the chart with pictures of motivating things (eg favourite football club etc)

Structure/routine:

- children with ASD generally love routine. Either try and stick to a similar format each week (eg 5 minutes talking; 25 minutes practise; 5 minutes listening to new skill; 10 minutes practise; 10 minutes watching other people) OR write a very brief plan for each session (this can be just done quickly in written form like a list). Share with child and ask them to be involved in telling you where you are up to in the lesson.
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- Keep to the same routines for behaviour management. Eg if the child often fiddles with their belongings and walks across the space to get to it, them bring in a box where they can be put and tell the child how many times they can fiddle with them in a session (eg you can look at your phone 2 times in every session)
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- Never offer empty threats or punishments

Physical exercise:

- some students with ASD are very active and need to burn off energy. If this is the case then maybe build in 5 minutes in the session where the child leaves to walk around the churchyard looking out for a certain names. Build this into a routine if you want to try it so that the child knows it will happen each wee
- ask mum/dad to buy a Theraband (from a sports shop) which can be used to fiddle with and stretch. These are often highly effective, quite tiring, both also appealing to a child as it makes them feel strong!

Social stories

- these are essential tools in helping explain a social skill (that the student is not aware of due to being ASD). They are written down and given to the child. The 'story' would need to be read with them before each session and then used as a reference when you can see the child is forgetting the rule.

Example of social story:

Problem – child is often talking when the teacher is talking

“I am learning how to do bell ringing with my mum. There are normally 5 or 6 of us in the class and there is a teacher. Normally in the lesson I get to practise my skills and sometimes I learn a new one.

All the people in the class are learning and want to be the best that they can at bell ringing. My teacher is very good at bell ringing and she can help us to learn this skill. It is important that we listen when she is talking so that we all here what she wants us to do. If someone is talking when she is talking it makes it difficult for some people to concentrate, and they might not then know what they need to do. I will try and remember to stay quiet when it is listening time.

I will know that it is listening time because my teacher will say ‘listening time now’. I will be able to talk about what I want to talk about when my teacher says it is ‘break time’ or at the beginning and end of the session.

If I do this I will be more successful at bell ringing”

Social skills:

- these do not come naturally to a student with ASD and they do understand the impact of their actions on others (they can’t put themselves in other people’s shoes). Social rules need to be made explicit.
Eg if the child always asks too many questions, explain why this is a problem and set them a limit at the beginning of the session. These can be ticked off on a chart so the child knows how many left, or the child could hand you a token when he uses them (eg a button). Or just use fingers to show how many left.
- don’t be afraid to be blunt (as long as this is done kindly!). Saying things like, “I am interested in this topic but can only talk to you for 2 minutes as I have to talk to other people then”, can be helpful to the child.