

ASD Teacher Tip By Mark McCaghy, Bloomington Director and Lead ASD Specialist

An important mission of WMLC is to provide insight into the world of students with autism, as well as provide tips to help make their educational experience successful. There is a saying, “What works for the typical child does not work for the student with autism, but what works for the student with autism works for the typical child.” There will be a new tip in each newsletter. The tips are not meant to be extra work, so I will try to keep them simple and non-intrusive to your classrooms.

To help understand the importance of this first tip, imagine a couple scenarios. You have to plan Christmas dinner for 30 guests, but aren't allowed to use a checklist. You have to teach five classes a day, but can't use your lesson book to plan out your weekly activities—you must go with the flow. You have to drive some place new, but you can't get directions. Feeling anxious yet?

THIS ISSUE'S TIP — PROVIDE A VISUAL SCHEDULE

Autism is a neurological disorder that impairs a number of brain functions. One function that is impaired is the ability to understand and predict social situations. This impairment causes a great deal of anxiety, which in turn can cause behaviors. We can help relieve anxiety by providing structured and predictable environments. By writing a schedule of daily activities, you provide structure that:

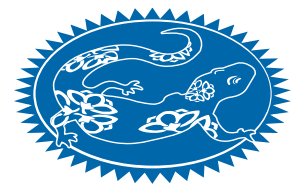
- helps students understand their environment
- helps students to be calm (reduces anxiety)
- helps students to learn
- helps students become independent (less reliant on verbal cues)
- helps students manage behavior

As you go through each step on the schedule (see sample to the right), somehow show that each step is completed. You can cross it out, put a check by it, or erase it. Draw attention to each step as you finish them. Also draw attention to any changes there may be as you go along. How good do you feel when you cross off that last item on your checklist?

Thank you all for being such great assets for our students with autism!

**Mark McCaghy, Director of
WMLC—Bloomington**

Shown here teaching a social skills class, Mark received his ASD Certificate from Hamline University and is currently working on his Master of Education. Mark has 7 years experience teaching Special Education at Lakeville, St. Louis Park, Eden Prairie, and Chaska along with 8 years at Camp Hand in Hand as a counselor and program staff.



Sample VISUAL SCHEDULE:

- 1) Turn in assignment
- 2) Review yesterday's lesson
- 3) Open book to page 233
- 4) New skill
- 5) Write your assignment in planners
- 6) Work time
- 7) Get ready for next class

Buddy Circle: Social Support for School Lunches By Debra Schipper

Lunch and recess times are the best parts of the day for many students, but I hear from many of my young friends here at West Metro Learning Connections that they “hate lunch and recess!” Among the reasons they give are the loneliness and boredom they experience as they sit alone or are left out of conversations, inside jokes, and games. Even with skills for introducing themselves, starting conversations, and inviting others to play, the lunchroom and recess “scenes” can be complicated for our friends to understand and navigate alone from beginning to end.

One of my favorite “jobs” when I consult and serve as an ASD specialist in schools is to set students up with a “Buddy Circle” and a “Lunch Bunch.” I always so enjoyed facilitating the weekly to twice-a-week “Buddy Circle” Friendship Groups with my students and their classmates, but in many schools social workers and/or speech/language therapist prefer to facilitate this program as a part of their service time with children with ASD. Either way, you can guarantee your children's teachers that “Buddy Circle” and “Lunch Bunch” are easily as fun for the teachers and adults who lead them as they are for the children who participate!

Below you will find my description of the first steps I take to set up this program. If you go to our web site, you'll find more information on the “Buddy Circle” and “Lunch Bunch” programs.

SET-UP

1. My student and I go into his/her general education class and talk about how everyone has different things they're good at and different things that are difficult for them. We're sure to mention several things “my” student is good at, but we also talk about how “playing, taking turns, knowing what to say in a conversation, whatever” is hard for him/her. The class participates in sharing what's easy and hard for them. I often make a list of easy and hard and then show how different skills are on different lists, depending on students' strengths and needs.

As a Mother of an Autistic Child...

By Liza Robson

I am sure you can all relate to my experience. The first time I heard the diagnosis, the worst possible picture entered my mind. That overwhelming event was followed by a tiny list of suggested treatments that were to help my little boy, but of course, there was no guarantee of the outcome. I was relegated to speech therapy and occupational therapy for the most part, and even then, no one seemed to point me in the right direction as to where to get it. Don't get me wrong. When I finally found a private speech and occupational therapist—they were wonderful. Was that it?

I ALWAYS HAVE HEARD THAT WHEN YOU BECOME A MOTHER, THERE IS NO MANUAL.

Is this really true? You saw your own mom, grandmother, and your friend's mom raising children, so hopefully we learned a little along the way. But where do we learn about autism or treating our autistic children? Just by chance a school physical therapist showed me a flier she had gotten in the mail. She wasn't endorsing it—of course, but maybe Matty needed social skills classes. That flier was a lifesaver for both mom and son. The flier was from West Metro Learning Connections and they were going to open a satellite facility in Bloomington.

I quickly gave them a call. Like other emerging services, I wanted on the list now! Matty began classes the following term and has been going ever since. I am so thrilled at the emersion of his social skills. I guess it never occurred to me that he literally needed to be taught what comes so easily to the typical student. Jill Kuzma, West Metro—Bloomington's original director, all the staff, and especially current director, Mark McCaghy, were and are gifts. If we ran into problems at pre-school or kindergarten, **West Metro was there for us coaching us and his teachers onto victory.** West Metro was the first to



Matty Robson, 1st Grader

Each new term at West Metro, Matty takes on another challenging topic and looks forward to each class and the friendships of his classmates.

teach us how to use social stories, and how invaluable that has been! A good social story helps me introduce a new situation to Matty and get him used to the idea and his expected behavior. Some techniques we still use today, and some we have set aside, but they have been invaluable to Matty's growth and maturity. So much so, that Matty is in first grade and is attending a private elementary school in Hampton, MN and rarely needs the help of an aid in the classroom. Matty has a long way to go, but with each new term at West Metro, Matty takes on another challenging topic and looks forward to each class and the friendships of his classmates. Matty especially liked "Communicating in the Community" last summer. He still talks about the lessons and the corresponding field trips. He particularly talks about the "Chatterbox Pub" in St. Paul... I might have to check that one out myself sometime! The staff is as good as ever and really takes the time to get to know their students and their families. I know Matty will be safe and well cared for when he is at West Metro, and I can honestly say,

"West Metro has provided me with that proverbial manual as to how to be the Mother of an Autistic child."

Buddy Circle (continued)

- A. Depending on the student's age and parent preferences, the student may plan the talk with me, the parent may participate in planning and/or presentation, or I may plan and the student participates. The student always participates in the presentation, as I can't get beyond feeling I would be disrespectful to go in and talk about him/her without his/her presence. Others may feel differently about this. For me, it has always been a very positive experience and really a time to honor my student in front of classmates.
 - B. Depending on the same conditions as in A, we either use the label of Autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder, or Asperger Syndrome, or we don't. When we have used the label, we have also read the book, This is Asperger Syndrome to the class, taking turns with teacher, parent, student, and me reading a page.
 - C. Same varying conditions as in A and B, we may open it up for questions from everyone.
2. We offer that the class may sign up to be a member of "Buddy Circle." We are very clear that whether or not they sign up, each student is still a friend. Signing up means they will also be a "Buddy-of-the-Week." (You can find a document on the web site that tells what a buddy does...this happens to be a first grade document; the content varies in depth and length depending on the children's ages). Everyone is given a small sheet of paper, and if he/she wants to be a buddy, writes his/her name on the paper. If he/she doesn't, they send it back blank or write "no thanks." No one is pushed to be a buddy. Those who choose to are given a permission letter to take home for parent signatures. When they bring those back, we make a "Buddy-Of-The-Week" schedule and set a time for the buddies to meet with me or case manager, either one or two times a week. We talk about how things are going and do an activity. A first grade schedule of what is done in group is also on the web site.

Please email me at dschipper@wmllearningconnections.com with any questions you may have...and, for sure, I hope to hear about some fun and successful "Buddy Circle" experiences your children have in their schools!

("Buddy Circle" is similar to the trademarked "Circle of Friends")

